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Out of sight and therefore...? Older people in society.

You may remember that The Times on Saturday, Jan 14th and for a few days following, ran a piece entitled “One Hundred People to watch in 2012.”

Of the forty enumerated at the time of writing this lecture, two were over 70 years old (Sir John Chilcot and the architect of the Shard, Renzo Piano); eighteen were under 40; seventeen between the ages of 40-60; two between 60-70 and one was 6 months old, Harper Seven Beckham. I suppose that it is a way of selling newspapers, but it reveals, at the very least, the attitudes of journalists to older people. You will notice that no-one deemed worthy of “watching” was over the age of eighty ... it partly explains the title of this talk “Out of sight and therefore...: Older people in society.”

It is not clear what the Times would have made of Noah who, says the Book of Genesis, was 600 years old when he entered the Ark; in his old age on one famous occasion he became paralytically drunk, and was 950 years of age when he died. It makes Abraham, living for only 175 years, look like a wimp... Sagas have a gorgeous habit of dealing wittily in hyperbole.

Enough of this, what I am going to try to do in this talk is to think aloud with you about the theology of ageing, and I do so very conscious that I am in the presence of some serious and scholarly theologians; I have set myself quite a daunting challenge. Where shall I begin?

I begin with a statement of the obvious. If there is **no** God then any talk of a theology of ageing is non-sense. However, if God is, and if God is as revealed in Scripture, tradition and reason, a theology of ageing is, at least in principle, possible.

I return to Genesis and to the quotation I used in a previous lecture: Genesis 1, verse 27: “God created human beings in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” I said that this was a foundational, axiomatic statement about what used to be described as the Doctrine of Man, or what should be called in a more politically correct era, the Doctrine of Humanity. What it claims is that there is an inherent and indestructible relationship between God and humanity. Our being is derived from his Being.

But having said this with such emphatic force, the book of Genesis in its sonorous and mythic style then goes on to describe what we have come to call “The Fall”-the profound alienation that exists between humanity and God, or, put it another way, Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden. One of the consequences of “The Fall” is that sin, evil, limitation and death enter the world.

Please do not misunderstand what I am saying. I am not saying that this is a description of an actual historical event; rather, it is an exploration and explanation of the human condition told in a powerful, imagination-gripping narrative form. It attempts to answer questions such as “Why is there evil in the world? Where did it come from? Are we human beings the chance result of impersonal forces, or are we in some way, the product of God? Why do things not go on for ever? Why does

anything exist?" They are the questions which all human beings face, believer and non-believer alike.

The redeeming feature of The Fall, if I can so put it, is that, as the Old Testament conveys, it does not destroy the relationship between God and his people. It is seen as a relationship of a demanding, but covenantal kind. After the test faced by Abraham to sacrifice his only son, the angel of the Lord reports, "This is the word of the Lord: by my own self I swear that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I shall bless you abundantly and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on the seashore. Your descendants will possess the cities of their enemies. All nations on earth will wish to be blessed as your descendants are blessed, because you have been obedient to me." (Genesis 22, verse 15-18.) That covenant promise is then echoed in the saga of Moses, for example, in the Psalm sung, according to the Book of Exodus, after the crossing of the Red Sea: "In your constant love you led the people, whom you had redeemed: you guided them by your strength to your holy dwelling place." (Exodus 15, verse 13)

I recognise, of course, the influence of the editors who helped to shape the final texts of Genesis and Exodus as we now have them, and that from an historical perspective it is likely that much was projected back into the past in order to justify the views of the present, but this does not alter the theology of the texts. Creation, Fall, Exodus, Covenant and Promise are major Old Testament theological themes. But what is also clear is that these theological themes have a distinctly communal character. They are addressed to the People of Israel collectively, for the most part, rather than to individuals. Let me give an example, chosen almost at random: Isaiah 52, verses 12-16:

I am he who comforts you; why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die, a human being who fades like grass? You have forgotten the Lord, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth. You fear continually all day long because of the fury of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction. But where is the fury of the oppressor? The oppressed shall speedily be released; they shall not die and go down to the Pit, nor shall they lack bread. For I am the Lord your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar – the Lord of hosts is his name. I have put my words in your mouth, and hidden you in the shadow of my hand, stretching out the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth, and saying to Zion, "You are my people."

And then there comes that haunting and lovely poem about The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53, verse 1-12:

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for

our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief; when he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand; he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

And apart from the sheer beauty of this passage, there is a question as to whether it is meant to refer to an individual or to the People of Israel, or to the Faithful Remnant of that people. It's neither the time nor the place to discuss that question here today. But I shall return to some of the implications of it in a minute.

Let me return to this all-too-brief overview of the theology of the Old Testament and take us very briefly into two areas of Old Testament life. I am almost bound to be asked about the use of the word "Elders" in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word can mean "aged, old, and bearded" (and that gives the game away) but it also refers, more often than not, to a man of a distinct social class, to the senior authoritative figures in the community who were consulted about various issues. For example, the Elders of the City represented the citizens of the city and were called on to deliberate about difficult moral and legal cases. So we cannot look to Biblical verses in the Old Testament about Elders to help us in our understanding of the elderly. But we might look to those verses in Deuteronomy which refer to the most vulnerable people in Old Testament society – the widows, the strangers and the fatherless. Here Deuteronomy is unashamedly clear in its proscriptions: Deuteronomy 24, verse 17-19: "You must not deprive aliens and the fatherless of justice or take a widow's cloak in pledge ... when you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf, do not go back and pick it up; it is to be left for the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, so that the Lord may bless you in all you undertake."

It is all summed up in those ringing words from Micah (Micah 6, verse 8): "The Lord has told you mortals what is good, and what it is that the Lord requires of you: only to act justly, to love mercy/kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

Let me try to summarise where we have got so far. I asked a question at the beginning about whether it was possible to have a theology of ageing. What I have been doing in a very condensed form is to suggest that there is such a theology in the Old Testament but it is buried deep within the big theological themes of Creation,

Fall, Covenant, etc. And whilst those themes have a powerfully communal character, we can deduce from them some profound moral principles which should apply to all people, including the elderly. So, for example, if we are all created in the image of God, it follows that that dimension of our humanity is not time-limited. We cannot get to a point in the chronology of our individual lives in which it can be said of us that we are no longer made in God's image, in which our being does not derive from His being.

Another example: if the story of the Fall represents an existential truth about our humanity, that we are alienated from God, and often from each other – that in-built alienation does not have a time-limit either. Put bluntly, we are as capable of being evil in old age as we were when we were much younger.

Another example: if God is a God who covenants with his people, it follows that God does not break his covenants with us when we reach a certain age. He remains faithful to us at all times and in all places.

And then, if we want to discover some more moral principles which should apply in society in relation to the elderly, we would do well to look at the provisions in Deuteronomy about how the most vulnerable in society should share in the goods of the land.

Further, if we want to find a succinct statement about how elderly people should be treated we ought to look at the words of Micah, where justice, mercy and humility are the watchwords for our behaviour one toward another.

Those of you who have been following my argument closely will recognise that I have omitted from these theological deductions from the Old Testaments, any reference to the passage which I quoted earlier from Isaiah 53 about the Suffering Servant.

I included those verses initially because they illustrated, by contrast, the way in which so much of the Old Testament is communal in character. But I also included them because of their profound impact upon the theology of the New Testament. Some of our early Christian ancestors saw in that poem a perfect description of who they understood Jesus of Nazareth to be – the very embodiment of the Suffering Servant.

Hang on to that idea for a moment whilst I attempt to introduce another huge theological theme. The theme, drawn from the New Testament is about the Incarnation, about God becoming enfleshed as Man. It was expressed by John in the opening words of his gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not...

... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

And the implications and deep truth of the Incarnation was expressed by Paul in his letter to the Philippians in this way:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.

If the Incarnation is true, then its implications for a theology of ageing are of immense significance. It would seem that God through Christ entered the human condition totally, in all its weakness and vulnerability. There is nothing about our humanity which was, or is, outside his lived and living experience, including our ageing processes.

Read the Suffering Servant passages again and as you do so, overlay them with an image of an elderly woman in a psycho-geriatric ward, and you can perhaps see what I am driving at. Or, if you prefer, (and I remain very indebted to one of my parishioners for pointing this out to me): add some other words to that superb piece from Paul in Romans 8:

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Instead, for the word “angels” substitute the word “ageing”; for the word “principalities” substitute the word “Alzheimers”. This is the power of the Incarnation that nothing, absolutely nothing is beyond the reach of God’s love and God’s redemptive power.

Now, if you add to the theological themes in the Old Testament of the Creation, the Fall and the Covenant, the New Testament theme of Incarnation you can begin to see what an extraordinary and liberating theology we can begin to create about our own ageing processes. And I have not mentioned, because there is not time, the theology in the New Testament about the Atonement, and the effect of Christ’s death on the cross upon The Fall. Our alienation was, and is, bridged by the fact of God reconciling the world to himself in Christ Jesus.

If all of this is true then the implications for the ways in which we might regard the ageing process are immense, and, perhaps even more to the point, the effect upon the ways in which we might treat the very elderly and frail deserve to be given much more consideration in our churches and communities.

You will be aware that there has been, quite rightly, a good deal of concern expressed recently about the ways in which our elderly are treated in our country. Part of the cause of that is undoubtedly to do with inadequate training and supervision, and lack of attention to rigorous quality controls, but what I have been trying to suggest today, by implication, is that it is also a result of an underlying spiritual and cultural malaise. Old people are out of sight and out of mind because as a nation we no longer share a set of theological values and beliefs. As churches we need to go on the front foot about this, not in any heavy or pompous way but by showing that we have a unique set of insights about the purpose of human life which deserve to be given room around the discussion table.

The other day I was reading a meditation in Nick Holtam's book "The Art of Worship". It was on the theme of Isolation (something which many older people experience) and in it was this, part of a quotation from Bishop Klaus Hemmerle (1929-94; Bishop of Aachen 1975-94): "For Christians, time in solitude gives us "Easter eyes" able to perceive in death, life; in guilt, forgiveness; in separation, unity; in wounds, glory; in the human, God; in God, the human; and in the I, You."

It says it all...

The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert.