

## Space in the City

### When I'm 64... A Celebration of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Age

#### The Rediscovery of Faith

15 October 2008

When I agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to speak today the first thing I did was to look up the lyrics of the song 'When I'm 64'... and I found the lines –

'when I'm 64 ... will you need me, will you love me, .... will you feed me?'

These are the words of the young looking into an impossibly distant future but they are also a universal cry at any age – for we all need to be needed, need to be loved – need to be fed

And what of the phrase 'When I'm 64'?

'When I'm 64' represents a landmark time in life – a crossroads where there are more fingerposts telling us where we have come from than telling us where we are going

- for many people, it represents the end of paid work
- the time when children leave home
- perhaps a time when the place we call home has to move or change

It is a time of 'endings', of rethinking, and of new beginnings.

Endings bring many different emotions; for some of us there may be a sense of grief and loss as work comes to an end – for we have lost not only our daily occupation but also the recognition and sense of identity as well as the meaning to the day which work can give.

There may be some of us for whom work has not been meaningful – necessary yes but not satisfying and their first feeling may be one of relief, of elation – even of escape!

So the crossroads of '64' – if I may call it that – which has been a destination for so long has now become the starting place of a new journey. Having arrived, we can't just sit down – settle down at the crossroads watching other people go past – life demands that we move over and move on

The third age has arrived and we must decide how we are going to live it

And how was it for me when I reached the crossroads?

My husband and I were retiring from general practice. We had been joint partners in a practice we had built up alongside a council estate on the edge of Southampton overlooking Southampton water. Although at that time, many practices were coming together in larger groupings we had remained a partnership of two.

When Neill came to retiring age – beyond it in fact – we both retired and that meant leaving the house and surgery and handing over to our successor within a week of the last surgery. For several reasons it was a very stressful time but we packed all our goods and moved to a cottage we owned, deep in the French countryside

I have to confess that our feelings were mixed. Because of ill health the burden of the practice had become intolerably heavy so there was great relief when we could hand over the responsibility to our successors but there was also sadness about leaving the practice we had built up and leaving the people whom we had come to know so well.

We were certainly looking forward with a sense of anticipation and excitement to life in France but there was also concern about family left behind

In other words it was typical of life – it was complicated !!

In France there was much to learn, to experience and to enjoy in our new life but within a few years Neill's health deteriorated to such an extent that we had to move back to England – to make a home in Winchester where 5 months later he died – at home – on Christmas night.

I had arrived at another 'ending' – alone this time – at another crossroads – and this time I did not want to move on ....

You may be thinking that I have been asked to talk today about faith and wondering why I have not mentioned the word ..... and that is because faith at that time was not a part of my life.

I was a typical non church going nominal Christian and Neill was of the same mind. In all the stress and weariness of his illness, we were never able to talk to each other about his approaching death and that was a very lonely place to be.

After his death I entered a very dark time – I was kept busy as there was a great deal to do but I spoke to very few people about what I was feeling

The journey thro' darkness and grief seemed endless and I remember after several years in a time of despair coming to a resolution a – very inarticulate – 'I need to know what I think about things'.

But how to begin?

Having had a scientific education my starting place was 'reason'; I began with philosophy classes – looking at Kant and Hume and Berkley – which was very interesting but did not satisfy.

Then one day I went into a church on a Sunday morning where a traditional Anglican Matins service was taking place – if ever there was a service to bemuse the unbeliever this was it!

I can't say why – but I went to that service again and gradually, week by week, the story that it was telling became clearer until I could say 'I could go with this – it makes sense – but sadly I don't believe it'. It simply was not real to me .....

My hope of finding a light at the end of this dark tunnel faded and my depression grew.

I am not sure how long it was – perhaps another six months later when I went on holiday to Rome and Assisi and it was there among the quiet hills of Assisi that I was overtaken by an intense religious experience that caught me up in body and mind and spirit; as others have found, before me and since, there are no words that can describe such an experience but as I came thro' it I can remember thinking:

'now I know there are other ways of knowing' – and –  
'I believe – I don't know what I believe but I can believe'!

I had discovered that there are different ways of knowing.

Previously I had thought in terms of reading and study through which we can learn a lot about religious ideas, about the life of Jesus of Nazareth and about the history of the church. This is a

discipline, an intellectual discipline to which we can set ourselves and through which we can come to know a great deal **about** our subject.

But if we want to know – not know **about** – but know our Lord in the way we know that we love someone – in our heart as well as our mind – in a way that changes us – then we need to find him in faith. And with faith comes trust and confidence and relationship.

This is different from the intellectual way of knowing and in a mature faith both have their place.

Maybe for many people they come as a package – heart and intellect together but for me – well – it was just amazing that it took so long – 7 years in a dark tunnel –

I am sorry that I have spent all this time talking about myself but somehow the story picks up so many things I want to say about the search for faith

Faith is a gift from God, given in his own good time. We can't reach out and seize it; we can't say that we have worked hard and we deserve it, we can only long for it.

Bishop John Pritchard wrote:

'maybe we need to respond to that slow steady undertow of longing that we sense sometimes when we slow down enough'

I recognise that 'slow steady undertow of longing that we sense sometimes when we slow down enough'.

Is this the opportunity that the 3<sup>rd</sup> age can give us – opportunities to slow down enough to sense the longings within us – the deep need to find the things that really matter?

To find a new faith or to revive an old one?

Faith does not have to come in dramatic, explosive ways as it did for me in Assisi – although I think perhaps this happens more frequently than we realise – faith can come quietly creeping into a waiting heart where it gently grows and takes root and this is the experience of many people, people who have said to me 'I have never known a time when I did not believe in Him – he was always there.'

And I hear words of longing in our song–

'When I'm 64 – will you need me? Will you love me? Will you feed me?'

And I ask – 'Having found a faith, how do we feed it to keep it alive and growing within us?'

I think of St Paul writing to the infant church in Corinth – he had heard that there were divisions among the people as different factions in the church claimed allegiance to different apostles (1 Cor.3: 6) and Paul wrote:-

'..one says 'I belong to Paul' another 'I belong to Apollos' .... What then is Apollos? What is Paul? We are servants thro' whom you came to believe, .... **I planted, Apollos watered but God gave the growth'**

Yes – it is God who gives the growth that will root the faith deeply and strongly within us but faith also needs to be fed and watered – so where do we look for our feeding?

The Christian community, the church to which we belong should surely be the first place we look to; it is the community in which we are known – where we gather together for worship and to celebrate the Eucharist. This is where we meet for teaching, for prayer, and for mutual support. It's where, nourished by the church the faithful reach out to serve in the world and to share the good news.

It's in this field of service in the community that the 3<sup>rd</sup> agers in particular, come into their own – on the whole we are rich in skills and experience and in time –but here I sense that I am entering common ground with the other speakers in this series so I am throwing this ball into the air for them to catch .....!

And now, I look around to see some of the other sources which feed and water our faith, challenge it and stir it up.

However satisfying the familiar may be, from time to time, restless thoughts stir us, and a believer's heart turns to thoughts of pilgrimage – journeying to a holy place.

There are many journeys that can be called pilgrimages but I am thinking here of the parish pilgrimages that I have known where, journeying with friends, we make time for study and for silent reflection, time for sharing the Eucharist together, time for finding that holy place, time to eat together and time for laughter.

I remember Lindisfarne – a truly 'thin' place where the transcendent and the earthly meet – I remember the incredibly beautiful sunsets, as we stood outside the church looking over the water towards the small island with its solitary cross where St Cuthbert sought solitude

I remember Bec in Normandy and the voices of the sisters as they sang their way thro' the pattern of services each day – and

– Bruges where we stayed with the English Sisters and I discovered a cellar like chapel beneath the Church of the Holy Blood where I first learnt to kneel.

I feel it's significant that Jesus travelled the roads of Galilee and Judea with a group of companions. Walking together starts conversations and coming to a rise in the road allows time for catching the breath and needing to cross a rocky place puts the discussion on hold – and we gain a time for reflection. In the gospels the teaching of Jesus is often initiated by an encounter with a stranger on the road or by running out of food.

Travelling together is about growing together and learning from each other

But the gospels also tell us that Jesus, at times, left the disciples and went into the hills on his own, to pray. And for us, there are times when we need to make a journey on our own – to put down the responsibilities of daily life and go on retreat.

Every retreat is different, every retreat house is different, but there has not been a retreat among those I have made that has not been an illuminating experience.

Retreats are about travelling light with a bible and our walking shoes and a paint box – or perhaps our knitting.

When I am on retreat I need – I like – to order the time – so that through the cycle of the day, the offices – the services – the meals, I have places for prayer and reflection, and times for study and importantly times for rest!

And by rest I mean giving my mind a chance to rest and be peaceful – which is why we need our walking shoes and our paint box and our knitting and why I look for a retreat house with big gardens or access to the country where I can feel the earth under my feet and smell the freshness of the air, live by my senses and still the busyness of my mind

On retreat, I think what I most value is the silence, the companionable silence of a religious house. Silence is profoundly restful.

It is not the silence of the Solitary hermit.

In a retreat house where silence is kept, the life of the house continues quietly and unobtrusively.

One passes fellow guests in the passage and sits with them at mealtimes, being always observant to see if they are looking for the bread and passing it in silence, while at the same time holding on to ones inner mood and peace, undisturbed by the need for conversation

There are a great variety of retreats available today, offering varying degrees of leadership or individual guidance. Apart from these traditional retreats there are now a growing number of retreats which focus on creative activity, painting or modelling or writing, which help people, perhaps for the first time, to explore their own creative spirituality

For practical information about retreats and dates one has only to look in the Retreats magazine which is produced annually by the Retreat association.

Before I leave this area of pilgrimage and retreat I must just mention two Christian Festivals – Soul Survivor and Greenbelt – No! – I haven't visited them but they have received a big 'Thumbs Up' from my granddaughter and her friends!

After this race round pilgrimages and retreats and festivals I come back home to survey some of the people and the 'places' that can nourish our journey of faith.

It must be right to put people first – the people from whom we have learnt so much – from their words, their wisdom, by their example, in their friendship; sometimes during a brief encounter, sometimes from their companionship on life's journey – and of course, there are the good friends to whom we turn when we need wise counsel.

We name them in our hearts – they are our great treasure – the people who have brought us nearer to God and have helped us to hear his calling – for me – after Assisi – the call to be confirmed and then, three years later the call to begin Reader Training.

As I reflect on what has helped me – somehow – Prayer keeps coming up – it's not that I am good at it but everything else seems to point to it or come from it. I don't find words easy in prayer – I need to try and still my mind – and wait in silence and try to listen.

And having said that I find words difficult – then I remember glorious words from the Prayer Book or the psalms or a gospel story that really open the doors! Praise be !

One thing I have discovered is that without prayer, faith gets shallower and drier.

The God of the Holy Trinity is an incarnate God and we can reach out to him thro' all our senses. For many people their communication with God comes through music – it might be Cathedral music, or in the singing of hymns and worship songs, in Gregorian chant or the songs from Soul Survivor

For many of us it is the glory of creation, from the immensity of the sky and the sea to the beauty of a flower.

Etty Hillesum, as she waited in her prison cell to be deported to Auschwitz, gave thanks to God for the glory of the square of sky that she could see thro' her cell window and for a gift she had the scent of Jasmine outside her door.

She had so little and we have so much in the wide range of hill and sky – in a hymn John Mason wrote:

How great a being, Lord, is thine,  
which doth all beings keep!  
Thy knowledge is the only line  
to sound so vast a deep.  
Thou art a sea without a shore,  
a sun without a sphere;  
Thy time is now and evermore,  
Thy place is everywhere.

And now to the Bible –

In those early days of finding faith I went out and bought a modern translation of the bible and started reading at Genesis chapter 1: v.1. Some chapters turned into a sort of speed reading but one way and another I made it thro' to Revelation. I now have a number of bibles but my favourite is perhaps a small NT with psalms that will slip into my pocket.

Now I read the bible more slowly, as if I am peeling away layers of misunderstanding – to find new insights, simpler insights. I find I am more accepting of mystery as I slide from reading into reflection.

I seem to have come to a very peaceful place in this talk but life is not like that all the time – there are difficult times where holding on in the gloom seems the only way although I am astonished how often I am offered a way of approaching the difficulties.

One such test is facing scorn or ridicule and when that happened recently I discovered just how deep are the roots of faith – like red hot walls that would not be breached

Forgive this personal story – but perhaps it is the only way that the story of faith can be told – for God reaches out to each of us – to you and to me, in different ways – as he wills. We each have our story.

The song 'When I'm 64' with its talk of 'will you need me', 'will you love me' and 'will you feed me' has stood me in good stead during this talk, for our need of faith in God is very great and the love He offers us is beyond imagination and there is food for our faith all around us if we will but pause, and step out and receive it.

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