



Coming of Age

Growing older with grace

Good evening and welcome to the third in our BRICK sessions on the subject of Coming of Age, growing older with grace.



Course outline

- Session 1 – ‘Full of years’
 - What does the bible say about growing older?
- Session 2 – ‘The Lord gives and the Lord takes away’
 - The experience of loss
- Session 3 – ‘To die is gain’
 - Approaching death
- Session 4 – ‘How should we then live’
 - Feedback / discussion / practical outworking

I hope the sessions so far have been helpful and have given some food for thought. Tonight we look at the subject of approaching death, which however old we are is the unavoidable part of growing older. We will be looking at the characteristics we need to develop in order to be able to approach death with grace. So to begin this evening.

Approaching death

- You only live twice
Once when you're born
And once when you look death in the face.
 - *James Bond – You only live twice*
- In life only two things are certain – death, and tax
 - Anon
- Dulce et decorum est. Pro patria mori
 - Wilfred Owen
- Eleanor Rigby died in the church and was buried along with her name...nobody came
 - *The Beatles – Eleanor Rigby*

Approaching death, the subject that quote literally haunts our culture, it's the elephant in the room. It colours

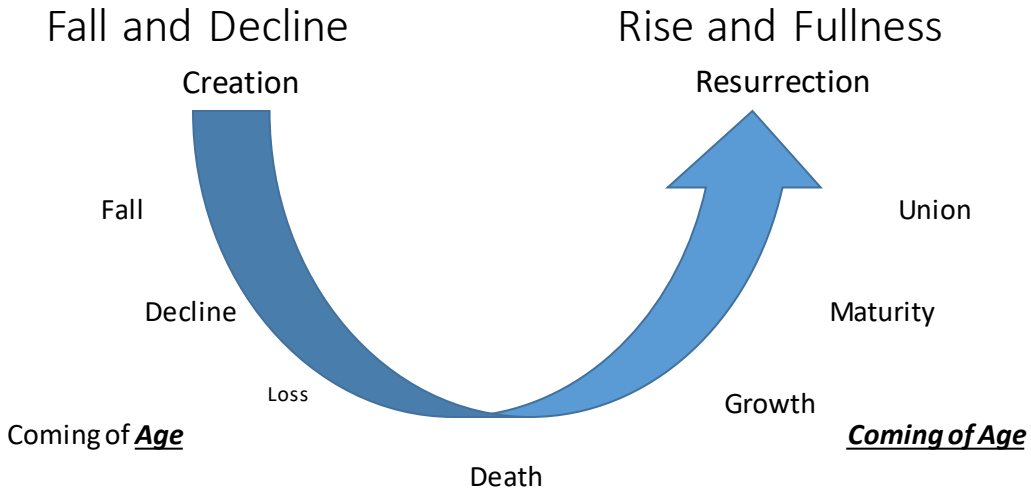
Our films
Our humour
Our poetry
Our music

The writer Donald Nichols, in his book *Holiness* wrote that other religions are amazed how little western Christians reflect on death and their own death in particular. This is not just being morbid, it is perhaps one of the areas where we have absorbed the western worldview of 'keep young and beautiful if you want to be loved' very deeply, because nothing punctures that balloon more quickly than acknowledging our mortality.

This reflection in our lives should not kick in when, as one author puts it– we are waiting for the last bus. So in this session we are going to think a little bit about preparing for our death, something we should start, suggests Donald Nichols, right away.

One reluctance to do this is perhaps because it is such a huge subject that one

sermon, or talk or BRICK session can in no way do justice to it. Tonight, if you like is just the **Hors d'oeuvres**, appetiser, if you will, to encourage you to reflect more deeply on this topic....but in the light of what we have learnt in the past two weeks about the biblical narrative, summarised in this now familiar diagram.



Although we have said throughout the course that these things happen concurrently, we are for tonight's session introducing a certain chronology to them, seeing them as a progression in the whole of our existence, which in a physical sense means passing through death.

The biblical narrative, as well as the facts of life, tells us all that from the moment we are born we are approaching our physical death.

This evening we are looking at how in the light of what we see in the biblical narrative about the Christian understanding that death is not the end, what does that say about how we live.

The writer Richard Rohr has said that there are two phases to life. The first is about what we do the second is about who we are. The first is establishing ourselves in the world the second is about discovering meaning in life. Physically we cannot stop the coming of age and the impact it has on us, however if we take seriously the biblical understanding that this is part of a process of coming of age, of growing into Christian maturity then we can apply that growth to the process of approaching death.

Just as I have used the phrase coming of age ambiguously I am doing the same with the phrase 'approaching death' this evening. Clearly whether it is the result of accident, illness, disease or any other terminal event there is a physical time, be it long or short, when we will be literally approaching death. However the biblical

narrative suggests we should be approaching death throughout our lives. Following His arrest on Maundy Thursday it could be said that Jesus had less than 24 hours of approaching death – yet we know that throughout much of His ministry He told His disciples that He would be handed over to the authorities, and executed and then rise again on the third day.

Jesus character did not change as He entered the last week of His life because He had already come to terms with His future death, He was living in the light of what He knew would happen to Him. You could say for this course if we want to grow older with grace we need to practice the life that lives with grace as early as possible.

Many of the negative connotations of growing older and approaching death can be seen – bitterness, resentment with life, feelings of failure or futility, frustration, going over old grievances again and again – the sort of negative view of being old that we saw in the passage from Ecclesiastes in Session 1 and that fuels the western worldview of ‘keep young and beautiful if you want to be loved.’ It is wise to address those much earlier in our journey rather than wait until indeed we are waiting for the last bus.

There so much to be said on this subject it is hard to know where to start. So I have chosen a particular approach this evening that I hope will be helpful and help in remembering the key points. This in no way is the definitive statement on the subject – just one picture that may be helpful.

The words from the cross.....



I am going to use the words of Jesus from the cross as our reference point this evening. But in a particular way.

I am not saying this is an exegesis of what Jesus was saying – rather that it is a starting point, in each case to looking at attitudes to approaching death, preparing our own attitude to live in the light of our ultimate death. I will support the attitude with biblical material, so that it is not just some self help idea and also then raise implications that we might want to consider.

Probably best to start so you see what I mean.

‘Father forgive them.....’

- **Attitude** – ‘Living in forgiveness’
- **Biblical imperative** – Jesus said ‘Not seven times, but forgive seventy times seven’
- **Wisdom** – forgiveness is a pathway more than a destination
- **Impacts** –
 - **Plenty of time in life to build up a portfolio of people we need to forgive – better to do it as we go long than leave it to the end**
 - **Do we need to forgive people for growing old, or even dying?**

The attitude I want to highlight here is living in forgiveness.

We could point to many elements of biblical teaching which stress the importance of this and we see that Jesus made it a central part of the Lord’s Prayer.

But conventional wisdom also puts a high value on forgiving people as we go through life, while psychologists and surely our own life experience tells us that failing to forgive can be very damaging to us.

However that is not to say forgiving is easy. When Jesus talks of us forgiving someone seventy times seven – that might even be for the same thing! We need to consciously turn away from going over and over grievances and find some way to turn that to positive – some writers suggest that praying for the person we are trying to forgive is helpful and if there is a serious way in which they have wronged us we do need to call to mind Jesus instruction to ‘love our enemies’.

What impacts might that have on the way we live so that we may approach death well?

Consider impacts. – Discussion in group.



‘I thirst.....’

- **Attitude** – ‘Acknowledge interdependence’
- **Biblical imperative** – Jesus said ‘That they may be one Father, even as you and I are one’
- **Wisdom** – Independence (often a feature of youth) and dependence (often how older people are characterised) are immature states of being
- **Impacts** –
 - **What can the older generation give to the younger generation?**
 - **Do we facilitate unnecessary dependence in the older generation?**

The attitude I want to draw out here is that of recognising that life is about interdependence.

The biblical imperative must surely be that there is interdependence within the Godhead itself and that Jesus prayed that for us.

Again conventional wisdom speaks to this and actually regards independence and dependence as immaturity.

Jesus, the one who told His disciples that He only had to say the word and legions of angels would come to His aid, allowed others to help Him receive a drink while on the cross. God who needs nothing from us is happy to be dependent on the cross.

Consider the impacts



‘Woman here is your son...’

- **Attitude** – ‘Fulfil responsibilities’
- **Biblical imperative** – Jesus said ‘Love your neighbour’
- **Wisdom** – selflessness is a gospel imperative
- **Impacts** –
 - **Should we ensure we have Wills, Funeral Plans, suggestions for our funeral service? Guardianship for children?**
 - **How do we view Power of Attorney, organ donation, End of Life Instructions (eg resuscitation?), Advance Directive for health care**
 - **Remarriage of a parent after the death of their spouse**

The attitude I am suggesting here is to recognise our responsibilities and to seek to fulfil them. As the eldest son Jesus would have been expected to provide for his mother’s welfare, which we see him taking seriously even on the cross and ensuring she is cared for by the beloved disciple.

The biblical imperative for this is seen in the relationships described between the generations and more generally in society – loving our neighbour is not simply about having warm feelings for them – but about taking practical steps to fulfil our responsibilities to those around us, perhaps particularly as we consider approaching death to the members of our family and our friends.

Christian wisdom also tells us that selflessness, consideration for others, is a biblical imperative.

Consider the impacts



‘It is finished...’

- **Attitude** – ‘Letting go’
- **Biblical imperative** – Jesus said ‘What does it profit a man to gain the world and forfeit his life?’
- **Wisdom** – Travel light
- **Impacts** –
 - **Retirement** – ending of a career – empty nest
 - **Death of a spouse / close family member**
 - **‘Where is that dream of your youth?’**

The attitude I am suggesting here is that of being willing to let go.

We saw last week in Job that he recognised that he possessed nothing when he was born and will possess nothing when he dies.

Conventional wisdom speaks of travelling light and the famous story of the monkey putting his paw in the sweet jar, when he had the sweet in his hand he couldn’t remove his hand but neither was he willing to let it go. If we learn to let go and move on as we move through life there will be far less to experience the wrench of loss when we draw near to letting go of all things.

Letting go is a hard thing to do, it is part of the process of loss that we looked at last week recognising that in the end only love remains.

Consider Impacts....

‘My God, my God, Why....’

- **Attitude** – ‘Honest with God’
- **Biblical imperative** – Jesus said ‘If it is possible take this cup away from me...’
- **Wisdom** – It is the real you that God loves
- **Impacts** –
 - **From black and white faith...to shades of grey**
 - **The road to death is for many, and their families, utterly appalling - the bible does not suggest keeping ‘a stiff Christian upper lip’!**

The attitude I am suggesting here is always being honest with God

There is a huge biblical imperative for this and Christian wisdom tells us that God knows anyway, neither should we worry that telling God how we feel including all our doubts and fears is a lack of faith, the Christian writer Os Guinness says that doubt is not the same as unbelief it is simply faith in two minds.

The great example of this is of course Jesus Himself, we only have to look at the garden of Gethsemane to realise that far from it being wrong to struggle with the road God seems to have set before on, it is actually important to do that.

We said last week that the great word in the experience of loss is ‘Why’ – Jesus was not exempt from this on the cross.

Consider the impacts

‘Father, Into your hands....’

- **Attitude** – ‘Trust God’
- **Biblical imperative** – Jesus said ‘You trust in God, trust also in Me’
- **Wisdom** – Footsteps poem
- **Impacts** –
 - **This is where the rubber hits the road**
 - **How do we do this, especially in the light of others’ pain, without sounding patronising or shallow?**
 - **Believing the biblical narrative of growing older, not the western worldview**

The attitude I am suggesting here is that of ultimately trusting God in all things, not without the struggles that I have just referred to.

Essentially this is the message of the whole bible.

Conventional wisdom can well be summed up in the famous poem ‘Footsteps’ where someone complains to God looking back on their life that while there were two sets of footprints, theirs and Gods during the good times, during hard times there was only one set and asks why God deserted them, to which God replies that at those times He was carrying them.

Consider the impacts



‘Attitudes to cultivate?’

- Living in forgiveness
- Acknowledging interdependence
- Fulfilling responsibilities
- Letting go
- Being honest with God
- Trusting God

There is no age at which cultivating these attitudes should start and many would say that the earlier in life the better since our graciousness in later years will come more easily if these have become habitual. There are no doubt other attitudes, certainly there are other disciplines, such as prayer, bible study, worship, meditation, fellowship, acts of service, Sabbath rest all of which are likely to help us approach growing older with more grace and approach death more prepared. Hopefully these will provoke thought and consideration of this subject.

Those biblical scholars among you will be saying – but wait, Jesus spoke 7 words from the cross and there are only 6 we have looked at.

This is because the 7th word takes us further into our session today.

All the above and the words Jesus spoke that has helped us generate this list came out of the way Jesus lived. The final word we are going to look at was actually a response to the imminent death of Jesus and the thief on the cross with Him.



‘Today you will be with me in paradise’

- **Today**

- I tell you the truth today, you will be with me in paradise
- I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise

- **In paradise**

- But the creed says...Jesus was crucified, died and was buried, he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father

- **With me...**

Throughout this course I have tried to avoid getting into areas where there are strong Christian views that have developed over the last 2000 years that are contradictory and have tried to focus on what we can learn from the passages rather than from debates over the nature of the text. So we have avoided whether Adam and Eve and Job are literal or figurative and exactly how Satan fits in with the angels of God. It seems to me that two parts of this sentence have generated a lot of opinion while one part has fallen into the background.

Today – is this passage saying that we pass immediately into the afterlife upon death? Arguments rage among biblical scholars over the correct placement of a comma in this sentence – particularly difficult due to the lack of punctuation in the original. So which is it? Both have some support in other parts of the scriptures and language.

‘In paradise’ –

So the creed tells us what happened to Jesus – where is paradise in that? Scholars point to the word translated ‘paradise’ and suggest this only appears in two other places in the bible, once in one of Paul’s letters (2 Corinthians 12:4) where it refers to heaven and Revelation 2 v7 where it is stated that the tree of life is in the paradise of God which could be a reference to Eden.

So the uncertainty over these words has led sincere Christians to hold different views of what happens at death.

A further complication is added when we consider that in our physical life we are creatures of time – so we can speak of yesterday, or today or now.

Therefore others have suggested that after death we pass out of time and are immediately in what on earth we have called ‘the age to come’ – the age of the new heaven and the new earth described in Revelation.

The part of what He said that sometimes gets glossed over, but might be the most important, and perhaps least controversial part of the sentence.

‘With me...’

Speculation on the other aspects of this verse is beyond the scope of this course....but what isn’t is the assurance of Jesus to those who follow Him that they will be with Him after death. This is what Paul says when he concludes that ‘to die is gain’

To die is gain

- **Philippians 1 v21-23**

- *²¹ For me to live is Christ [His life in me], and to die is gain [the gain of the glory of eternity]. ²² If, however, it is to be life in the flesh and I am to live on here, that means fruitful service for me; so I can say nothing as to my personal preference [I cannot choose], ²³ But I am hard pressed between the two. My yearning desire is to depart (to be free of this world, to set forth) **and be with Christ**, for that is far, far better*

Paul explicitly says here that to die is gain because he will be with Christ.

He also says that prior to that His life is to be the life of Christ in Him.

The aim of the discipleship pathway we are following at St Marks is to live the life Jesus would live if He were living our life...which is what Paul describes as 'For me to live is Christ'.

For those who are followers of Jesus death is the gateway to the presence of Jesus. Approaching death is to live with Jesus at the centre of our physical life.

So our summary becomes:

‘Attitudes to cultivate?’

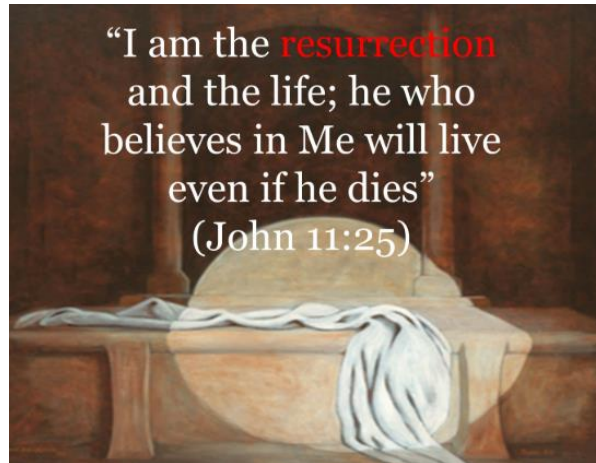
- **Living in forgiveness**
- **Acknowledging interdependence**
- **Fulfilling responsibilities**
- **Letting go**
- **Being honest with God**
- **Trusting God**
- **Jesus with me**

I want to pause for a moment and invite you to consider this list.
Imagine a person fully living this.
Surely that person would grow older with grace.

PAUSE

It is easy to become despondent as we consider approaching death, but what is the positive feeling for Christians as they approach death?

Hope.....



The answer is hope.

The committal prayer in the Anglican funeral service makes this strikingly clear:

We have entrusted our *friend* to God's mercy,
and we now commit *their* body
earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust:
in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life
through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who will transform our frail bodies
that they may be conformed to his glorious body,
who died, was buried, and rose again for us.
To him be glory for ever.



Approaching death.....

.....in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life

There is so much more I'm sure that could be said – but that is beyond the scope of this course.

The course aim is to help us grow older with grace.

At the end of that process of growing older is the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, not a vague hope, but a sure and certain one.

So as we have considered approaching death we have looked at some of the preparations we could make to help us on that journey.

But we are not the only ones making preparation....



John 14v1-6

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Growing older

- The beginning of the end....
- The end of the beginning....
- For I consider from the standpoint of faith that the sufferings of the present life are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is about to be revealed to us....and in us [Romans 8 v18]

So as we consider growing older we can ask, is aging the beginning of the end, or simply the end of the beginning?

Paul was in no doubt which it was when he wrote to the Christians in Rome.

Fall and Decline

Rise and Fullness

Creation

Resurrection

Fall

Union

Decline

Maturity

Loss

Growth

Coming of Age

Coming of Age

Death

So we will end where we began – with the biblical narrative on growing older.

Life consists of a coming of AGE and a COMING OF AGE.

Seeking to live in a way that recognises this is vital to growing older with grace.