



7 November 2010  
The Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity  
Choral Evensong  
Ecclesiastes 12 vv. 1–3  
Romans 12 vv. 4–16

## Triple chins and bingo wings

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Bingo wings and triple chins – I imagine these are words that may never have been uttered before in this chapel. They suggest a picture of the ludicrous and grotesque. Of bodies running to fat, losing the taut smoothness of youth but most of all – words that remind us that bodies become old.

Now, you may wonder, with what authority does this young man standing before you tonight dare to pronounce on the challenge of growing old? As I approach my fortieth birthday, I can only cite the following: A continual battle to arrest the spread of my tummy bulge. Grey hairs taking control of my beard. Knees and legs no longer working as they should.

And here we find ourselves with our first reading: The writer of Ecclesiastes cautions us to take account of God before the 'guards of our house' begin to tremble. He is, of course, referring to our legs giving way, losing their strength and their stability, their power to keep us upright. 'Remember your Creator in the days of your youth', he says, before (we might add) you are confined to your shop-mobility scooter. The villain of Frank Capra's film *It's a Wonderful Life* comes to mind – Mean old Mr Potter. A geriatric villain, long confined to his bath-chair who never gave the demands of his Creator a second thought.

In my own case, I might add, dodgy, trembling knees have been helped by a regime of Yoga exercises. Thank goodness, I say, that my archdeacon isn't a zealous evangelical or he might have banned me from adopting The Warrior and The Snake positions in privacy of the Rectory!

Bingo wings and triple chins – these are words that suggest the comicality of old age. But there comes a point when growing old ceases to be funny, the moment when our bodies turn against us, raising their long, slow mutiny. Tonight I want us to think about the challenge of ageing.

We all know of Shakespeare's seven ages of man. Well, earlier this year John Lewis gave us their version of the passing of the years. You may have seen the advertisement. A woman was shown to be passing through the stages of her life – child, student, lover, bride, mother and grandmother. As the scenes passed before us it was clear that she was living the most perfect of middle class existences – blessed and fortunate with her health, mobility, wealth, progeny and beauty. And the final scene showed her walking through a field, an elegant octogenarian, hand in hand with her doting husband, surrounded by grandchildren and a faithful hound. In the background, Fyfe Dangerfield singing 'She's only a woman'. It seemed all so graceful, so perfect.

I sat on the sofa next to my wife, and I found that towards the end of this advert, I was crying. Now, I will be frank with you, I don't normally cry when watching TV adverts. And I was relieved to hear the next day that I had not been alone in my weeping. Thousands had been tweeting that they had been similarly affected. Why did we all weep? Perhaps the tears sprang from seeing the archetypal mother, nurturing, loving, growing old, reminding us all of mothers we have known and lost. Perhaps the tears sprang from being presented with perfection – yes this is how a human life should be for all of us, blessed and fortunate, free from pain and distress – and yet realising that such perfection is so very unattainable.

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Tears aside, it was a clever piece of work It was artful in what it presented Here was a woman who, we were being told, should be considered the most blessed and fortunate of our society – she had won the grand lottery of life. She has got to the end of her days with as many functioning faculties as might be considered reasonable And of course she crosses the finishing line surrounded by all the consumer durables and soft furnishings that John Lewis could possibly supply.

Of course, what was missing in this touching scene was sickness, tragedy, infirmity, colostomy bags, wheelchairs, arthritic limbs, oxygen masks and morphine drips It showed us a collection of wonderful scenes uncomplicated by any messy arguments over the right to die and the writing of living wills Suffering, disintegration and death had been banished, along with bingo wings and triple chins.

Earlier I used the word ‘graceful’ to describe this advertisement But I feel that I must retract that description You see my point to you tonight is that growing old ‘gracefully’ means somehow addressing the triumvirate of suffering, disintegration and death. We have been so successful in pushing back the boundary of death and extending the human life-span But to pretend that growing-old, especially in its final stages, does not involve drawn out suffering is to hide from the challenge of our age. Where is the meaning, what is the point, where is the hope in growing old and inching slowly towards a pain-riddled disintegration? Our society has failed to answer these questions. Instead we park our aged in waiting rooms, holding pens, and leave them for death’s eventual arrival.

If you think I am exaggerating for effect, let me say that this reality can be physically encountered by any one of us simply by crossing the threshold of a nursing home. It is something that parish priests do from the beginning of their ministerial careers We go where most people do not have to go, unless they work there, or live there or visit relatives there.

Some nursing homes are good. There you will receive heroic and unrecognised levels of care. But many nursing homes are very poor And in this nursing homes share something with restaurants – they reflect the imagination, integrity and intellect of those who run them In too many homes I have experienced the same sights and smells: urine, boiled vegetables, faded wallpaper, the scramble for the newly vacated room, the vacant looks, the screams and shudders, the continually sounding alarms outside each door summoning the care-staff who, invariably, speak little - if any - English. Everywhere, resplendent, is the paraphernalia of disintegration I ask, where is the grace in this situation? Barely suppressed in the conflicted heart of many a visitor, is this dreadful sentiment: ‘be gone, dear friend, ease your way quickly into the night of death. Rid us of the inconvenience of your lingering survival.’

Where, I ask again, is the grace in this? For this is what it means to have pushed the boundary of death so far. The reality of suffering and disintegration stretched out over many years, with no sort of hope of relief, other than the relief of death. This is the challenge. And it is primarily a challenge for us who have to witness the cruelty of geriatric disintegration and journey alongside those to whom it is happening. What meaning, hope and love can we, as Christians bring?



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My two suggestions come from the passage we heard from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. Firstly, the next time we enter a nursing home let us challenge the attitude that says the residents are unproductive and hence worthless. This attitude is destructive and infectious and it is antithetical to the Christian faith. But tragically this attitude seems to be too all prevalent. Subtly and unsubtly we are told by the prevailing voices in our society that human beings are cogs in machines, bits of matter to be used and thrown aside when no longer of worth. And of course, when presented with the disintegration of advanced old age we know that things will not be getting better. There is no possibility of a return to productivity. There is no earthly hope.

It is precisely this attitude that we must arm ourselves against. Whether someone is productive or unproductive is an irrelevance for the Christian. For us a human person is always a bearer of the divine image and, if baptised, a member of the body of Christ. And Saint Paul reminds us that we should love each member of Christ's body with mutual affection. He urges us to 'Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep'. Never, we are told, treat another human person as an object whose worth can be assessed upon their level of productivity.

Well, we can taken that as a given. But we can go further. It really is not true, from the spiritual perspective, that the bed-ridden and immobile are 'unproductive'. Many times I sat opposite the widow of the man who had been the Rector of my parish in the 1960's. Hilda was her name and she was trapped in a chair day after day. A team of carers called upon her at every hour. What could I offer her in my regular visits? Where was the hope to be found for her condition? This is what I said to her: 'Hilda, though your body is wasted and powerless you can still perform the most powerful act that is given to a human being. As you sit in your chair you can still pray. You can make common cause with heaven. And your prayer can still move Almighty God to perform great wonders'. Pray for those for whom no prayers will be offered.'

Saint Paul says - 'persevere in prayer'. So long as we still have our wits, perseverance in prayer remains possible even when everything else has become impossible.

Lastly, the next time we enter a nursing home let us challenge the attitude that says that there is no hope. Saint Pauls says, rejoice in Hope. We can enter the nursing home confident that life does not end with its final breath, a death certificate, a wooden coffin, the closing of curtains and the scattering of ashes. For the world maybe, the world that has forgotten God and let go of the possibility of hope. But for the Christian, when we look upon the very old, those who are slowly disintegrating, we should challenge ourselves to see someone beginning the greatest of transformations. We should remind ourselves that the ones we visit and whose hands we hold are preparing to pass into the next and more glorious dimension of reality which we call heaven. A Nursing home is not the holding pen for death, but the vestibule of paradise. Let us be reminded that the bed-ridden are soon to be saints, agents and ambassadors of the heavenly court. Just doing that, just allowing our imaginations to be baptised with the truths of the Christian religion, transforms everything. This is a majestic, challenging perspective. Triple chins and bingo wings will soon fade away to be replaced with faces of awesome, numinous, indescribable beauty. Rejoice in Hope, says Saint Paul. Indeed, rejoice in hope.