Old age transformed: all flesh made holy

Have you noticed that every film these days has to contain some reference to Christmas? I imagine this is so that it gets played again on TV every year and is not forgotten. So, in a shameless bid to be memorable, I begin with a Christmas story…

One Christmas day I followed the morning service by visiting a member of the congregation whose wife had recently died. The loss was so close that he didn’t feel ready yet to come to church, though he had been the kingpin at the chapel for decades. We talked, we prayed, and I was glad of a pause in the midst of the Christmas frenzy. But then this wise, old man began to reflect. He told me that he thought the story of Simeon and Anna was the finest of all the infancy narratives. I had not even really thought of it as a Christmas story at all, let alone compared it with any of the others. His reason for thinking it so fine? ‘Well’, said Albert, ‘all the rest, the shepherds, the wise men, even Mary and Joseph, none of them really knew what was going on… but that old man did, didn’t he?’ He told me that though Simeon was half-blind, frail with age, near to death, he was the one who really knew what God was about, and was blessed with the deepest kind of wisdom known to humankind, and, as Luke tells us, ‘the Holy Spirit was upon him’.

Perhaps it’s just typical of our marginalisation of old age that this story is left out of the carol services and the tableaux, and that it’s just a scrap of it that makes it into Evensong. Compared with the drama of shepherds and
angels in the night, or with wise men bearing glamorous gifts with T.S. Eliot’s cold coming, sherbet and women, the story of Simeon and Anna, two old duffers who spend so much time in a temple, might seem boring and dull. We celebrate the Godhead becoming incarnate in human flesh, but we do that, at Christmas, by thinking of a flawless infant with smooth skin and tiny fingers and toes. Such virgin flesh is a worthy vessel for the divine perhaps, and better than older, more scarred and wrinkled flesh, bodies made tender and flawed by time. A minister once told me of a pastoral visit he made to an older woman, at which he commended the thought that in Jesus God really understood what it is to be human. The woman told him, ‘Ah yes, but he never got old did he?’ And he was silenced for a moment. We think of the incarnation and we think of a baby. But if God became flesh, God became all flesh..the flesh we know with our older, as well as our younger selves.

I live now in a town where a much higher proportion of the people than in Cambridge are over 60. In the congregation I serve, there are just a handful of us under 75. A 90th birthday is no longer a rare event, though the ways of celebrating them are now more interesting than tea at the nursing home. Many of the issues we face are the issues that all people who are growing older confront. But perhaps one thing we rarely name explicitly is that getting older is, even when not accompanied by illness, little valued in the world and culture that surrounds us. I come low in the informal hierarchy of ministers in the town partly at least because my church attracts people in the second and not the first half of life. I go to countless meetings – the local Arts lobby group, a Citizens UK group for inspiring campaigns and political action, the Christian Aid committee – where we spend a lot of time apologising for our grey hairs and our age and looking around sadly at each other, longing for someone younger to be there.

Last year I wrote a chapter for a book called ‘The Universities We Need’, edited by Professor Stephen Heap. I was asked to write the chapter at the beginning describing the world that we live in and thus the world that our universities need somehow to ‘serve’ or prepare people to live and work in and contribute to. I wrote about all sorts of things, but one thing that is undoubtedly a strong mark of change in our part of the world is that life expectancy has increased markedly within little more than a generation, and this will continue. According to UN statistics, by 2050 the number of
people over 60 in the world will have doubled from what it is now. This does mean and will mean a great deal. It is testimony to much improved health and better living conditions in many parts of the world for which we should give hearty thanks, but it also presents challenges that we are beginning to name and know. More older people in the world will present new economic demands, change the care needs we have throughout our lives, the illnesses we fear and the ways in which we die. In China, people have recognised now that a ‘one child’ policy cannot provide enough people to care for an increasingly older, older generation. Though there are still many countries where life expectancy is low (and where most people die still by their 40s) the ‘direction of travel’ is clear. The growing sense of ‘crisis’ about social care in our own country is just part of what confronts us. But what does this mean? It would be easy to talk about government policy and pensions and social change. But there are even more profound questions going on in my soul, as perhaps there are in yours. Everyone says that however old you get you feel just the same inside. Medieval doom paintings always show the redeemed, and the damned come to that, in the prime of life – believed to be about 33, the age that Jesus’ died. But what does it mean then to live to be 99? How shall we think of growing old and being human? How shall we face it and prepare for it and be our older selves with grace and dignity and wisdom, if we are blessed (if blessing it is) with long years?

Let us turn to the story of Simeon and Anna, the finest of the infancy stories, and see what we might find. It is easy to make lots of assumptions about human life, and it is easy to make assumptions about this story. We so easily make these two people into ‘types’ and we paint them with the grey shades of age, as we persist in painting age in shades of grey. The text doesn’t actually tell us that Simeon is old, though it implies he has been waiting for the Messiah a long time, perhaps like an aged revolutionary looking for the end of capitalism, still wearing his Mao hat and his socks with sandals. When he has seen the Christ child he declares he is ready to be dismissed in peace, which we take to mean he is ready now to die. Anna, we are told, is at least 84 (a great age indeed for those times), has been for long years a widow and spends all her time in the Temple praising God. And in our minds, let’s admit it, we have put her into a box where the ‘old ladies’ live, the beige-coated, grey-haired look-alike old girls on the back pew, perhaps a little eccentric, the harmless or competitive flower arrangers and makers of jam, ready to sing Jerusalem and dotty enough to
sign any rota, smelling slightly of wee and a little too eager to hold any baby who comes by. And we miss, perhaps, the bit that says that she is a prophet and that she too can see what this child will be and how Jerusalem will be redeemed. Even within the Bible, Anna is a kind of ‘type’ too and this whole story is just an echo, isn’t it, of the older story still of Hannah and Samuel, another baby given into the service of God? But could we rescue Simeon and Anna from all this ‘typing’? Could we imagine them as real human beings, as people who have been blessed by God, and whose older flesh has been made holy by God’s presence with them? I could take you home to my own congregation in Taunton and show you the people I serve and love, who are not beige-coated types of anything, but retired missionaries with astonishing testimonies, foster parents who have saved countless teenage lives, at least one former spy (maybe more than one, how would I know?), pioneer women ministers, doctors and midwives and teachers, artists, parents, campaigners, volunteers for local charities and projects…human beings in all their glory, and each one with a vital and warm story to tell of life and faith and the longing for God’s redeeming love. Each precious human life carries an astonishing story, within each body is a heart seeking and yearning for love, in each face the marks of life lived seeking God, both enduring and enjoying the burden of being human. If in my own ‘temple’ are such people found, what should I say about Simeon and Anna?

Let us imagine a little of what realities they might reveal or hide. Alan Bennett comments in his diaries that nowadays if you see two older people holding hands you don’t smile and think Darby and Joan, but you wonder which one has dementia. It could be that Anna has dementia. I know many people now who are caring for someone with dementia, or living with it themselves or wondering whether that little bit of forgetfulness is just normal or the first signs of what is to come. We could comfort ourselves by remembering that most of us will not actually get dementia in old age, but perhaps we all have to learn to live with the possibility and to hear the news that God in becoming flesh assumes all flesh, and all suffering and tragedy, and all longing and hope. As I learn more about dementia, I begin to see that even if it comes my way one day then I am still me with my emotions and passions and commitments, that God still blesses the flesh I actually am and might be, and that I can go on being a place where God is known. And perhaps Simeon is Anna’s carer, taking her every day to the Temple where the regular rhythms of worship
and liturgy, with familiar words and music that touch the heart, give her life shape. Apparently the people who cope the very best with dementia in our time even now are nuns, who live a life patterned by regular prayer and meals and community (a little like a Cambridge college perhaps?). Simeon knows what brings Anna peace, and he knows that deep within her is the insight of a prophet. I once ministered in a home for those mostly long past words. I took services using familiar and ancient prayers and occasionally someone stirred to life, amidst the inarticulate cries and silent sleep. But one day, after a period of maternity leave, I went back with my new baby in my arms. And one woman, who had uttered not a word to me over years, said, ‘What a wonderful baby!’ As indeed she was… Anna and Simeon, who knows, may have known the challenging years that many people endure now. But the Bible has no doubt that they could see the truth and that God was blessing them. Their eyes had seen God’s salvation. And seen it, if my man Albert was right, more clearly than the shepherds or the so-called wise men.

Or perhaps Anna and Simeon have a different story. Maybe Simeon is the kind of rangy older man who walks long miles, who climbs hills and temple steps without getting puffed. He knows he won’t see death until he has seen the Lord’s Messiah and is living every moment to the full. He’s keen as mustard on politics, an activist, putting the younger ones in the party to shame with his vigorous marching, his punchy writing and his powerful public speaking. And Anna is his inspiration, though he cannot quite understand why she spends so much time in the Temple. They were lovers once, long after her short marriage was over, and their passion was deep. But she has convinced him that passion is best turned to protest, prophecy and prayer. They are still close and there is still fire between them, but now she prays and he practises for revolution. They are joined at the heart and they are comrades in the cause of justice and of God. When they both see this child in the Temple they know that their cause is won, that God has come to be with his people and that even the Gentiles will see the light of God’s love. They know now that their love and their passion and their faith have seen their fulfilment. Anna usually talks little, but now she tells anyone she can about the redemption of Jerusalem. And she joins with Simeon in handing out the leaflets and chatting to the crowds who always gather in the Temple. The people have come to see the sacrifices and the priests, but Anna and Simeon tell them that the child in Mary’s arms is the one to watch. They will not live to see him come of age and speak and
pray the words and hopes they have cherished together, but their love has been the longing that finds its fulfilment in him.

Who knows what Simeon and Anna might have been? And who knows what you and I might amount to? But this story in Luke’s Gospel declares that words of wisdom can come out of the mouths of older people as much as babes, and that the light and blessing of God is meant for all people: Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old. The Christ child was held in the arms of his virgin, teenage mother, but also in the arms of the aged Simeon (and I like to think Anna too) – and the same God blessed all flesh.

This story needs to leave the margins of Christmas, the back-end Sundays of January, and find its place again at the heart of the story of the good news. And all kinds of us need to look again at what old age means or could mean. And perhaps institutions like our ancient universities, founded early in the Middle Ages when the country was run by teenagers and when people died in what we think of now as youth, need to think again about how they serve all the people of our communities. In the county where I live thousands belong to an organisation called the University of the Third Age – U3A. Many of them might be graduates of the University of Cambridge and many of them not. But could it be that this university might do more in the coming times to contribute to the third age, to the long years many of us might live? How can we help our universities enrich our lives for all our lives? I have never believed that education is wasted on the young, but perhaps there is more room than we find at present to squander it on the older ones we are fast becoming.

I find in every season of the Christian year that the Gospel is made manifest, in the incarnation, in the truth of God becoming flesh, God with us, is the wonder of salvation. But this wonder is true for all of us, not only for the young and beautiful, but for the old and beautiful too. As my own flesh sinks and fades, I revel in the passion and power of being human and want, more than ever, to be a sign of God’s presence in the world I know God loves. I am like Anna – spending many of my days in the temple, looking for redemption. And I trust that God is with me and will bless me with light. Just as God blesses Simeon, and the shepherds and the wise men, and Mary and Joseph, and all the mixed-up medley of humankind with whom I am glad to say, ‘My eyes have seen God’s salvation’. Amen.