

### AGEING – some of my experiences so far

Probably, my mother's and my experiences are mirrored in the lives of others in different ways. So here are some of our stories.

It was on the grass by the A3 Tibbett's Corner roundabout, where my 100 year old mother and I were enjoying a cup of tea from Jake's Burger Bar, sitting on the grass at the side of the road.

It was an ordinary kind of a morning. Ordinary things were going on around us. The workmen munched their bacon butties as usual, the buses and vans swerved round the corners, the sun shone feebly.

Then I noticed the man in his late sixties moving slowly across the grass, his eyes fixed on the ground, as if searching for hidden treasure. But it wasn't treasure he was after. His job was to notice and pick up every scrap of litter scattered on the ground. He was doing this intently, as if his life depended on it.

Our eyes met and we exchanged smiles. 'Morning!' we said to each other. His ebony face was furrowed, his eyes sad, and I wondered what had brought him to England from the other side of the world. He looked more like a teacher or doctor than refuse collector. Was he doing this work because this was the best he could find to help support growing grandchildren?

By the time my mother and I were ready to return to her Care Home, he had disappeared. I carefully pushed her wheelchair along the pavement, and noticed him a little way ahead. We caught up. I nodded in the direction of my mother commenting: 'She's over 100 years old!'

Pleasure and respect swept across his face. He drew closer, stuttering in broken English: 'In my country we would ask someone this old to give us a blessing.' I realised that although my mother had been rendered speechless by her stroke that she understood the conversation and was nodding in affirmation to me. 'Would you like her to do this for you?' I asked. His face lit up, and he knelt in front of her on the pavement.

I gently placed her paralyzed hand on his head, and uttered the words I knew she would want to say herself had she been able to speak: 'May God's blessing rest on you and yours, now and forever. Amen'. Three pairs of eyes filled with tears as we parted.

This was in stark contrast to the reception I received from some of the parish priests, in some of the parishes in which my mother's three different care homes in the London area had been situated. Two made no response to my repeated messages, requesting for someone from the church to visit her. The third replied, indicating that he had was far too busy building God's Kingdom and had much better things to do than to visit the elderly and dying. He communicated that they were hardly worth his effort.

Yet, my remarkable mother had pioneered by training as a doctor in the years when extremely few women were permitted such a training, then she was a missionary in India, later the wife of an official high up in the education world, she was a member of the General Synod since its inception and, last of all, in retirement an active country rector's wife. Now, on her last lap of life, these three representatives of the Church regarded the likes of her as a waste of space - people not worth visiting, nor being given Holy Communion at home. None of those priests objected in the slightest to *me* taking services in her care homes in their parishes, although it was their duty to do this in their parishes! I was reminded of the parable of the Good Samaritan and that Priest who 'passed by on the other side'. Their attitudes were the more puzzling for me, since the world outside the Church regarded my mother as remarkable enough to include her story on the Friday afternoon BBC programme 'Last Word'. But, to those three vicars, she, and the likes of her, were not worth 'wasting' time on. It seemed that 'bums on pews' was where their hearts lay in their work in their parishes. The pastoral care of the elderly was beneath them. And, others might have picked up their implicit message: that the aged and infirm must be of no worth to God, since God's local representatives had no time for them. Such clergy attitudes were not lost on the staff of her Care Homes. It was they who had requested me to ask these local priests to care for her pastorally, and who were required by the Care Commission to make provision for the spiritual needs of their residents. If even the Church could not care less about people like this, why should they?

During my time as a self supporting minister in St Paul's church, Wimbledon Park, my mother's life changed dramatically for the better. Much of this was due to the obvious *agape* love of St Paul's clergy and congregation for this paralyzed, wheelchair-bound, determined old lady. They had not known her before her stroke. Now she could not talk but obviously understood everything going on around her, and responded in no uncertain terms. When the Vicar announced in church that the proposed new Curate was female, my mother let out a loud whoop of delight, bringing a smile to every one's faces.

John and I did not want her to become institutionalized, and trekked pushing her wheel chair along the bumpy pavements to St Paul's church's 'over 60's' weekly lunch club, and every Sunday morning to the service. This was a hassle since the Care Home was staffed mainly by 'care bank' replacements on Sundays. It seemed impossible for them to have her ready in time for us to leave for church at 9.30 am. Apparently, it was too early and they were too pressurized to give her the priority required to get her ready and out. I was once exasperated enough to threaten to move her, along with her toast (for her to munch during the service since she had not yet had breakfast) since it was 10.00am and church would be over before we arrived. This galvanized everyone, making them realise that my mother really wanted to go to church, their prospectus said that they would acquiesce to such wishes, and from then onwards she was sparkling in her Sunday-best, fed and waiting in the day room for us to arrive. But, I wondered, had churches ever considered holding services later in the morning, so that Care Home residents had more of an opportunity to attend? 10.00am is usually too early for those relying on others to dress and feed them. It did my mother the world of good to get out of the Care Home, into a place full of younger people, and best of all where there were children. She sat at the very front of church, her eyes glued to their every move during the children's talk and, sometimes (wonder of wonders for her), she was given a real live gurgling baby to cuddle and to coo to. Such encounters were obviously the high spots of her week.

Gradually, church members grew less apprehensive of sitting by the 'unknown' represented by her, and their fear of 'failing' in such an encounter waned. A number took her to heart. During Communion her eyes fixed on those special individuals who were the most likely to pause by her on their way back to their seats, to give her a kiss or whisper words of affection into her ears. She waited expectantly for them to demonstrate their love for her, and soaked up their affection.

John was the one of the two of us who had the strength to get her to and from church in her wheelchair. I had Polymyalgia and Arthritis and couldn't manage this often. When he not available, we discovered to our amazement that there were enough able-bodied church members actually willing to do this instead of him. She never missed a service unless she was ill. Others trundled her off to the children's Summer Club. They deposited her, in her wheelchair, in the middle of the vicarage lawn, where she laughed raucously at the antics of the children, and shared the strawberries and biscuits they liked to feed her with, as if feeding a favourite pet or zoo animal. Those 'in the know' advised the others: 'She won't eat this – but she loves that!'

I was worried about leaving her unvisited when we went on holiday, but church members again rose to the occasion. It is very challenging (especially when you have had no training in working with people who are disabled, elderly, doddery and with minds of their own) to risk the uncertainties of visiting someone who cannot speak, who might fall asleep on you, who might forget she can no longer stand but who might try to walk when your back is turned and land up on the floor, who is likely to start coughing should you give her a treat to eat or drink and to refuse to let go of the drink even when it looks as if she is about to choke to death. To try to make it easier for both sides, and also so that my mother would associate church visitors with her familiar family, I gave each of them a scrapbook full of family photos and a written summary about each person. Hopefully this meant that visitors could break the ice by talking to her about her favourite subject - her family.

As her body aged, I watched her spirit blossom to new life, flourishing in the warmth of the love of St Paul's church. I suspect that she had never previously experienced being the recipient of generous love in such a way by a group of people like this. I watched her grow increasingly infirm but increasingly relaxed and less anxious, and as if she were deriving deep comfort from, and was basking in, all the care being lavished on her. The Care Home played their part but, undoubtedly, it was this particular group of clergy and this congregation who so enriched and blessed my mother's ending. She lived till she was nearly 102 years old, and died in my arms in her Care Home.

During her final years, I too was aging. Being a Self Supporting Minister, I needed to work to support myself. John's pension was not enough. Having been overseas missionaries, with what some call a 'faith' mission, our pensions were rather sad. The idea in those, long-ago days that it was somehow more virtuous to trust *God*, rather than pension schemes, to provide for us at the end of life. As a Non Stipendiary Minister, I am obviously not eligible for a clergy pension. Money was an increasingly big issue as I too grew older. There was very little on paper for me – not even a proper State pension, because in those days our missionary society did not pay for the Social Security stamps for married women. When we returned from 16 years of missionary work in Thailand, we could not afford to buy me into the State System properly. God's provision for my old age was going to have to come from my capacity to earn a living well past normal retirement age.

So, late in life, for five years, I trained as a psychotherapist – receiving my Freedom Pass in the middle of the training! This meant that I could work from home, which I did full-time till I was 72 years old, and at 74, still do a little. I seemed to be particularly useful as an older priest, and professional psychotherapist (someone who had seen most

things before and was not going to be shocked by much), in working with religious people, and especially with ordained ministers from the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist and Baptist churches. Adult survivors of clergy sexual abuse often came my way, as well as a few perpetrators of abuse.

At the beginning of my 70's, (in January 2018 I will be 80 years old) out of interest and for the joy of it, I studied at Heythrop College for a Masters in the Psychology of Religion. My local church carried on using me as it always had.

Therefore, it came as a bolt from the blue, suddenly, to receive a letter from a friend, wishing me well on my retirement. I asked whatever she meant. She replied that the Church Times listed me among those retiring that month. This was the first, and almost the last, that I heard about it. It made no difference to my professional working life and local church work. Then a letter arrived from the Diocese stating that if I wanted to continue as a priest I must apply for a 'P.T.O.' – without which I was not authorised to lead services and preach. It took me a few more years to discover that as I was now marginalized to the 'P.T.O.' fringe, that I was no longer invited to any clergy events other than Deanery clergy meetings, and was no longer eligible to vote in the Church. (My name apparently was not on the crucial list of retired clergy, and so I did not know anything about any meetings for the likes of us).

When I twigged that I had so passed my 'use by date' that I was not going to be invited to clergy events any longer, I asked around. Someone told me that the diocese was too stretched financially to pay for us to attend, that available facilities were too small. OK! But I was humiliated when one person explained that 'should too many elderly clergy attend, it will put off the young ones and we don't want to do that, do we!' Ouch!

This was at variance with my six teenage grandchildren who all reckon I was sufficiently 'cool' to invite me to be their friends on Facebook (while their parents are not awarded this privilege). Are the likes of me *really* so unacceptable to younger clergy that we must fade away? Might this flag-up an unnoticed and unrecognised ageist agenda floating around, I wondered? Perhaps we really are no longer acceptable to younger clergy. If this is so, someone needs to explain this to us, and to tell us what is supposed to be wrong with us. Who knows, maybe we could right some of it. When I was younger, I found the wisdom of age benefitted me greatly. My clergy psychotherapy patients certainly do not find me unacceptable or they would not be paying out of their limited stipends for consultations!

I felt that I was still of as much use as I could manage to be in my local church, but that from the Diocesan point of view, in celebrating my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, I was automatically penalised by silently and un-warned ceasing to exist. It was as if I had evaporated into cyberspace. As far as the whole diocese was concerned, it seemed that I had passed my 'use by' date. But as far as my local church and psychotherapy patients were concerned, life went on as usual.

I started a weekly, time-limited group one afternoon called 'The Faith-Doubt Group'. Eight of us, older people, got together to share in confidence and with honesty our Christian stories – our belief incapacities and wobbliness, our misconceptions, and how we felt God had, or had not, let us down in our lives. No one was younger than 70 in this group. It was a time of spiritual growth for each of us. Most had never shared their real feelings with other Christians before – they felt too ashamed to own the truth. Some had no idea that others doubted like they did.

All this was going at a time when my mother and my daughter (who has mental health issues) absorbed much of my energy. A son, with four teenage children, had returned from overseas missionary work and, until last month, was unemployed for 18 months. Six people living on his job seeker's allowance - which came to under £16,000/year - called for a chunk of my earnings to go to support my grandchildren. They would never ask for help but we *wanted* to bale them out a little. Next my husband was diagnosed with early Alzheimer's disease. That was a blow and a frightening prospect.

While I often felt inside myself that I was 42 years old, my body started screaming out that this was not so. Arthritis set in. I had four operations on knees, two on feet and one on each hand. Then painful Fibromyalgia took hold, eased only a little with medication. I began to feel trapped on a wheel inside the hamster cage of my body. No way could I escape the treadmill of pain. I did not want to be defeated by this and gritted my teeth, devising ways of continuing to live as fulfilling a life as I could despite disability, and as regardless of pain. The prospect of spending the rest of my life confined to an armchair appalled me.

My local church was brilliant in not making a fuss when I could not do everything I wanted to do which they also probably wanted me to do. The church staff meeting came to our place when I wasn't able to get up and down the three flights of stairs where we lived. No one asked the impossible of me.

Reluctantly, I was forced to face the limitations of aging. My body no longer permitted me to do all I expected of it. I often missed out on social engagements. I could not always manage public transport into London. My husband's driving license was withdrawn because of his Alzheimer's. Then my eyesight became problematic and the DVLA warned me that I should not drive either. Not only was I encased in a body that didn't move freely, but there were days when I could not manage to reach the bus stop or church on my own two legs. The mobility a car had given me was removed.

I asked Father Christmas for two new eyes, two new ears and two new knees but he forgot to come to our home. Here I am, limited, but often still feeling 42 years old and wanting freely to experience the exciting world around me - all those plays and exhibitions in London that everyone else attends, all those wonderful river and hill walks they do but that I cannot even contemplate. Even the wonderful world of cyberspace is limited to some extent by my vision, and listening to music by the tinnitus that intrudes into my world of sound.

Something in me refuses to give up, something urges me to make the most of this last lap of life. Feeling very embarrassed and very stupid, I asked my vicar how he would feel if I were to sit on a high kitchen stool to take services, since my knees complained bitterly when I stood on them for the 75 minutes required to celebrate the Eucharist and preach. The consequence of such activity was having to spend the following 24 hours in bed recovering. 'Great idea!' was the vicar's response. So the Reader firmly screwed a high kitchen chair onto a platform for me. I gave-in, and faced what felt like the indignity of using my stick when processing in and out of church and feeling wobbly or in pain. Sometimes I sat during hymns. I even found a couple of Minders to help me through a baptism service when the vicar was away. I realised that I was a health unsafe holding a baby when climbing up or down from the font, and was a fire hazard when lighting baptismal candles from the high Pascal candle. My church supported me in this, and no one made me feel as silly as I might otherwise have felt.

My husband once remarked: 'My wife can do anything!' I smiled when he said it. But, 'Independent Me' was facing the reality that she was now limited in what she could do. The fact that I had a blue disabled parking badge ought to have brought this home - but it didn't.

When my mother's Care Home, in the Lichfield Diocese, was closed down I searched for somewhere for her and found her to be eligible for Bromley and Sheppards Colleges for clergy widows, certain clergy daughters and retired clergy. At 90 years old, the college reckoned she was too old to settle in there readily and so she came to sheltered accommodation in Wimbledon.

However, the person I talked to about her, asked whether I would like to go on their waiting list since I was eligible. 'Daft idea!' I thought to myself, 'I'll never reach the stage where I need *that!*' But I went on the waiting list, and every few years someone wrote and asked if I wanted to stay on the list. More recently, occasional letters arrived stating a flat to be available, and asking whether I was interested? 'Thank you, but no thank you!' was my regular reply. Aged 72, I could not envisage ever needing such provision. But then, on the day that my GP suggested that I should try to change my way of life, and nearing my 74 birthday, another offer of a flat arrived in the post.

Things *were* getting on top of me. I was feeling life was too much. My mother had died two years earlier. The mundane business of running a home and going up and down those three flights of stairs, of supporting my husband with his Alzheimer's, and my family with their differing needs and demands, was getting overwhelming. Life seemed, for the first time, to be more than I could manage.

We were offered a lovely two bedroomed flat at Bromley and Sheppard's Colleges, and given two months in which to move in, if we wanted it. It seemed as if we were on an unexpected roll of goodness and generosity - God's 'roll'. This place was ideal for us and within our budget. The ground floor flats I had investigated near to St Paul's church, which were large enough for us, were over-budget.

We took a deep breath, both feeling that this just might be God's unexpected move for us, and accepted the place. Within only two months, we sold our property in Wimbledon, and now live at Bromley and Sheppard's Colleges. Any forebodings we had about living alongside a bunch of retired clergy have proved groundless. We love it here and enjoy the group of 50 or so other residents, with whom we can mix as little, or as much, as we want to.

Growing old *can* be terrifying. Sometimes we may feel we have lost God - but my experience is that He has not lost us. He is looking after us, especially at those times when we're so exhausted we are not aware of it!

*Anne Townsend, 4th March 2012*

**MB BS, MRCS LRCP**

*Post Script*

In 2017 I am happily settled in By Parish church and on the ministry team. I chair the pastoral group, take services and preach and serve as a spiritual director with 8 people at present. A mobility scooter has enhanced my life beyond description!