

Christmas is for older people too

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[0 : 00] And we have that flood of reminders of past friendships via cards and letters.! And Christmas also neatly coincides with the end of the year.

! We all say, because we have to, is it really 12 months since we last did this? All of which makes us feel the passing of time and that we're getting older.

That's not a thought that most of us like to think about much. Sitting around the Christmas table or splashing in the fountains of Trafalgar Square, if you're still allowed to do that, or New Year's Eve, you don't hear many people saying, I'm so glad I'm a year older.

No surprise there. If we love life, the thought of getting older is pretty negative. Energy levels, aches and pains and worse.

Can't do what we once did. Forget things. Feel its diminished opportunity. We seem to attend more funerals than weddings.

[1 : 23] And there's a prospect of more of this. Until. And that's just what we might think about ourselves. What about the world we live in?

At least the Western world. Older people mean increased pressure on limited resources. Older people are a statistical problem.

A time bomb for the economy. A burden on the state. Or the family. Although perhaps a resource to be exploited as the army of the volunteer sector.

Or a market area for the grey and silver pound. To be tapped in for life insurance or world cruises. The media hardly bothers to break the stereotypes.

So we have grumpy old men and women filling column inches with their moans. Little old ladies and men because they're always little. Shuffling along in life. And there are victims of mugging and scams and NHS blunders and malpractice.

[2 : 27] Or if you're one of the chosen few. Or a so-called national treasure. Like Sir Ian McKellen or Stephen Fry or Judy Dench or Judy Walters. You're okay to be old because you're a national treasure.

But most older people aren't national treasures. It's not a promising future. Although we're all heading for it. So the title of this message is actually.

Christmas is for older people too. Because in stark contrast to popular culture. And ingrained self-perception. The Bible has some very positive things to say.

About old age. And old age at the birth of Christ. Also that rather beautifully. At a season of the year. When older people are often at their lowest ebb.

And the world seems intoxicated. By the newborn and the fresh. God appears to deliberately give honour. To older people. Did you notice in our readings in the Gospel of Luke.

[3 : 27] The features that unite a cluster of personalities. That bookend the Christmas story. We know of Mary. A virgin and almost certainly very young. Less than 20.

Encountered by an angel. Of immense and unfathomable age. Which is a message in itself. But either side of this. In the immediate events of the birth of Christ.

We find Zachariah. Or perhaps your Bible says Zacharias. And his wife Elizabeth. And then afterwards Simeon. And Anna. And so the message today is about these four people.

The first thing we can say about these four. Is that they were old. Or older people. And significant to God. So. We go briefly through these Bible verses.

Just to remind ourselves of that reality. Firstly in the case of Zachariah and Elizabeth. Chapter 1 verse 7 of Luke says. They were both well on in years.

[4 : 28] Or I think the latest NIV version. Has something. A little bit more quaint than that. What did you read in yours? Both very old. Okay. Well we don't really know what very old means.

If you live in AD 20. Or whatever. Period that was. In the time of Christ. But it's old. Believe me it's old. And Zachariah himself says to the angel.

In verse 18. I'm an old man. And my wife is well on in years. And in chapter 1 verse 36. The angel says.

To Mary. Your relative Elizabeth. Is going to have a child. In her old age. And she who was said to be barren. Is now in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.

How old was Zachariah and Elizabeth? It's a hard one. Priests normally served until the age of 50. But there is a thought. That they might then go on to like duties. E.g.

[5 : 34] Offering incense. Like Zachariah. Rather than killing sacrifices. In the case of Elizabeth. She was said to be barren. And well on in years. So it was. Well known that she was.

Well past childbearing age. She might be in her 50s. Probably her 60s. Approaching her three score years. And ten. Now what of Simeon.

And Anna. Anna. And they too were undoubtedly. Old people. Luke chapter 2 verse 26. It had been revealed to him.

By the Holy Spirit. That he would not die. Before he had seen. The Lord's. Christ. And in verse 29. He responds.

In praise and prayer. Sovereign Lord. As you have promised. You now dismiss your servant. In peace. One commentator rightly said.

[6 : 31] Well we don't know that Simeon. Was necessarily old. But I really can't believe. That a very young person. Would write. Such words. Or speak in such words. About himself.

As if. The fact that he was about to die. And he was going to see. The Lord's Christ. Christ. Now you can dismiss your servant. In peace. I think it's clear.

That he was an old person. And in the case of Anna. We've got no doubt. At all about her. There was a prophetess. Verse 36. Of chapter 2. Anna.

She was very old. She'd lived with her husband. Seven years after her marriage. And then was a widow. Until she was. 84. 84 certainly. If you do some other arithmetic.

You might think. That she was even older than that. I want to say this. Please note. Their age is not smothered. Overlooked. But carefully noted.

[7 : 29] It is not a source of embarrassment. Or frustration. Or hindrance. But of blessing. God spoke to. And used these people.

Especially. In their old age. Secondly. They're named. They're not just one of a crowd. Or a number. But named.

With their own unique background. And personal story. And they are given the dignity. Of being a central part. Of God's unfolding purpose. In their old age.

Noted. Named. And dignified. So may we have God's mind.

As we face. Our own. Older age. And relate. To people. Older than ourselves. This is what God thinks. Of such people.

[8 : 25] And how should we think. Status. What matters in God's sight. We're told something. Of the lineage.

Of Zachariah. And Elizabeth. And Anna. We may be confident. Of the Jewish pedigree. Of Simeon. Then too. We know something. Of the ministry. And gifting of Zachariah.

He's a priest. And Anna. Who is a prophetess. But what is most clearly. And firmly. Remarkable upon. Is the character. Of each of these. Four older people.

Zachariah. Zachariah. And Elizabeth. And there are plenty of verses. That we can look at here. Chapter one. Verse six. Both of them were.

Upright. Or maybe your Bible says. Righteous. In the sight of God. Observing all the Lord's. Commandments. And regulations. Blamelessly. What a commendation.

[9 : 25] Upright in the sight of God. Blameless. They followed God. Wholeheartedly. I believe that what is being spoken about here.

Is actually life righteousness. Rather than legal righteousness. So. We're conscious and familiar with. That kind of distinction.

That to be a Christian. Is to have a legal righteousness from God. The righteousness of Jesus Christ. That makes us accepted. And we can be called righteous. Because of him.

But actually. The whole tenor. Of. These two people. And the other two. That we're thinking about. What is being reflected upon here. Is the sort of lives. They were living each day.

They were living each day. Their righteousness was on display. Not so much their standing before God. As their character. As believers.

[10:19] God could safely entrust baby John. Into their hands. Chapter 1. Verses 14 and 15.

The angel says. He'll be a joy and delight to you. Many will rejoice because of his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord. Never to take wine or other fermented drink.

He'll be filled with the Holy Spirit. Even from birth. What a challenge. To give birth to a boy. Like this.

Who will be great. And will be filled with the Holy Spirit. From birth. What sort of parents. Is God going to choose. To look after.

Such a child. Well. Zachariah and Elizabeth. Come to mind. Because they were righteous. And upright people. And it would not be a strange thing. For them.

[11:14] To be bringing up a child. Filled with the Holy Spirit. From birth. This baby. Would be perfectly at home. In the home of Zachariah and Elizabeth.

Because of the sort of people. That they were. Zachariah's long term. Experience of God. Made his unbelief. More blameworthy.

Chapter 1. Verse 20. Now says the angel. You'll be silent. And not able to speak. Until the day this happens. Because you did not believe my words.

Which will come true. At their proper time. We had a discussion about this. The other day. And you can read the commentators. And their perplexity. Why Mary didn't get.

Challenged on this point. By the angel. When she expressed. How can this be. Since I am a virgin. And what difference is there. To what is going on. With Zachariah at this point.

[12:13] Where he's expressing. Well surprise and amazement. How can this be. My wife is beyond years. Or think of. Abraham and Sarah. In the same sort of.

Situation and saga. And yet. There is a punishment. That it comes upon Zachariah. Because of his unbelief. At this point. And I would just suggest.

Perhaps. That he'd received. A lot of light from God. Over many years. He'd heard things from God. He'd been close to God. He'd followed God. In his ways. And God expected. More of him. That his age. As a believer. Actually.

Put him into a place. Of additional responsibility. In Luke 12.48. We read.

[13:07] To whom much is given. Much will be required. That to have had the privilege. Of years. Of awareness.

Of Christian matters. Of reading our Bibles. And hearing countless sermons. Praying many prayers. Puts us into a position. Of great personal responsibility. And God would say to us.

I expect more of you. Because of all that you've received. Elizabeth. Elizabeth's instinctive and heartfelt God-honoring reaction to the gift of a child.

Chapter one, verse 25. The Lord has done this for me, she said. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.

It's lovely to see the way in which she could identify what was happening to her, not in biological terms, but as God's hand. God's kindness to her.

[14:13] It was instinctive, it was heartfelt, and she honored God. And then notice Elizabeth's humility before her teenage relative. If she was indeed 60 and indeed Mary was less than 20, it's pretty remarkable that she speaks as she does in verse 43.

Why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? That she was able to see what was happening in spiritual rather than ageist terms.

And all the honor, naturally speaking and culturally speaking, should have gone from Mary to her much older relative.

But in this case, counter-culturally, Elizabeth was able to give honor to her much younger relative. Then notice Zechariah's obedience and praise to God.

Chapter 1, verses 63 and 64. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, His name is John.

[15:24] Immediately his mouth was opened, and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. What has happened to him in the temple didn't make him resentful and bitter, but humble and more trusting of God.

Pretty devastating in older age to lose the ability to speak, and it appears also the ability to hear, because the word can mean both things, and it's clear from the context that the relatives had to

make signs to him.

So suddenly he'd lost two great faculties. How would that make you feel? Well, it's a blessing to read that the first thing that happened when he opened his mouth was that praise to God came forth.

And what about Simeon? Chapter 2, verse 25, says of Simeon, he was righteous and devout, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

That's very special to read that at this particular point in the Bible, pre-Pentecost, in the days when it wasn't common for the Holy Spirit to be abroad amongst men and women.

[16:45] But this man was marked out by the presence of the Holy Spirit upon him and in his life. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel. He had patient hope about him.

He'd experienced a revelation from God. Verse 26, It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until or before he'd seen the Lord's Christ.

And he was a man who was responsive to the Holy Spirit. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. Well, it's a wonderful picture, isn't it?

Three times the Holy Spirit is mentioned in those four verses. And this is a man who is wrought upon by God's Holy Spirit. A man before his time. A man who is living very close to God.

A remarkable person. In his old age, he was knowing the fullness of the Spirit in his life. And what a faithful man he is as well because at this joyful moment with the young baby, 40 days old or so, in his arms.

[17:52] A joyful experience for any parent. He shares in that joy. But he's faithful enough to express the whole counsel of God. And to tell the whole truth to Mary and Joseph at this point.

Great things will happen in and through this child. But it's also going to be a sign that causes falling and rising of many. The thoughts of many hearts will be revealed and a sword will pierce your own soul too.

How would we feel in the delivery room at the Royal Sussex Hospital speaking in that sort of language to a mother with her newborn baby? He was a faithful man.

He said what God had told him to say. And then we think of Anna. Extraordinary lady. She worships night and day. Fasting and praying.

Chapter 2, verse 37. You can see it there. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day. She was in God's place at the right time.

[18:59] Coming up to them at that very moment. And she gives thanks and testimony. She gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Well, what a group of people. What a fantastic quartet. Wouldn't you love to have godly people like these four in your church?

In your family? In your lives? Perhaps you have. Even more remarkable for the fact that these four lived in dark times when the religious establishment was compromised.

God's voice through the prophets hadn't been heard for 400 years and the nation and its hopes had been seemingly brought to its knees by exile and oppression. Yet God had his people, notably older people, keeping the faith, keeping strong, maintaining a testimony.

It's these qualities and characteristics that outstandingly marked them out and caused them to shine like stars in God's firmament. It was foretold of John the Baptist that he will be great in the sight of the Lord and these people were truly great in the sight of the Lord.

[20:30] There's little or nothing said about their houses, how they live, their income, their health, their family connections, their education. You know all the stuff that we use to measure people by.

But this is God's measure. This is what's recorded for all time. Man looks at the outward but God looks at the heart.

If this matters so much to God, shouldn't we deeply aspire to be such people for his praise and glory? Indeed, and when shall we become such people?

We need to be becoming these kind of people straight away. I say don't delay. If you don't or won't learn the life of grace now, you will almost certainly not learn the life later on.

Disobedience, pride, thanklessness, worldliness, spiritual carelessness, if not dealt with now when we have energy, motivation, and desire, will become our lifestyle habits and will never be curbed later on.

[21 : 48] But what a beautiful thing it is to see the graces of obedience, humility, thankfulness, spirituality, and faithfulness shining simply and truly through God honoring older people.

Is there any greater demonstration of the keeping power of God in the gospel than to see an 85-year-old Christian man and woman trustingly following the Lord to the very end of their days? satisfaction. Please note how God met with and satisfied each of these people in their old age. I'm sure that he met with them in their younger years but what amazing satisfaction and richness he brought to them in their old age, supplanting anything that had happened before. Here is Zachariah coming to the end of a lifetime of priestly service. It's probably likely that he'd actually never been in the place of incense before in his whole life.

[22 : 56] There were so many priests they chose by lot and that may have been his first occasion of going into the temple and into the holy place to offer incense. What an amazing turn of events.

He might have anticipated this is what it's going to be like. Built himself up for it and then he meets the angel Gabriel. He'd never had such a shocking and a wondrous experience.

The angel says, I stand in the presence of God and I've been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. Almost with heaven dripping from him he comes and stands at the right side of the altar of incense.

What a day, what a moment, what an experience for Zachariah. And to have the assurance that his prayer had been heard.

Which prayer? Prayers of long ago now stopped for a baby? Or perhaps because he really was on duty that day, the prayers he was praying inside the holy place were not prayers for a baby, but prayers for the nation of Israel, prayers for its redemption, for its salvation, even for the spread of the great good news and kingdom of God into the whole world.

[24 : 26] That would have been the sort of staple diet of the prayers of the priests as they went into the holy place and offered incense, which was only symbolic of what was far more important, which was the prayer they were making on behalf of the whole nation that day.

And wouldn't it be like God, not to answer just one prayer, but a multitude of prayers in one moment, as it were, and to be saying to Zachariah at that moment, you've been praying for the nation, your prayer, your prayer today has been heard, he's coming.

And way back you prayed, you prayed as a couple for a baby, and in God's mysterious providence, the baby that you prayed for is part of the redemption of the world.

Your prayer has been heard. To have the privilege of fathering the Christ forerunner and given another opportunity to serve God, because remember, God didn't take away the privilege of service either in the temple, he carried on for the rest of his week.

Or in the birth of John, God could equally have passed that over to someone else to have that responsibility, in spite of Zachariah's stumbling at that point, but God was so gracious as to give another opportunity, and in their old age, to be raising the forerunner of Christ.

[26 : 11] And we think of Elizabeth bearing the crushing and undeserved burden of disgrace because she was barren, now and miraculously carrying a baby to full term and having the privilege of a perfect delivery.

And what a blessing, not just a birth, but the birth of one of eminence. She stands alongside the likes of Sarah and Rachel and Hannah. And Simeon, who for years had longed for the Messiah and was then privileged to be given such a promise, you'll see him with your own eyes before you die. Was it possible the whole nation had waited hundreds of years for this, but it happened? It happened to him.

And Anna, 84 years old, but privileged to see the baby, the parents, and tell of him to others. 84, but still speaking.

Why not? Such satisfaction, such answered prayer. Why not when you're 50, or 60, or 70, or 80, or more?

[27 : 26] Is it possible? Will God grant such satisfaction? I think the overwhelming pressure and indication of scripture is that it would be delights to do that for older people.

To hear their cries, to answer their prayers, to visit them afresh, to give them opportunity for service, to cause them to have their mouths opened that they might tell of him, to carry on serving. it was on the day of Pentecost that Peter proclaimed that the prophecy of Joel in the Old Testament times would be fulfilled.

The young men shall see visions, but the old men shall dream dreams. Men and women, every age, shall be partakers of the coming kingdom.

And I end with this thought and encouragement from Romans 15 verse 4 where we read, for everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

[28 : 40] So here's the word for us today. Here's what God has given to us, not just in one life but in four, not just in one place but in many, as it were spelt out to us in large letters and saying well there's a blessing in older age.

And as the likelihood is that most of us will live to older ages than our grandparents ever conceived of, how important it is that we should take these matters to heart. And remember that Christmas time is not just for the young but it's for older people too.

To