

WHEN I'M SIXTY-FOUR

A Celebration of the Third Age!

“I married you for life, but not for lunch”

I think I should confess, right at the start, that I fit neither the title of this series nor the title of this talk. I'm on the way to being 67 and certainly not retired. I'm not certain when the Third Age is supposed to begin but in my mind it's linked with retirement and the beginning of a distinct new life-stage. And we're not there yet!

“I married you for life but not for lunch”. Sandwiches available, as it said encouragingly in the pew sheet of my church last Sunday! When we married in 1965, I knew that my husband Michael was responding to a vocation to become an Anglican priest and I felt that my own calling was to be there alongside him – though becoming a Bishop's wife was certainly not in the marriage contract – and so I guess I was aware that lunch at home on many, if not most, days would be on the menu for us as a couple. In fact “He married me to be the bread-winner for the first two years of our life together” is closer to our experience: days after returning from our honeymoon we moved to a 200 year old cottage in Cuddesdon in Oxfordshire, with one cold tap, no bathroom and a chemical loo up the garden, where we were to spend a very cosy and happy almost two years, while he was in training for the priesthood at Cuddesdon Theological College. I taught Latin so that we could have some lunch in the brief moments when he touched down at home. On six days a week his day began at 7.10am with Mattins and Meditation in the College Chapel and ended there with Compline at 9.45pm. He sometimes came home briefly during the afternoon. I've often mused on the fact that, whilst this pattern instilled excellent spiritual habits for a lifetime in Christian ministry, it encouraged a distinctly questionable work/life balance for married bliss or the demands of family life.

In this talk I want to explore from my own experience and that of family and friends, including some of my counsellor friends within Relate, some of the things that happen to couples when they suddenly find themselves in later life together at home, after a working life which has taken one or both of them out of the home on most days. I hope to reflect on how relationships and the balance between partners may change in later life; on feelings that may be around at the point of giving up, leaving, retiring from a job, which may have been a person's way of life for many years; on the opportunities and the limiting factors which later life may bring. I'd also like to share something of my and our own journey.

We're much looking forward to going on a pre-retirement course in January 2009, which the C. of E. makes available to clergy – and to bishops – in the years before retirement actually happens. In our case, moving house and starting again in a new setting will accompany leaving the absorbing, time hungry, diary-bound committed life of a diocesan bishop and his wife, with its

expectations, demands and pressures, as well as the immense privilege and richness of serving God in our particular roles. It will involve moving out of our very large historic “tied cottage”, set in a beautiful garden, an oasis of peace in the middle of this city, into a small house somewhere out of Winchester and outside the diocese. We know where we hope to go but as yet have no home to go to. The transition won’t be easy; downsizing will be horrendous. But we genuinely look forward to living more simply and on a much smaller scale and in a less public way.

I’ve perhaps got too many hopes and aspirations about what I would like to do when we retire; I don’t think that Michael in his constantly full life has had time to think much about his Third Age. I trust that the pre-retirement course will help us begin to shape and share our aspirations and hopes realistically. Most of all for me is the longing to have more time for our family who, I fear, come much too far down our diary priorities. Grandchildren grow up so quickly: we have one in her second year of school and three in their second year of life. And I know we are not alone in watching our children trying to balance life as parents of young children with the demands of full time work but without the financial resources to cope at all comfortably. It would be good to be able to support them more.

We belong to what is sometimes called the “sandwich generation”: many people at our stage of life find themselves stuck between supporting elderly parents on one hand and their children and grandchildren on the other. One in four grandparents look after their grandchildren on a regular basis and 40% of parents continue to support their children financially well after they have left home, even taking out joint mortgages to help. Carers for elderly and other relatives reputedly save government anything between £21 billion and £87 billion per annum in care costs.

The experience of very close friends of ours illustrate this beautifully. He retired from the Civil Service on his sixtieth birthday; she continued to teach part time for a year or two and struggled with negative feelings about his constant presence at home which deprived her of space she had always had and hadn’t realised how much she valued. He tended to comment and be concerned if she wasn’t home by the time she said she would return. Meanwhile he had a portfolio of interesting retirement responsibilities, many of them continuing what he had been doing before retirement: involvement in their local church, governor of a primary school, chairman of a youth project on a large run down London estate. Then they are constantly travelling between London and the West Country to care for her Mother in her nineties and to support their two sons and five small grandchildren. They seem to us no less busy than they have ever been and, sadly, to have little time for themselves and for leisure. They have had a lifetime of responsible, different and absorbing careers, punctuated with an excellent family life with their two sons, elder relatives and plenty of friends; and stimulating holidays abroad. And always that daily work routine and the structure that gave to life, when they were both out of the house all day, though she used to get home earlier and have a little space, which was suddenly disturbed by his retirement, so that for a while life felt out of balance and distinctly uncomfortable.

On the other hand I was speaking to Peter, a retired consultant anaesthetist, in a Hampshire church the other Sunday, who said that retirement had never felt difficult to him or to his wife Carol (who was standing nearby!) He had given up work gradually and had accepted one or two short term, part-time roles before he retired completely. He had an absorbing and lifelong interest in woodcarving and fishing, in both of which he delighted more and more. "And", he said, "I've always encouraged Carol – a nurse, so we're complementary – to have her own interests and friends. That way we have always had stimulating things to talk about ... and now we also have time." He came across as a deeply contented person, sustained in and through a good marriage.

And then there was the 62 year old cyclist I met on a train going north to York a few weeks ago. He turned out to have been a primary school head teacher in the same Berkshire school for 32 years. Two years ago his successor was appointed and he agreed to job-share with her for a while. He went down to three days a week last year but continued to take the lead in his school; this year he has gone down to two days and she is in charge, while he acts more as her mentor. In this way he feels the school is having a seamless transition and he is gentling his way into retirement. He was on his way to York by train and then intending to cycle north for three days to Berwick-on-Tweed to be with his sister on her birthday.

We are told that our life expectancy at 65 has risen by about 20 years over the last 25 years, though certainly not for all or in all parts of the country. It doesn't necessarily follow that longer life means more time in perfect health, though it may do. An increasing incidence of chronic illness puts increasing strain on the medical services and perhaps too increasing strain on marriage and other close relationships. I'm certainly aware of many more golden weddings being celebrated but the lengthening of married years can take its toll, especially where there are unresolved issues in a creaky relationship. I heard this week of a couple, both in their nineties and the wife in a wheelchair, both very deaf, who were brought to Relate for help, because during a row they had begun to hit out at each other and there was concern for their mutual safety – possibly also for their mental health. I just think with sympathy about the pressure and sadness – and frustrations – of your marriage partner disabled and hard to communicate with, because of hearing loss on both sides.

Sometimes I walk down a street noting white sticks and walking frames, wheelchairs and mobility buggies and ask myself what it may be like one day, when one or both of us may be coping with loss of mobility or some failing sensory function and consequently becoming more or less dependent. I'm not being morbid, not at all: I hope that I'm trying to prepare a little for what the future may bring to either or both of us. Will I remain gracious and grateful, hopeful and interested in others, or as determined to cope as my very arthritic grandmother? "Don't pick that up for me, please, dear. I need to work out how to do it so that I can manage when you're not here." And she did, bless her, for many years, with the same courage with which she had coped with widowhood in her early thirties and the loss of her beloved

younger son during World War 2. She lived alone, more or less independently, in a village in Fife, well into her eighties, until her heart began to complain and she needed to go into care.

So what are the opportunities and what the limitations of becoming older? For many of us there will be a rich vein of opportunity in later life, though constrained probably by less money. To mention a few possibilities: travelling the world – cruises have never been more popular apparently, Saga or otherwise – hobbies, offering our time, skills and experience as volunteers, the University of the Third Age, golf; more time to enjoy music or theatre, if we can afford it, to walk, garden or read. More time with family and friends – I do hope so!

However, for many people there are more difficult and even distressing aspects to becoming older. I was shocked to hear from a friend who was having difficulties with an eye following a cataract operation. The consultant said to her that he had been reading her notes and had had no idea how old she was – in her eightieth year, though she didn't look it (what does that say about my own assumptions?). "What do you expect", he said, "at your age?" Sadly, ageism is clearly alive and well.

A counsellor friend of mine told me a moving story of a couple who came to her at Relate for help. They were in their eighties. She had terminal cancer and they were finding themselves overwhelmed by terrible feelings of anger: the husband because she was about to leave him – abandon him; the wife resentful that his life would go on when hers ended. They had had 60 years of a loving, trusting, supportive marriage and were appalled at what was happening to them now. The counsellor was able to help them externalise the anger and give it a name, and a way of dealing with it, so that they could unite against the anger – and the cancer – and re-find their loving, trusting, accepting closeness for the time they had left. She spoke of the privilege she felt when working with older couples and how in this case she had

“a sense of two who had become one. It felt to me as if there was a parallel with the beginning of life, when two are one as mother and unborn child, and in so many ways the end is like the beginning in human life. It was very moving.”

She went on to speak of ***“how, in long term relationships, a sense develops of how one is held in the mind/heart of the other. This can be immensely sustaining, grounding, secure-making. To feel that someone, over a long period of time, values you, believes in you, has a deep knowledge of who you are, creates a sense of self that is profoundly reassuring. Of course, this is not only the case with couples, but also in long term friendships, sibling or parent-child relationships, though a partnership such as marriage has a particular intimacy, through sex in part, which creates an even deeper union. Union again: two becoming one”.***

I quote her remarks in full, because I find them profoundly moving and insightful; and, because what she says has so many echoes of what I believe – and find myself becoming ever more deeply convicted by – about the nature

of the relationship which God our Father longs to have with each of us as his children. Do you remember Isaiah 49:15? ***“I shall never forget you. I have inscribed you in the palms of my hands”***; or the wonderful picture in Psalm 139. I quote almost at random from this amazing psalm: vv.13-14 ***“You it was who fashioned my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for you fill me with awe; wonderful you are, and wonderful your works. You know me through and through.”*** And yet here also is the anomaly within marriage. One partner does get to know the other through and through but still there remains mystery at the core of the other’s being. So reassurance and a secure grounding, yes, but still always more to explore and to discover to the end of our lives together.

Loss and dependency seem to be particular themes of later life and quite a number of older people suffer from depression. Retirement may bring loss of status, when it may be hard to readjust to not being ‘someone’ and to no longer having a role in the outside world. And with that can come a sense of loneliness and isolation from the world of work, loss of the friendships and company of the workplace.

One friend, whose husband had recently retired from a significant and demanding political post, said to Michael: “he doesn’t seem to realise that I have had a life too”. A felt need to reclaim status may lead to issues about who is in charge and if both partners start to undertake roles in the home which hitherto have been the domain of one of them, usually the wife, this can lead to conflict – going shopping, for instance, or managing the house or garden. On the other hand there may be a swapping of gender places, if a retired husband switches off and becomes more passive and his wife becomes more assertive or powerful in the relationship.

Similarly, there may be changing intimacy and sexual needs on both sides. I heard of an older couple who were referred to a Relate psycho-sexual therapist for help. The therapy went well, reported the therapist, but the husband was feeling rather worn out, since his wife had become orgasmic and now couldn’t get enough sex. Research has shown that up to 35% of women and 30% of men aged fifty or more suffer from sexual dysfunction. Help is available through Relate and other agencies, if that is what’s wanted. However, for many, the *urgency* of younger sexual needs give way to the *comfort* of older sex. Don’t let’s forget that extraordinary story, told by the first speaker in this series, of Thomas Parr from Shropshire, who lived for 152 years, 1483-1635, married his second wife at 120 and was happily sexually active until 12 years before his death!

Sadly, whilst divorce rates generally seem to be going down somewhat, divorce rates among the over-60s are on the increase. Much is required of each partner for a long marriage to continue to be satisfying and mutually sustaining and those who counsel older couples speak of idealisation and hopes being dashed: the wife who looked forward to life together and to her husband giving her more love and attention, only to discover that the golf course, or directorships or new interests engaged him more than interest in her after retirement, which led to a crushing sense of disappointment and

even bitterness in her. The husband, aware of getting older and fearful of losing his sexual attraction – as well as his hair! – who takes up with a younger woman and abandons his wife of 30 years or more. I read the moving story in the Mothers' Union 'Home and Family' magazine of Jennifer Rees Larcombe's experience of this and how, through much pain, she eventually came to terms with her loss. But for some the loss of hope is simply too great: they may come to Relate for help but one or the other can't bear it: the wasted years, as he or she sees it; the waiting for love and attention in retirement which doesn't come, because he – or she, for that matter – is simply not like that; the bitterness. For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health until death us do part just may not seem possible after all. I married you for life but this is not life for me.

Marriages need nurturing at any stage and good communication is so much the key to a healthy human relationship: the capacity to listen, to say thank you and I'm sorry, to love and to mutually cherish –the very same ingredients which make for a healthy relationship with God. Retirement and more space and time may in fact exacerbate issues between people that have remained lurking unresolved for a long time, hidden beneath busyness. We have found in the Marriage Encounter movement, with which we have been connected for many years, remarkable giving of tools to help couples to communicate honestly and continue to do so.

Not surprisingly, the losses of old age mirror the loss through death of someone close and the journey of working through grief, of letting go of idealised expectations and the readjustment and rebalancing which inevitably follows death. If readjustments, the rebalancing process can be achieved, and it will be a variously large or small task for different individuals and couples, then dreams and hopes, opportunities and possibilities for a rich retirement experience, though not necessarily in financial terms, are endless.

I'd like to finish by sharing with you just a little of my own feelings at this stage of my/our life, looking forward towards retirement and what it may bring, though none of us knows the reality of the future. I'm more grateful than I can possibly express for what I've been given these last 43 years since we married in 1965 – "for life and mostly for lunch too", though, like most people, we could not possibly have anticipated the shape of our journey to this point.

Neither of us entered marriage with particularly helpful models or experience of marriage and family life: Michael was an only child and for various reasons was at boarding school from the age of 5; my family life was chaotic, financially strained, and often not particularly happy, with hardly any extended family, though I and my siblings were never in doubt about our parents' love for us. My parents both died, five months apart, in the year before we were married and my younger brother a few years later. Young as he was, Michael was then, as he remains now, my totally committed and wonderfully faithful husband, lover, friend, supporter and encourager. And he had too to some extent to be Mother and Father to me through long years of working through all the feelings of loss – and a degree of recurrent depression that can accompany such loss. There have been many adjustments and new insights in our relationship over the years, not least when I trained as a Relate

counsellor in the late eighties. In recent years we have, I think, experienced a real and powerful deepening of our relationship together before God and in our ability to pray together, for which I'm profoundly thankful.

Now we look forward to lunching together in retirement even more frequently and to a shared life within our growing family; to leading more pilgrimages, to having more time to enjoy music, books and theatre, walking and gardening, as well as continuing to use our experience and gifts in the service of God. We look forward too to a lessening of the treadmill which a pressing life can bring. There will be further adjustments and testings and we don't know about what lies ahead in the area of health and strength. But we are confident that God will be with us, and will continue to hold each and both of us in his hands, whatever lies ahead. It's an extraordinary thought that he knows us through and through, as he has done since before we were born.

Let me finish with a picture that I found in Michael Hare Duke's little book, "One Foot in Heaven" a book about growing older and living to the full:

"Old age is sometimes described as 'Life past its sell by date', but this is to fall into the trap of seeing value at only one point in the life-cycle. A hollow tree in the forest may be assumed to be no good because it is past its prime. The negative description focuses on the partly rotted trunk, the loose bark, and the old dead branches which need to be cut out. But too little is made of the contribution of the hollow tree to the life of the woodland. ... Its outer bark will have thickened with age and its roots penetrated deeper into the soil. This will give it stability against winter gales. Younger trees are bent under the wind pressure caught by their heavy foliage ... and are in danger of blowing over. The hollow tree stands firm in the ground and offers less resistance to the gale, and so becomes a secure home to a host of woodland creatures. Insects live under the bark, birds can burrow into the soft wood to find a useful site for a nest and small mammals can make a home in its roots."

"I married him for life" and for lunch and I pray that at no time will that life seem to have lost its value.

Lou Scott-Joynt

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I'm grateful to many people for allowing me to talk to them about their own lives around retirement, and also to Sue Armstrong, Mandy Hopkins and Dee Holmes, some of my friends and colleagues within Relate and to Helen Tarsh, a psycho-therapist, married to Nick, the Chairman of national Relate.

I'm grateful too to Paul Cann of Help the Aged for material gleaned from a workshop he ran at Relate's Annual Conference on "Promoting Strong Relationships in an Ageing Society."

And I'd like to recommend the following two books for further reading, if you are interested:

"One Foot in Heaven, Growing Older and Living to the Full", by Bishop Michael Hare Duke, who in retirement became President of Age Concern Scotland for two years. ISBN 0-281-05399-5

"It's No Sin to be Sixty – A positive look at the Third Age", by Neville Smith, a retired Anglican priest. ISBN 978-0-05231-342-8