

Exodus 19. 25 – 20. 20

Psalm 19. 7-14

Matthew 21. 33 46

Last Monday night I attended Mumblers for the first time. When it came to ordering I thought I would order a smaller, senior's meal. At the counter I got my senior's card ready to present to the cashier, to comply with the instruction on the menu that the seniors pricing was available on showing your seniors card. But the cashier didn't ask to see it. I realised to her, I looked like a senior – she didn't need proof. It suddenly felt like I had joined the ranks of the unseen, elderly. I felt seriously deflated.

The hymn writer John Bell tells a story of going into congregations in a consulting role and invariably being told: *oh, we are an ageing congregation*. What, he asks, are you ageing at a faster rate than the general population? Pricking a hole in the self-accusatory bubble that there is some kind of guilt associated with getting older. Trouble is, *we're an ageing congregation*, I find, is the mantra of most congregations. Along with an associated guilt about this self-evident reality; as though we have failed to stem the tide of getting older.

Things have changed dramatically in our society over the past century but in many ways in the church we have struggled to adjust to this changed context; and I think seize the opportunity of that changed reality. We wring our hands and accuse ourselves about the loss of people in the church; and many hanker to be able to go back to the way things were.

In our lifetimes two things have changed, making church involvement for families and young parents difficult. Firstly, the working of both partners in a household now and so the lack of time available for community participation and contribution; the sort of community involvement that characterised the world that many of us grew up with. In my own childhood home mum stayed at home and when dad arrived home from work on Friday night everything was set for a weekend of activities. It doesn't help to make value judgements about the contrast between that world and our contemporary world. It just is a change that has taken place.

And the second thing, is the tremendous demand on time and attention in the raising of children – extra curricular activities during the week, weekend sport and a succession of opportunities for **high stimulation and engagement**. The church hasn't been able to compete – not that competing is the name of the game - although some churches give into that temptation.

The other thing that has happened in this last century is that we are all living longer. In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – 1900-1910 – the average male life expectancy was 55 years. In 2020 the average male life expectancy was 83 years. An increase in life-expectancy over 100 years of more than 50%. The life of expectancy for women in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was just 41 years; ten years less than men. Maybe a reflection of the risks of childbirth. In 2020 women's life expectancy was 85 years, greater now than men, and a 100% increase in life expectancy. My own grandfather died in 1923 at the age of 50; tragically, leaving a widow and nine children. We have always told ourselves that he died too too young; but he lived a pretty much average length of time.

We wring our hands about the lack of young people in the church, particularly teenagers. For many of us the faith formation that took place in our teenage years was something which set the course for much of our lives. Although, that's not to ignore the number of peers from our teenage years who did not remain in the church. Our current UCA President, Sharon Hollis, says that we fetishise young people; that our mantra: *where are the young people*, is a kind of fetish. We have made the presence of young people the gold-standard measure of the health of a congregation. But, of course these teenage years are just a small fold in time in light of the rest of our years – maybe just five or six years between the start and finish of secondary school and going off to tertiary study or work; and a whole new life-trajectory. We have placed great store by capturing people in these years. The trouble with this valuing, in many ways I would say, this over-valuing of young people, is that we devalue the rest of our years, the rest of our spiritual journey through our years. Hence our guilt about being an ageing congregation.

We live in a society which valorises youth and vigour. We talk about reaching our physical peak sometime in our 20s; and then it's the long, slow decline toward death. We inevitably condemn ourselves by making this the highest value of human perfection. And spend a lot of those post-peak years hankering after our lost youth.

What I've observed though is that in our preoccupation with the lack of young people in the church, we have overlooked a cohort of people with whom the church might engage. People at the stage of life many of us are in. Empty nesters and people in the active years of retirement. In reality it is this cohort that keeps the church running in so many places; maybe what we're struggling to do is adapt to our change circumstances, continuing to try to be church in the form it was which we were raised.

In my first congregation there was a whole group of men who were retrenched in the Kennett years, maybe 15-20 of them; all forced into retirement in their late 50s. One guy was playing golf three days a week. Trouble was his father was hale and hearty at 102. I wondered whether he was going to continue playing golf three days a week for the rest of his years; for more years than he would have worked. Is this a purposeful life? What might be the possibilities for a purposeful life in a long retirement?

As we Baby Boomers have been preparing for retirement over the course of our working lives, it has been as though the purpose of life has shifted from finding meaning and dignity in work to securing prosperous leisure in retirement. Checking out of participating and checking into an endless round of indulgent pursuits. Certainly this is what the advertisers lure us with; even the banks encouraging us to spend the children's inheritance.

There is a kind of assumption that old age equates with a getting of wisdom. As I've got older, it's become clear to me that this is not so. Wisdom assumes a willingness to reflect deeply on life, especially on the course of our own life; the choices we have made, the things we have succeeded in; the things we have stuffed up. And maybe share with those who are coming after us some of that reflected wisdom; repent of some of the choices we have made; to seek reconciliation where healing is needed. And to caution others that maybe the path we took was not a wise one. Of course, where this is most pressing in our own time is the expectation that everyone - all 8 billion of us - can enjoy the same unimpeded material progress we have undergone.

We began today with words from the book of Proverbs:

The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,  
and whatever else you get, get insight.  
Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;  
she will honour you if you embrace her.  
She will place on your head a fair garland;  
she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.

On Thursday Jenny Preston and I led the funeral of John Gregory, a man who was born into this congregation 76 years ago and who has maintained family connections with Highfield rd over his life. Family told stories of a curious – some might even say furious - tenacity from John's earliest Sunday School years; wanting answers to all his questions. Especially about those events recorded in scripture we might call miraculous, or supernatural; or events that seem downright racist or unjust or simply in-credible. Few were courageous enough to tussle with John and to prevail – at least on his terms. But I was curious about John's tenacity in trying to get wisdom – maybe some would simply call it knowledge – but it seemed to be a never-ending quest for him. He had a kind of inner authority that drove him to wrestle with questions of meaning and to seek answers, always restless to go deeper.

The life trajectory that we are set on now is a kind of fast moving treadmill from birth; child-minding centres promoted as early-learning centres; play not being an adequate pastime for pre-school children; primary and secondary education that involves an endless succession of extra-curricular activities; tutors supercharging children for assessment tasks; multiple experiences so that children can realise their full potential; and then an adult life where establishing and maintaining a work-life balance is a constant challenge and getting ahead seems to be the purpose of life. There's not a lot of time for the getting of wisdom.

And then retirement arrives. And there is time for questions to be pursued, explored and reflection to take place. There is suddenly space; but for what? Is it then an endless succession of indulgent pursuits – living on the surface. Or will the opportunity to go deeper, gain wisdom, be given space. And time.

I did see a statistic that said that a significant majority of the post-war population had exposure to church and Sunday Scholl up until the age of twelve. I suppose this is not news to us if we were raised in the church and saw the great draining out of peers during adolescence and early adulthood. But the overwhelming magnitude of these numbers surprised me. But where have they gone? What are their questions? Did they leave because no one would respond to their questions seriously; or someone else shut their questions down – and so their quest – maybe their whole questing through life? And what of our questions? Do you feel free to voice them? Or do you think I might be disapproving? We're you schooled to not air your questions – being told to be a doubter was somehow shameful. I have a friend who was a curious child like John Gregory. He said that it was though the adults in his life used to respond to his curiosity saying: *shut up, or I'll nail the other foot to the floor.*

In August 1994 the Director of the Assembly Commission for Mission, Dorothy McRae-McMahon addressed an 'Open Letter to the Doctors of the Church':

In spite of more than 60 years of theological training in 'mainstream', post-critical Biblical study and theology, I believe that we have a largely pre-critical, semi-literalist church

membership. This means that when we face some of the key ethical and missional issues of our day, we are not equipped to do so. It means that we are heading towards the 21st Century with something more like a 19th Century view of Scripture. It means that in much of the church we dare not ask the questions which need to be asked and we are unable to face mature relationships with the community around us.

A fellow ministry candidate said to me when we were in college together, that the elders in his life had said to him: *don't go to theological college: it will ruin your faith*. Serious theological engagement with the reality of our lives, our world and who God is changes us. Being people of faith is not about being set in stone; neither is being church. I only came across this quote from Dorothy last year. It is a terrible indictment really. What Dorothy was saying is that most of the adults in our congregations have a Sunday School theology. What is to be done?

I suppose I want to say to you is that what Dorothy McRae-McMahon wrote thirty years ago expresses what I have come to understand is the task of the church in this time. This is not about getting people through the door into the church but about engaging deeply with the curly reality of our lives, the sometimes-tragic reality of our world in the light of the gospel. To do this amongst ourselves but also to offer it to the community.

So, I'm hoping we may begin and continue a conversation about how this might take place and that you may continue to life into your vision of being a community of vibrant faith and gracious hospitality.

Andrew Boyle