

Trinity College Cambridge

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CHRISTIANITY AND OLD AGE

Psalm 90: 1–12 Luke 2: 25–32

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The picture you have in front of you is very probably Rembrandt's last work – it was found, unfinished, on an easel in his studio, along with other uncompleted paintings, after his death in 1669. It is, of course, a picture of Simeon – a subject which though not generally popular in Dutch painting of the period, seems to have been important to Rembrandt, who returned to scene on many occasions from the 1620s onwards.

In this version, his last and simplest rendering of the subject, we have Simeon in the very act of giving voice to the *Nunc Dimittis*. He is a frail old man. His eyes are blind, but his inner vision is unimpaired, and his mouth is open in ecstatic praise. He has the child somewhat awkwardly or diffidently, not exactly in his hands, because his hands are held as if in prayer – for how else would you hold the Christ child but prayerfully? But holding, or not quite holding, the light of the world, the blind man proclaims the coming of the light he cannot see, uttering those sublime words of acceptance and fulfilment: 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace: according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation'. The picture (you can't quite see the subtle richness of the colours), 'glimmers with unearthly brilliance', in the words of one critic – and so does the moment. We see an old man whose old age is not a time of disappointment or decline, but of complete and utter fulfilment; whose life has been leading up to this time, not dwindling towards it; here and now, in this frail old age, Simeon's life reaches its highest point in his God-given spiritual insight and fulfilment. The picture and the moment glimmer with unearthly brilliance.

This is, you might say, a highly utopian vision of old age – this vision of old age as a time of fulfilment, satisfaction and completion. And there is, of course, an irony to this utopian vision, since Rembrandt's own old age was anything but the happy crowning of his life. Rembrandt's old age was marked by bankruptcy, failure, family squabbles, bereavement, a decline in his popularity and success, and loneliness. If Rembrandt ever said 'Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace', we may suspect that he said it in a tone of weariness or even desperation – not with the ecstatic intensity of joy with which he has depicted Simeon saying it. Rembrandt, we might suggest, has imagined something he didn't know, perhaps even something he could only wistfully imagine – old age as a moment of fulfilment and peace and contentment, when one prepares to leave the world, but does so full of hope and joy.

Well what of us? What is old age like for us? How do we envision it – or more to the point, what do we make of it, individually and socially, in our own day?

There is of course, one very big difference between the seventeenth century world when Rembrandt died at the age of 63 years and ours – for that matter, a big difference between our contemporary world and the world of even 70 years ago, when those whom we might consider old now, those who are 70 plus, were being born. In 1945 when the Old Age Pension was introduced in its modern form, it was available to men reaching the age of 65 when life expectancy for a male was 64 – and a little bit more for women. Now, very many of us can expect to live well beyond 64 – it depends on social class, of course (since death, like disease, comes first for the poor), but most of us here can expect to live perhaps another 20 years beyond 65. Medicine's success in dealing with the acute causes of death (such as kidney failure, septicaemia, and pneumonia) and, more recently, in either curing certain cancers or holding them in remission for increasingly long periods, has granted most of us the prospect of a much longer old age than anyone reasonably anticipated even in 1945, and certainly not before then. You might even say that the medical advances of the last 60 years have created an old age which didn't exist for any but the very few when the old age pension was actually introduced.

So the first thing to say about old age in our day is just that, in a way which is historically unprecedented, it is long and for the many, and not just for the few (even if it is still distributed inequitably) – which makes it even more important that we know what to do with it. So – the key question – what have we done with this new old age, which we have created and turned into a mass phenomenon?

The fact is, I think, that we are highly ambivalent about old age – speaking generally, we might say that we have created a mass old age, even while we neither exactly accept it, nor have done what might make it acceptable. And here is my thought – not for the day but for this evening – we will perhaps only accept it and endeavour to make it acceptable as we learn to pray that prayer commended to us by our first lesson – 'teach us to number our days'.

What do I mean when I say that we don't exactly accept old age – and that we have not done what would make it acceptable? And how would numbering our days help?

As to our not accepting it – it is striking, isn't it, that what many of the elderly seem to aspire to be is to be young. The picture is, of course, complicated, but there is at least something in the thought that what our society encourages old people to do, above all else, is to hang on to youth, with a certain grim determination. We can visit the more affluent suburbs of Los Angeles, say, and laugh in a superior fashion at those whose clothes and

hair and cars are suitable to 25 year olds, when their faces (notwithstanding the botox and the plastic surgery), tell us that you could triple that number and still add a few. But albeit in less exaggerated ways, most of us in the modern west are socially cued to decline the elderly role. In literature, perhaps in politics, perhaps amongst great and wealthy families, the figure of the old man who clings desperately to power and prestige is a very regular type – but the same more than slightly ridiculous figure is found wherever someone acts and behaves in such a way as to ignore the fact that the elderly, standing in a different relationship to the future than do the young, have different interests in the present and the future. Even those of us who are not (or at least not yet) scraping our hair from close to the top of our left ears, all the way over to the other side, even we may never quite reach the point, then, of saying ‘Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace’, if we conform to the propaganda which bids us pretend to be young – and especially if we adopt the further thought that a good death is really one you don’t see coming.

But then, given how little we have done to make being old acceptable, it is hardly surprising that we battle to stay young longer, and don’t very willingly admit the fact of being old until we have to. Our ambivalence about old age, that is to say, is certainly understandable when you look at the facts of it. For the facts of old age in the UK are generally bleak. According to *Age UK* – who are, of course, not an entirely disinterested source, but nonetheless have some sight of the issues – 5 million older people in the UK claim that television is their main form of companionship. 600,000 people leave their homes only once a week or less. And a million people say that they often go for an entire month without speaking to a friend, family member or neighbour. Under the circumstances it is hardly surprising that we don’t exactly rush to accept the fact, or fate, of being elderly.

So how might we do better? How might we learn to accept old age and indeed to make it acceptable, since the two are so intimately related? What would it be for our old age to shimmer with the ‘unearthly brilliance’ of Simeon’s old age, in that utopian vision of completion, culmination and fulfilment, rather than it being the, far from utopian, in fact dystopian reality we have conceived and constructed?

‘Teach us, O Lord, to number our days’, prays the Psalmist. And so perhaps we need to learn to pray, old and young alike – if we are to conceive, construct and practice a better old age than the old age with have instituted.

For the old to number their days would be for them to reckon with the fact that they are, well, old – and to accept it. That doesn’t mean giving up on activities or interests or responsibilities; indeed it doesn’t mean not taking on new activities or interests or responsibilities. But there can be no living well in old age which involves denial, which doesn’t acknowledge and accept that old age brings with it a gradual loss of powers and

eventually, of course, the most decisive and radical loss of powers in death. To count our days would be to rid ourselves of the delusions which lead us to ignore the fact that, as they say, we won't be around forever.

Of course, to accept this truth, not just intellectually but emotionally and existentially, can very hard. It is very hard not to take death personally, so to speak. And in a culture which values productivity and power, it is hard not to struggle rather desperately to hang onto what maintains our social prestige. It is hard to rise above a social context which thinks there is something shaming, demeaning, or undignified about the dependence which our gradual loss of powers entails, and which leads finally to death. But if we learn to count our days in the light of God's word, perhaps we can do so less fearfully. We might learn to accept that dependence is not demeaning, or undignified or shaming, but is in fact a part of the human condition which God has willed for us. We began our days in dependence on our parents. We have lived them out in dependence on one another, however much we may buy into myths of rugged individualism. We will end them, very probably, in dependence on others in the meeting of even our most basic needs – but all this belongs to the goodness of a created order in which humans are directed towards one another by the fragility of life; in which this fragility and neediness makes us social. Our contingency is not something to be denied, but something to be acknowledged, as it directs us towards one another and towards God. Maybe in old age we will even learn to accept this dependence gracefully for the first time, and to see it as a sign of our greater and final dependence on God, in our coming into existence, and in our leaving it. On one thing the Bible seems to me to be quite clear. Death is death – whatever we may hope for beyond death, it is not a natural continuation in time. (To put it in shorthand, the idea of an immortal soul is a horrid Greek notion.) What God wills for us after death we do not know – but maybe, just maybe, accepting our dependence on one another and on God is what it means to prepare for death. Certainly, however that may be, the dignity and serenity of old age lies in acknowledging these truths, not in delusional denial.

But if that is what it is for the old to number their days, what is for the young – and how might this change our perspectives and practices? Were the young to number their days, even in a purely selfish and calculating sense, it surely would make a difference – for if the young were reckon on the days they have had and the days they expect to have, if they were to 'do the math' as the Americans say, they might just realise that they too, as it turns out, will one day be old. (It is not just the old, that is to say, who live in denial of old age.) And then the young might just realise, in consequence, that it is simply improvident to will social conditions for the elderly which render the experience of old age the bitter and bleak experience it is for so many in our society.

But there is a second, and rather deeper way in which, for the young to number their days, might make a difference. To number our days, as the Bible sees it, is to understand the regular time we have been given as claimed by Christ. We number our days when we learn to live our days in the light of the days he lived amongst us, in which he modeled true humanity. Now what, in brief, can we say of Christ's humanity? – but that it was a humanity lived with and for the other, with and for the sick, the poor and the needy, in whose number we include the great biblical figure of the widow, who stands in the Biblical story for those, like the elderly, who in their marginalization and insignificance, live in social peril. For us to learn to count our days would be to learn to make them count as Christ made his days count – to learn, in other words, to be with and for the other, including the elderly. If the young counted their days, in this deeper sense, or even in the shallow sense, then the solitary existence of so very many of the elderly in our society would surely be transformed by a new solidarity.

And that is where, perhaps, we must leave it – with a visionary solidarity between old and young to match the visionary solidarity depicted in Rembrandt's picture. Week by week, or day by day at evensong, we ourselves give voice or ear to the very words which are coming out of Simeon's open lips: 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace', words of faith, hope, acceptance and joy from one who, frail and blind, nonetheless in his old age finds completion and fulfilment. We voice or hear those words in the hope that they might become our very own words, that we might achieve the same place of fulfilment, faith and acceptance. But how will such a visionary and utopian picture become a personal and social reality? How will this utopian old age displace the dystopian old age which we have created? Perhaps only as we all learn to pray – Lord, teach us to number our days.