Readings: Genesis 5; Luke 2.25-38

Genesis 5 is a glorious account of life before the Flood: Adam lives for 930 years, and it turns out he’s the youngster. Jared weighs in at 962, and Methuselah reaches an all-time record 969. It’s not recorded whether the pension age was raised accordingly.

In the light of eternity, living ten times as long isn’t a significant difference; life is still a drop in the everlasting ocean. But these ages, long the object of awe and scepticism from readers, are not as far over the horizon as once they were. In 1880 a person born in the West could expect to live to the age of 40. Today, life expectancy stands at 80. We live twice as long as we did a hundred years ago. In 60 years’ time, at the rate we’re going, people will expect to live to 100. How does this change the way we think about life, the purpose and value of living, and the nature of old age?

Given the amount of care and research that goes into healthcare and well-being, you’d think greater longevity would be a cause of rejoicing. As Woody Allen puts it, aging looks pretty good when you consider the alternative. But there’s no shortage of gloomy accounts of where we’re all heading. It’s widely assumed that old age means chronic disease, a sense of obsolescence, meaninglessness, decrepitude, loneliness, and a long slow retreat into death. If so, then by this quest for longer life we’ve created a slow-burning living hell for ourselves. If by contrast we take it that the elderly have become a powerful interest group, we inhabit a climate of political mistrust, in which the old vote for a package of generous welfare benefits for which the young will have to pay. In between lies a host of public policy challenges like elder abuse, varieties of dementia, pension time bombs and lower birth rates that mean there are fewer and fewer young to care for more and more old. We have a confused stereotype of old age between an image of poverty, frailty, and dependence, on the one hand, and selfishness, conservatism, and inflexibility on the other. Either way the elderly seem to be a threat – so needy that society can’t care for them or so dangerous that society can’t withstand them.

There’s a much more positive account of what it means for society to get older. The third age, as it becomes more recognised, can be a time of personal development. Education can come to mean more than training for employment and can be undertaken for its own sake. Universities can become centres for all kinds of inner growth. If the elderly vastly outnumber the young, the chances are violence and war will steeply decline; military spending worldwide has reduced by a third since 1989. The demographic shift may be a significant contributor: older people are simply less invested in fighting wars. It may not be great for the economy if the world is populated by those whose lives are less dominated by material or romantic desires; but the sum total of human happiness, shorn of striving and competing, and infused with contentment and phlegmatic acceptance, may be much increased. The need to sustain a marriage over 60 years, rather than 20, may be a considerable challenge; but people’s ability to navigate blended households and merged family trees may be correspondingly greater. The proportion of life spent on rearing children is much reduced, although children remain dependent on their parents for longer than they once did; but overall this leaves a much greater segment of life available for relations of choice, for friendships, for grandchildren and great-grandchildren, for a diverse range of acquaintances with common interests. There’s no reason why all these developments may not be positive ones.
To get to this more positive place requires one fundamental shift: to alter the almost-universal assumption that aging is a euphemism for dying. If you see life as a relentless quest for health and wealth, aging presents a major obstacle. That obstacle becomes a challenge; it must be either edited out of the story or medicalised and transformed into relative youth. We put our resources into ridding our later years of any ill-health or into postponing death indefinitely or into making elderly people invisible so that the rest of society can preserve the illusion of eternal youth. Aging becomes the most apt symbol of the doomed human desire to keep control of our lives. It pushes us to ask whether there’s anything to live for beyond acquisition of goods, the accumulation of experiences and the postponement of death.

Consider two very personal kinds of conversations. In the first, you hear about the death of a person with much of their life still ahead of them. You say, ‘It’s so tragic. He had hardly lived. He never had a chance to experience the second half of life.’ In the second, you hear about the death of a person’s mother. You say, ‘How old was she?’ On hearing the answer, ‘Ninety-five,’ you say, ‘Oh well, I suppose she’d had a good innings. I hope she didn’t suffer at the end.’

Think about what these two conversations tell us. The first suggests there’s a sense of injustice, of deprivation and cruel fortune, even a cause for railing against God’s providence, when someone dies aged shall we say 55 or 60. The second makes it clear that none of us can expect to live much beyond our nineties, and that we’re relatively intolerant of people even mourning their loved ones who’ve died at what we like to call a ripe old age. But what we don’t have a language, or much a vision, for is how we are to fill the years between the age at which death is a terrible injustice and the age at which it’s a reasonable fulfilment of an unwritten contract. Why are we so outraged at someone dying at 60 if we have no sense of what they’re supposed to do until they’re 95? And why do we see life before the age of 60 as inherently more valuable than later life? These are the conventions that need scrutinising if we’re to discover the wisdom of old age. Either death is forever, in which case holding out against it for a few more years is, in the eternal scheme of things, neither here nor there, or death is not our master, and there is hope beyond the grave, in which case you’d think getting started would be a cause not for sadness, but for rejoicing.

Rather than berate our society for its attitude to old age, I’d like to think with you about Simeon and Anna in Luke chapter 2. To understand Simeon you’ve got to get a sense of how Luke’s gospel, and especially its first two chapters, are constructed. Luke’s gospel begins in the Temple, with Zechariah, and ends in the Temple, with the disciples praising God after Jesus’ ascension. The first two chapters, about Jesus’ birth and childhood, also end in the Temple, with Jesus talking with the teachers of the Law. And here, just before that scene, is another scene in the Temple. What it all means is that just as the Temple was the definitive place of encounter between Israel and God, the location of the Law that enshrined the eternal covenant between God and the people and the mercy seat that was the place of perpetual divine-human reconciliation, so now Jesus is all of those things. Jesus is the new temple. He is the place of encounter, he is the embodiment of the covenant, he is the fulfilment of the Law, he is the redeemer who takes away the sins of the world. Both this scene with Simeon and Anna and the next scene with the teachers of the Law are about the passing of the baton, the changing of the guard, the emergence of a living relationship through Jesus out of the ruins of the old covenant.

Perhaps this is our first clue about old age. Youth is like a temple, a great edifice of self-important self-glorification. To grow old is to realise the folly of that temple, its inadequacy, its gradual replacement by something, more beautiful, good, and true. It’s to turn that edifice into gentler, more abiding, and more profound relationships, just as Luke portrays the turning of the covenant from the Temple into Jesus.

Let’s look more closely at Simeon and Anna. Simeon’s been hanging around the Temple for a long time. It had ‘been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.’ He was ‘righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and
the Holy Spirit rested on him.’ What Simeon grasps is that God has wonderful things in store, and these things are not going to be achieved by or even through him, but that he will witness them. He is thus the epitome of patience and of humility. Think about those two words – patience and humility. A Christian believes that the future is bigger than the past. God has in store for those who live in divine love such things as pass our understanding. The popular image of old age involves neither patience nor humility. It doesn’t include patience, because it’s so filled with people becoming exasperated with the failure of their own bodies, or so bewildered by their inability to keep pace with contemporary values or technology. It doesn’t include humility, because it’s so filled with old codgers saying, ‘I’ve forgotten more than you’ll ever know,’ or, ‘When you get to my age, young man…’ But an old age that’s permeated by patience and humility is one that expects God to save the best till last. That’s what happened to Simeon. Maybe that’s what’ll happen to you.

Then let’s look at the community that gathers in the Temple on the day of Jesus’ presentation. Here we have a baby, two parents, and two elderly people unrelated to the parents or to one another. It’s an image of the kingdom of God – young and old, male and female, seeking faith and blessing, finding God together. One tendency of an obsession with youth is to ghettoise elderly people in communities away from the rest of society where they can see others and be seen only by appointment. But what older people need most is the joy of interacting with all ages, and what all ages need most is the diversity and spirit of one another. Churches are one of the few places today where unrelated people of different ages relate to one another in non-contractual ways. We take our inspiration from this moment in the Temple. Elderly people can’t find harmony on their own. They need to give and receive from all ages. It’s often said elderly people are lonely and isolated. So are younger people. The answer lies in each other.

Finally let’s ponder the prophecy Simeon gives to Mary and Joseph. ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’ In other words Jesus will turn Israel’s world upside down, and from him no secrets will be hidden. But Simeon is also very realistic. He knows Jesus’ mission will cause division, and he knows it will cause wounding pain to his parents. There’s nothing sentimental about Simeon’s vision of old age. He’s not heading into the sunset with reel-to-reel home videos of his grandchildren’s first smiles and teetering first steps. He has real wisdom. He doesn’t believe life is about avoiding conflict or simply trying to keep everyone cheerful. He perceives Jesus has a calling that will mean he has to die for forgiveness and eternal life to be born. Some things are more important than simply staying alive. Some short lives say everything a life needs to say. But few except the old realise this.

So here are the four pillars of the wisdom of old age that we learn from Simeon and Anna. First, as we get older, we realise life isn’t about attaining perfect mental and physical strength to become independent, it’s about forming relationships of interdependence that grow richer with age like a good wine. Second, the patience and humility of old age affirm that we are not the centre of God’s purposes, but that our greatest privilege is to witness the salvation God brings. Third, your age isn’t the most interesting thing about you. It’s not good for anyone to be confined to the company of people just like themselves. A flourishing life is one spent with a diversity of ages, backgrounds, and social locations. And finally, we shouldn’t idealise old age: the wisdom of old age is one that sees suffering, hardship and grief but sees through them to beauty, truth and goodness.

Simeon and Anna didn’t spend their lives shoring up their minds and bodies against the ravages of time or chance, or the inevitability of death. They spent them preparing for the moment they would come face to face with God in Christ. When it came, they were ready. The question for us about old age is, what are we preparing for? And when it comes, will we be ready?