Ageing and spirituality - 'The old shall have visions'

Stanley Baxter

I have to make clear at the beginning of this reflection that this is just one particular man's view of the experience of ageing and spirituality. I am a priest, a husband, father and grandfather, and enjoy friendships with people of all ages, and with diverse family members, and I am part of the community of Holy Rood House. We are individuals made in the image of God and every person's experience is unique.

There is a sense that we are born to die and from the very moment of our birth we begin this process of ageing, thus moving towards the moment of our death. Our attitude to our personal ageing is influenced and affected by all other events in our lives, the sickness and death of others, personal stress and worries, the state of our own health, our relationships with others, our gender, and how far we are conscious of being accompanied in the process by family and friends.

As I move towards the end of my life my theology becomes sharpened, doctrines and ideas I once thought important and fought for as essential to my Christian life and priesthood are being challenged (eg ‘Full Catholic Privileges’). Whilst I seem to believe less in certainties, I become more certain than ever that the presence of Jesus is real and my spiritual journey and future is in some way bound up in Christ.

As we are complete people of mind, body and spirit, these three parts of our personality interconnect and act upon each other, but they age and develop in different ways. For instance although my body is ageing, I do not think as an 'old man', so far I am still thinking as I used to when I was 30/40, my mind has not yet caught up with my body. While it is possible I need to use the faculty of thought I have been given in service to others. However I do have to recognise that whatever my mind tells me, I am no longer 30/40 and I am now old. All this interconnects with my spirituality and I am being given an opportunity to prepare for the reality of death wherever and whenever it may come. As we need to clear our desk for this event and to leave things as tidy as possible for those we leave behind, so we need to do so with our spiritual life and get rid of the clutter so we are ready when death comes.

We have the opportunity to reflect on our response of faith to God's gift of Jesus. This is a daily challenge wherever we are in the ageing process, prompting the question 'Who is Jesus Christ for me today?'

As we age we discover more clearly that spirituality is not the same as religion. Spirituality within any religious system, including Christianity, is based within a community that has an established and corporate way of developing awareness of the Other. However, spirituality is not so concerned with boundaries and certainties; indeed an important part of spirituality is about the unknown and the uncertain. Therefore a healthy attitude to ageing and moving towards our end time is the willingness to let go of many things we have always thought to be important to us because we have spent most of our lives working for and acquiring them. These may not be material things but may be positions of power, authority and responsibility. I have found this particularly difficult because I have been a 'pioneer' in many different ministries over the years and someone who has shaped the vision and mission of those ministries.
I have also found as a priest that my view of the sacramental has become much wider and not confined to the seven traditional sacraments of the Church, although these sacraments have become more important to me. As my view of Jesus Christ develops I have begun to see beyond a local view of Jesus restricted to this world, and to appreciate more the Cosmic Christ, who brings all things together in the great Sacrament of the Universe. This is enabling me to see the process of ageing as an important part of that renewal, a recreation which as Christians we understand as the Resurrection.

This means that ageing is no longer to be seen, however painful the process may or may not be, as an inevitable drift into some unknown territory of which I know nothing, but a continuation of the spiritual journey I commenced at the day of my birth. I have never from the moment of my birth known with any certainty what the future held, but I have always been held within the love of family and friends, and that has been a reflection of the great love in which God has held me. While I may not be certain, I can still have the trust and confidence that the love which has held me so far will carry me through the ageing process into a deeper and wider experience of the love of God and a rest in the Divine.

There is a prayer in A New Zealand Prayer Book which sums it up if we see death as in some sense or at some time a place of rest.

Lord, it is night.
The night is for stillness.
Let us be still in the presence of God.

It is night after a long day.
What has been done has been done;
what has not been done has not been done.
Let it be.

The night is dark.
Let our fears of the darkness of the
world and of our own lives
rest in you.

The night is quiet.
Let the quietness of your peace enfold us,
all dear to us,
and all who have no peace.

The night heralds the dawn.
Let us look expectantly to a new day;
new joys, new possibilities.

In your name we pray. Amen.

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