

# *Joys & Challenges of Ageing*

*(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church, Sept 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022 (various))*

Old People's Homes for 4-year-olds. Did you watch it? Did you see the delight on the faces of the older people when the children arrived? Did you watch the more grumpy older people mellow? Did you watch shy children become more confident? Did you watch each group draw the other out, encourage each other that anything was possible? Did you see how they learnt from each other? Did you see special friendships being born?

Ageism is alive and well in our society. We all want to avoid getting older, think of the advertisements for creams to keep us young and wrinkle free. When do you see older people on our screens? May I suggest the ads we see older people in, are for either funeral insurance, retirement living or continence pads. We seem to outsource our care of older people – aged care homes, paid carers into the house, now some of that is for good reason. However, we tend to see older people as having a use by date, a burden on our finances and economy and they are a little bit invisible. Covid and the recent royal commission have exposed how badly as a society we have treated older people.

There is no doubt that ageing poses many challenges. Older people find themselves experiencing many losses – loss of partners, family and friends, loss of home, health, control, independence, mobility and memory. Many find the memories of traumatic experiences like the war or growing up in orphanages resurfacing. Yet, they are no different than us and also experience family dysfunction, financial hardship and the like. For an increasing number they also have to live with dementia.

By 2036 it is estimated that 6.5 million of our population will be aged over 65 years old.

The bible has much to say about how we should think about ageing and our elders. In our call to worship we heard some of this. Older people in Scripture are seen as wise, as fruitful and able to learn and contribute. Their grey hair and wrinkles are a sign of that wisdom. When I think about the bible and ageing, I think of Anna and Simeon in their old age who have waited patiently for their Saviour and when they see Jesus they tell everyone. I think of the way Paul is grateful for Timothy's mother and grandmother, two older women who nurtured him in the faith. I think of Abraham and Sarah, Elizabeth and Zechariah who are blessed with children in their old age.

Other cultures and religions seem to treat their elders differently than those of us from an Anglo-Celtic background. Older people are seen as a source of wisdom, caring for them is an honour and blessing. Unfortunately, in some cultures some people do not get the chance to get old.

However, there are moments of joy in the ageing process.

As many of you know I spent 13 years working in the aged care space as a chaplain. This was a role I fell into as I didn't really imagine myself working with elderly, but I loved it and learnt so much. To help us understand what ageing might be like I would like to introduce you to a couple of people I met along the way. These people taught me about resilience and the importance of building relationships and I count my encounters with them as a very great privilege.

1. K was a man troubled by war memories whose balm was whisky. A man who was not religious and loved a bet on the horses but was very generous. Over about 9 months his health deteriorated, and he was placed in a nursing home after numerous hospitalisations. I went to him in the nursing home, even though strictly speaking he was no longer our client – I told him I was naughty doing so but he promised he wouldn't tell, and he loved the visits. One day he said to me that he knew his end was near. I asked him how he felt about this – he said he was okay and that he had had a good life and had made his peace with God and was now ready. (Just a few weeks before we had started to talk about God, and he told me when he was at war, he would leave the troop and find a tree and yell at God – I told him I thought that was an okay thing to do and God was big enough to handle that). During this last visit for one of the first times I prayed with him and left knowing he was at peace – he died 6 days later and requested that I and his case manager be taken to lunch at a winery following his funeral. The opportunity to talk about his traumatic memories helped him find his way back to God where he found acceptance and peace.

Hopefully this time enabled him to explore and validate his faith perceptions and behaviours and that he experienced giving and receiving forgiveness.

2. R was a real blokey bloke. He'd been an alcoholic but had got through that. He loved horses and footy. He cared for a partner who had a drinking problem and was abusive. He'd worked in the mines all over the country. When I met him, he had a severe lung condition and required oxygen to get around. He belonged to an activity group I ran and, in that group, he really blossomed – he formed friendships and was able to share some of the sadder stories from his life, he embraced the more creative side of his personality and enjoyed art and cooking. He was the best trivia quizzer I had ever met, I even tried to get him to go on one of the TV game shows. Underneath the blokey exterior was a loving and gentle man. He got cancer and ended up in hospital, I went to visit him, and he told me that the Serenity Prayer got him through his alcoholism years ago and it would get him through this time. He also asked me to thank the group for all they had given him – I said they were thinking of him and looking forward to him getting back to them. He knew that wouldn't happen and he died a few days later. R taught me never to judge a book by its cover but rather listen to their stories to discover who they really are.
3. B lived with dementia. It was frustrating for him as he couldn't read or write anymore. Yet never a more gentle man could you meet. He always tried his

hardest to participate despite his progressing dementia. Sometimes he had very clear memories – he told us of the time he saw a Tasmanian Tiger in the north-west of Tasmania where he grew up, with tears he would talk about his mother and washing day which of course was a Monday. His faith was very important to him, so when he was dying, I was asked to go to the hospital to pray with and for him. I went a few times and read the bible to him and his wife and prayed with them. One visit, which turned out to be my last, he was alone, and I don't think he recognized me. I gave him a small cross to hold in his hand and suggested I pray for him – he took the cross and sat up in the bed and prayed for himself and his family. He died days later. His faith and assurance of God's care was very real to him in his final days. As I prepared his funeral with his family I remarked that I really liked B but just couldn't understand why such a nice man barracked for Collingwood. His daughter-in-law laughed and told me that in his final days he had said that he really liked me but could never understand why I barracked for Geelong.

4. C was Irish and spoke softly with the best Irish lilt. As a young woman she had lived through 'the troubles' in Ireland and had lost family members in the fighting. Her husband had been an academic as were her two sons. She had travelled the world with them and was grateful for all those experiences and the people she had met. As she aged she found herself in a supported accommodation facility and confined to one room. Her world had contracted so much yet she never complained. I would visit and she would ask me for the details of my last holiday, I would remind her I was visiting her and the focus should be on her, her response was but 'you are my eyes on the world'. Despite her circumstances she still had an outward looking attitude and wanted to know what was happening in the world. Ministering to her in her final days was a great privilege.

I could tell you a hundred more stories like this, they all remind me that ageing is full of challenge and also contains the possibility of joy and the possibility to review your life and be at peace with all that has gone before.

We can do better in aged care. We can see older people as an asset rather than a burden. We can start to see them, not treat them as invisible. We could make our services aged and dementia friendly – shorter services, shorter sermons, more comfortable seating, better hearing systems. We can visit our elderly neighbours. We can listen to their stories even if we have heard them before. We can inform ourselves about Elder Abuse or Forgotten Australians or Dementia.

What can we do as a little church in the middle of Footscray to make a difference? Linking with Westhaven, making rugs and other gifts is a start.

Older people are just like us – they need to be accepted, loved, forgiven, to express their thanks and fears, to give back to society and to live life to the full and prepare for their death.