

Old Testament Psalm 71:9-18 (New Living Translation) **AND** Psalm 92:12-14

Epistle 2 Corinthians 4:13-18 (New Living Translation)

Gospel Luke 12:22-31

The widower, now on his own and aging, started living with his middle aged daughter who was at the top of her game as a professional, working long hours and coming home either exhausted after a frenzied day of work and ready to collapse on the couch, or still pumped in work mode and highly motivated even though at home, to keep the work pressure on for an extra hour or 2. The elderly man saw a role for him now that he was living with her, to be helpful and so he would prepare the evening meal.

This particular day he thought he'd make a casserole. He got some lovely beef and a whole lot of veges - celery, carrots, pumpkin, parsnip, onions etc and began dicing it all on the titanium chopping board that was kept at the edge of the bench. If you've ever diced pumpkin, you'll know that you need a good heavy duty knife and a great deal of pressure. Same with the beef. Then with the softer ingredients – celery and onion and the like you can have a good old whacking and chopping session perhaps even to the beat of some music. So satisfying. All done, he scraped the choppings into the slow cooker, rinsed the board under the tap and put it in the dishwasher ready for the evening wash when electricity was cheaper. Satisfied with his prep he sat on the couch and began to watch sport on TV.

When his daughter came home, he told her that he had a casserole at the ready, but she was in the pumped up mode and intending to work for a bit longer at home. She went into the kitchen, only to immediately shout out to her father – “Dad, have you seen my i-pad ?”

Growing old can have it's hazards, especially in this day and age with the proliferation of devices and the tsunami of digital technology. New terminology, phrases and language that are in every day use can be completely mysterious and confusing to us who are older, and we can be embarrassed with shaken confidence. An older relative of mine was organising a journey to Switzerland to visit his daughter and grandchildren who lived there and was

nervous and fearful that all the travel tickets and information about connecting flights and visa details was downloaded onto his phone and he wasn't sure he knew how to access it. He was catastrophising future events at foreign borders where he feared he'd not remember what to do, and that he might even accidentally delete information.

There's nothing we can do to prevent the aging process and it is inevitable that across the range of predictable outcomes, as we get older we can expect a fall away of rigour both physically and mentally. Although we are all wired differently it is inevitable that these traits will cross our paths in some iteration at some stage.

(personal story)

I have lately been using the illustration of the cul-de-sac. The road of life ends. We don't have the software to go back, so we must learn how to make the most of the situation whilst waiting for the cul-de-sac to open up a slip road. For some – the slip road opens soon after arrival, whilst for others there can be a lot of circling around waiting ! This is simply how picture that stage of life when pursuing goals, dreams and ambitions are no longer relevant; more time is behind us than in front of us and when we have long passed the point of peak physical and mental fitness. It is at this stage that the greatest challenges to our senses of purpose, pride and confidence can be experienced because the loss of these can make us feel of no use any more and we often don't know how to deal with the realisation that we are no longer who we used to be in the eyes of others.

In pastoral ministry, ministering to people who are circling in the cul-de-sac can be challenging. What does support and encouragement look like for someone who is waiting ? Do you pray with them – ‘ *O Lord – open up the slip road soon.... !* ’ Do you help them to reminisce on their glory days of the past ? Do you shower praise on them to boost up their flagging ego ? Do you talk all the time about death so that at least you know you've done your best to prepare them ? Josh has an approach that he expresses – ministry in the cul-de-sac is about *helping people to finish well*. While that doesn't address any specific issue, what it does do is introduce a beautiful overarching principle that can be the guide for knowing how to help.

It is thought that St Paul might have been in his mid 50s when he wrote second Corinthians so he would hardly be in the cul-de-sac, but we know he lived a physically demanding life and must at times have been utterly exhausted even

unwell and thus well aware of aging. Paul wrote.... *we never give up. Though our bodies are dying (or wasting), our spirits are being renewed every day*¹.

The context is to do with Paul being willing to work for the Gospel to his end, and in appearing to accept the inevitability of diminishing physical capability, he counterpoises that loss with the encouragement of being replenished, renewed, re-energised daily in spirit. What does this mean in old age ? What can he be referring to ? What does this feel like when our bodies start to fail and when we get mentally affected by frustration and disappointment ?

(personal story)

During our life time we strive to achieve or create an identity that marks us out. We are driven to be someone or something so that we can stand in the company of people showing what and who we are, and we feel good about the acceptance even admiration of others. It is when all those affirmations evaporate in our aging that we feel adrift, lost and confused - so who are we when we feel as though we are past our use by date ?

Richard Rohr writes²:

I believe God gives our soul, our deepest identity, our true self, our unique blueprint, at our "immaculate conception". Our unique little bit of heaven is installed by the Manufacturer within the product at the beginning ! We are given a span of years to discover it, to choose it and to live our own destiny to the full.

Our identity from which our deepest sense of purpose comfort and confidence flows unabated to our end, is in the Divine love of God. At every stage of our life we are unique and special to God. Aging wont change that and we should understand that the joy and affirmation of truly belonging is still accessible even in aging. In contrast to our identity being achieved by us, is the fact that in Christ identity is given to us. It is a grace. It is given without reference to what we can achieve or what others expect of us. It is a gift. This gives us our deepest sense of identity. Who we are is sourced not in what we think of ourselves or what others think of us, but in what God thinks of us and this doesn't change with the years.

Circling around the cul-de-sac we can be renewed in our spirit when we think about this.

¹ 2 Cor 4:16

² *Falling Upward*: Richard Rohr, Invitation to a further journey

There is renewal in our spirit when we quell and douse our feelings of disappointment in the weakening of our bodies; there is renewal when we take in the magnitude of the promise that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God; there is renewal when we think back and see the blessing of God's constant love over the past years even in the midst of what we didn't see at the time - in the ups and downs and in the highs and lows; there is renewal when we see God's love in the fellowship and affections of our friends and in the devotion of our families; there is renewal whenever we turn our thoughts to thankfulness and praise of God.

In a 17th century, the Church of Scotland formulated key tenets of faith, and the first question proposed was..... *What is the chief end of man* (humanity) ? and the answer adopted was*to glorify God and enjoy him forever*. There is renewal in our spirit when we enjoy God for that is our highest calling. Even though we are in physical decline, our enjoyment of God can be our greatest blessing in aging that more than compensates for our feelings of loss.

The passage in Psalm 92 is well known for its mention of old age. See the references to *flourishing life*, sometimes translated as *vigorously blooming*, and to being *vital* and *green* and see the glorious encouragement of *still bearing fruit even in old age*. The metaphor of a hearty healthy fruit bearing tree with full and glossy green leaves is describing a quality of life that includes the elderly, but this is not the focus of the Psalm. The focus of the Psalm is the praise and worship due to God for the beauty of his great works. When we bubble over with praise and worship, that is the fruit - *vigorous and blooming* – that we can show forth even in old age. We read in Psalm 92 phrases like -

It is good to give thanks to the Lord.....to make music to his name....he causes me to rejoice and I shout for joy.....how great is the work of the Lord.....how deep his thoughts.

The reason why the person is pictured as a hearty healthy glossy fruit bearing tree is because they are praising and worshipping God with thankfulness for his faithfulness and great works. It is in such praise and worship that our lives will glow and have brightness and colour even when we're old and think we're useless !!! What is the chief end of people was the question ? It is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. I recently read that the advancing of years doesn't bring us closer to death, but closer to God.³ If we can hold on to a thought like that as we progress into old age we might be able to experience some encouragement as we circle the cul-de sac. God is love. God is light. God is the

³ *Letters to Corinthians*: William Barclay commentary

source of all goodness and blessing. Thinking about moving closer to God will be much better for us than thinking about dying !! ⁴

Our chief end – or our ultimate meaning for life, is not in the things we do, the qualities we cultivate, the reputations we pursue. Our chief end – or our ultimate meaning for life, is in our praise and worship of God and this is a fruit we can bear in old age.

Stan Thorburn

⁴ 1 John 4:8,12,16; James 1:17