

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 28 DECEMBER 2008

Dr John Bodycomb

“Letting Go and Laying Hold”

“forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (Philippians 3:13)

Two days before the Rev Gordon Powell died, four years ago, I read with him one of his favourite pieces of scripture. It is the passage in Philippians 4 that begins “Rejoice in the Lord always”, and then urges the reader to focus on a great catalogue of positives. Paul was now elderly, certainly by the standards of the day. He was in a Roman prison, the future all unknown. We are fairly sure that he was beheaded during the persecution under Nero. And yet he wrote as a man totally composed, serene, ‘together’ as we say.

What was the secret of his composure? I believe it was his understanding of two principles he states a few verses earlier. “This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal.” That is to say, I leave behind the baggage that burdens, and I embrace the future as promise – not threat. At the end of one year, and on the threshold of another, this seems well worth our consideration.

I

First, **leave behind the baggage that burdens**. This commonly takes two forms: the harm we have experienced and the harm we have done. Both can be very burdensome if we let them.

In my experience of counselling for fifty-five years, some of the hurts hardest to put behind have been related to death and dying, loss and grief. This is partly because only in my lifetime and during my ministry has there been a definite move to be more open about these matters. Until forty or fifty years ago, we kept our emotion to ourselves and we were not encouraged to do anything else.

Some of those most deeply hurt have been children. A lady I will call ‘Jennifer’ was 54 when she came to tell me about a childhood experience that had been reawakened by the death of someone she valued. This was the story. Just before her tenth birthday, Jennifer had lost her mother to the secondaries from a breast cancer, like the recent case of a well-known marathon runner. She had been despatched to stop with family friends on a farm property. They were very caring, but tried to distract Jennifer with swimming in the dam and pony riding. They took her to church, where a well-intentioned person said her mother was in heaven and wouldn’t like to see her looking miserable. Worst of all, the funeral took place during Jennifer’s time on the farm; it was thought she would find it harrowing. She might get upset and cry a lot.

When Jennifer began to talk all this out, it was clear that there were two major issues. First was that, at the time she most needed to be home and with those nearest (like her father), she was shunted off elsewhere. She was excluded from the single most significant family event of her short life. She felt pushed out. The hurt was still there, more than forty years on.

But there was something else. Jennifer had not been at the formal farewell to her mother. She had not said this very important ‘ritualised’ good-bye. Indeed, she had failed in her duty as a loving

daughter. And so, all the hurt she felt over being excluded was in this case compounded by feeling she had let down her mother. There have been a number of 'Jennifers', and this is the main single reason I think we need to take much more seriously the effects on children and young people at such times.

I said the baggage that burdens can be the harm we have experienced and the harm we have done; Jennifer's baggage was a mixture of both. Let me say another word or two about the harm we have done. 'Donald' was a third year Arts student at the University of Melbourne when he came to the Chaplaincy. He had joined one of the conservative religious clubs on campus, but seemed to be having some sort of a breakdown. It was apparent after a while that he was feeling very uncomfortable about something (or things) he had done. He was asking questions about heaven and hell – which I have found among young people to be a sure sign!

So, what had Donald been up to? He had run short of money during the first year, and on a visit to his grandmother had filched some change out of her house-keeping money. Nothing had been said, and he assumed this had gone unnoticed. He did it again, and again, and again. Small amounts, and evidently not noticed. Over the summer between second and third year, Donald's grand-mother died. Among her belongings was a note for Donald. She said she knew all along, and that she would have been very glad to help him had he but asked; she was sad that he could not ask, but had to steal from her. Donald was in a bad way over this, and quite unable to put the matter behind him. It's not that simple. One can talk about God's forgiveness and say that Jesus often mediated this to people who needed to move on – but it doesn't always work that simply. Donald took a long time to leave behind the baggage that burdened him.

II

The second principle that underlay Paul's composure, his serenity, his inner 'togetherness' was to **embrace the future as promise, not threat**. That is, as a time of new challenges, new adventures, new accomplishments, new discoveries, new growth. Paul, not surprisingly, puts this in terms of spiritual growth. He says, "I don't consider myself to have 'arrived' spiritually, nor do I consider myself already perfect. But I keep going on, grasping ever more firmly that purpose for which Christ grasped me. I don't consider myself to have grasped it even now. But I do concentrate on this: I leave the past behind and with hands outstretched to whatever lies ahead I go straight for the goal, my reward the honour of being called by God in Christ."

Two people in our time, both in their seventies, have quite a lot to say about the importance of this principle for older people. One is Dr Francis Macnab of St Michael's, whose 'SAGE' program (Successful Ageing with Growth and Enhancement) is well known. The other is Sister Joan Chittister, high profile Benedictine nun. I'll come to her in a moment, but first Francis Macnab.

A few years ago he published *Don't call me Grumpy*, sub-titled 'what older men really want'. In it he recounted interviews with older men who saw the future as promise, not threat. One was the great Antarctic explorer, Dr Phillip Law. Although Dr Law was living alone, surrounded by his past, Macnab described him (at 93) as "thoroughly committed to being a person of the future". He noted how Dr Law had maintained a wide range of interests and been a continuing participant in intellectual discussions. At the same time, Phillip Law recognised that he was more fortunate than many, who became isolated. "They have many contacts in their career years," he said, "but nothing outside. When they retire they can become very much on their own, and sometimes depressed. I have never become depressed myself, but I recognise how it can come on a man regardless of his interests, contacts and background."

The other one I want to mention is Joan Chittister. She has been a Benedictine nun over fifty years, has written forty books, writes a weekly column for the National Catholic Reporter (in the US), and is an inveterate globetrotter. She has received numerous awards, including eleven honorary doctorates, and has been on a collision course with Rome over her views on the ordination of women. She is in her seventies. Joan Chittister's latest book is called *The Gift of Years*, sub-titled 'Growing Older Gracefully'. She notes how people can grow up assuming they will be over the hill, with nothing to look forward to, once they pass retirement age. Maybe if you are told that often enough, you get to believe it.

I am reminded of the university student at a cricket match, explaining to an older gent next to him why the older generation was so out of touch. "You grew up in a different world," he said. "Actually an almost primitive one. Today's young people have grown up with TV, the internet, jet planes, space travel, a man on the moon. Our space probes have gone to Mars. We have nuclear ships and electric and hydrogen cars. Lightning-fast computers." On he went; when he paused for breath the older man said, "You're right, son. We didn't have those things when we were young . . . so we invented them. Now, you arrogant little twirp, what are you doing for the next generation?" I'm told there was hearty applause from those sitting around them.

In *The Gift of Years* Joan Chittister describes growing older as 'the capstone years', the time in which a whole new life is in the making. She says, "The gift of these years is not merely being alive – it is the gift of becoming more fully alive than ever." Then she sets out to show how this can be possible. For her, one thing that can make the difference between good and not-so-good ageing is lifelong learning. According to Harvard University's Longitudinal Study of Adult Development, continued learning determines (quote) "the degree to which life will be satisfying to us, as well as the degree to which we will be interesting, valuable, life-giving to others."

Sister Joan says learning projects that help keep older persons' minds active also expand their horizons. She is convinced that older people can turn this journey into an adventure. "Old age is not when we stop growing. It is exactly the time to grow in new ways. It is the period in which we set out to make sense of all the growing we have already done. It is the softening season when everything in us is meant to achieve its sweetest, richest, most unique self."

I want to conclude this by telling you of a conversation I had some years ago with the distinguished psychiatrist Dr Ainslie Meares. We were discussing the ability of older people to deal with change. He said, "It is a fallacy to say that older people resist change. The middle-aged are more likely to do so. But older people have seen and endured many, many changes, and they are aware that this is a part of life. What older people do not like is anxiety. If they appear resistant to change, this is because they wish to avoid anxiety. Provided the anxiety level is not raised too high, they often welcome change."

Now, as an older person, I can endorse that. And so I can say happily with St Paul, "this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." In that faith, may 2009 be a good year for you all!