

Christmas is for older people too (2)

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[0 : 00] We saw that the Christmas story has much to say to older people, and the title of this message is Christmas is for older people too.

! Older people are often at their lowest ebb, and the world seems intoxicated by the newborn and the fresh.

God appears to be deliberately giving honor to older people. The Bible story is rich with older people.

There are many throughout the pages of the Bible, so we're not just taking a little unusual picture here. No, older people are constantly granted significance by God.

And I repeat some material that we gave last Sunday. So it is significant in God's eyes that he would use these particular people, and the Bible is quite clear in talking about their age.

[1 : 26] It doesn't disguise their age at all. In those particular passages, we see that their age is marked out. In many ways, their age is marked out in order to demonstrate something of the greatness of God.

So that in the world's eyes, they may have been past it. In God's eyes, it was very much the opposite. And he was about to do something significant through these people.

They are significant. Secondly, they have status in God's eyes. And it's very interesting to see the way in which they are described, and therefore the way in which we should be careful to view older people, especially older Christians.

Their status in God's eyes is a matter of righteousness. Their upright lives are particularly remarked upon, not only that they're believers in God, but they're living lives which are consistent with their profession.

So running through a number of those verses, if you had your Bibles open, you could see those as well. But I just mentioned the fact, Zechariah and Elizabeth, they're both remarked upon as upright.

[2 : 37] That they were blameless in their following of God, in the keeping of the law. That they were experienced people.

That they had years of serving God behind them. That they had God-honoring reactions to the situations of their lives. And we see in the case of Elizabeth, especially an older lady, her humility when she encounters her relative, much younger relative, Mary, and how she honors Mary for the birth of the coming Messiah.

And the cheerful obedience that they offer in their lives. So we saw status. The things that God remarks upon. The things that God looks out for.

And I find that really challenging. Because when you think about yourself, when you think about other people, people are defined by their circumstances so often, rather than their character.

But God has it another way around. God is extremely interested in character. Because God does not look on the outward, but he looks on the heart. That's a hard lesson for us to learn.

[3 : 59] Because it's the complete opposite of the way the world thinks about things. And we also saw the satisfaction that was granted to these people in their older years.

What an encouragement it is to see that God deliberately grants such satisfaction. Answered prayer on a massive scale. In fact, prayers that had long since ceased to be prayed, I'm quite sure.

It was interesting, just hearing that reading again, to note how Zachariah says to the angel, how can this be? How can this be? I'm an old man.

Not just my wife, Elizabeth, is past bearing children. But I'm an old man. That it's gone completely off our radar. Neither of us could even consider that a child should come through us.

And Elizabeth has that enormous joy and deep satisfaction of childbearing. Simeon, seeing the Messiah, thrills him.

[5 : 07] And Anna, in the same manner, in the same way. Now this morning I want to add three more characteristics of these four people that God chooses to single out for our attention.

and which provide for us a model of God's ambition and purpose for older people. As well as all of us. And also see how the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ provides a model for older people and indeed for all of us.

And it's wonderful really to reflect upon the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. 33 years, he didn't live to old age. But he knew the moment of his dying.

He knew the moment of his dying. And he knew when his final days were coming. And he lived with significance the whole of that life. And so he lives a complete life.

And he provides a rich example to us. And in case you may be tempted to distance yourself from this message because you don't consider yourself to be old, and most of us distance ourselves from that description by about two years or about that.

[6 : 25] Please remember, we're all heading in this direction and need to prepare for it. These stories give us vivid images of what the godly life might look like in older age.

Secondly, we have a responsibility to pray for and encourage older brothers and sisters because they need all the prayers and encouragement they can get.

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.

Which is a great way to start the new year. So firstly, each of these had stories to tell.

They were real life stories. I don't know if you find that helpful or even that very helpful. Little statues and medieval paintings of these rather famous people I don't find very helpful.

[7 : 39] I don't find the little halos very helpful. They're very static people and they appear as if they sort of drifted and drift out and everything in their life is just serene and perfect.

But of course, these are the sorts of images that Christmas brings us because they populate our Christmas cards and we find them in the galleries and so forth and visual stuff stays with us.

So, here on the right hand side there's this very scene that we read from Luke chapter 2 with Mary and Joseph presenting baby Jesus and here's Simeon and Anna as quite a sort of striking picture. But, of course, that doesn't tell me anything about the stories of the people. What stories might you have heard if you've had a chance and taken it to sit down with Zachariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna.

They seem like well-adjusted, right-thinking, clean, living people for whom life moves serenely on. You've seen Zachariah on his way to temple service or the kindness of Elizabeth looking out for her neighbors and how Simeon just seems to be a person who's got an appropriate word at the right time.

[9 : 06] And Anna, well, she's just part of the temple furniture. What a faithful prayer warrior she is. But do you realize the concealed pain that Elizabeth carries with her as people peep behind the neck curtains or the equivalent or gossip to one another as the years go by and the village families grow with each fresh birth and the oldest lad gets married and another family begins.

So many betrothals and weddings and births and circumcisions and bar mitzvahs and family Passover meals and Elizabeth, of all people, yes, the wife of a priest, remains childless.

Barren, as the haunting Hebrew word expresses it, yes, barren. Think of the anguish of Hannah in 1 Samuel. Surely, shunned by God, disgraced in the community, but for what?

Who knows? Who can tell some dark family secret, unknown, unconfessed, even worse, as she keeps on coming to synagogues if nothing has happened. It never says that the Lord had closed up her womb, as we are told of other women in the Bible, just that she was childless, but who knew the truth about that scripture which had not been written at this time or what was going to happen next? Elizabeth carries a life story. And there's Zachariah having to carry this burden as well. Why doesn't he put Elizabeth away?

[10 : 52] Plenty of people do that. He could have divorced and remarried and the family line could have carried on, but he surely missed his chance now. A lonely life for them both. And now struck dumb and possibly deaf by some experience in the temple in the very midst of the high point of a priest's service.

Not many had the privilege of offering incense. Now he can't hear or talk. Disaster. What's he done wrong? So it wasn't easy for Zachariah and Elizabeth, but they probably wouldn't have told you despite the pain inside and the hurt received from common tittle-tattle.

They just went about life quietly and graciously, which was weird but impressive. For Simeon, there's a different story.

A truly spiritual man who'd poured out his soul to God and many years ago had received a blessed word that he would see the Lord's Christ with his own eyes. But what can you do with that kind of a word?

Had he shared it with anyone? Probably not. It would sound boastful or presumptuous, arrogant, and anyway, who could he safely talk to on such a dangerous topic?

[12:16] So he probably kept it to himself. But he's getting old now and it's getting harder and harder to believe that God will really fulfill that promise or even that God had said this thing at all.

So what had he heard? What does he hear? Does God really speak to people? It's hard to keep going. And then there's Anna, 84 years old Anna, always there, always praying, always fasting. She doesn't miss a moment. But she's a widow. And let's do the arithmetic. She's 84 and she must have married before she was 20. And we know she was only married for seven years before her husband died.

So that makes her no more than 27 when her husband died. and a widow now for 84 minus 27 equals 57 years. 57 years!

What a loss. She never remarried. Too old at 27 or just feeling that she's never had, will have a husband like him again.

[13:29] Just seven years of marriage. What had happened to cut short her husband's life? It's 57 years. But she can remember her betrothal and wedding days as if it were yesterday and the day he died.

It's still painful. Still the memories come welling up even in the temple, even in spite of the fact that she's not seen the family home for decades. All old, older people have stories.

Their own stories and hurts and pains and doubts and anxieties that they can hardly share with anyone. Faithful, upright, Zachariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna were people with life stories that they learned to live with and had actually grown as people and people of faith.

They're not to be pitied, but they're to be understood as three-dimensional real beings and templates for all of us because the deepest lessons are taught through pain and loss.

And it's these life stories that had equipped them more and more to become instruments of God's favor and use in the star-shining, angel-visiting, world-order-shaking events that they happened to live with.

[14:54] So it is for us. As we wonder about 2015 and what use is God going to make of our life stories, how can God change us because of our life experiences?

What is God to teach us because of what we've been through and are going through? Because it's the life stories of each person that make them what God wants them to be.

We are shaped and changed and used by God by our life stories. A friend of ours remarked to us several times in emails over Christmas, he'd had a tough year.

a member of his family diagnosed with breast cancer, lost a dear friend. And he said to us several times, I'm just hoping 2015 is going to be a better year than 2014.

And that might be your feeling as well today. But I want to say that as a Christian, we really shouldn't think like that.

[16:17] To be a Christian is to be in the privileged and dignified place where one year is not better than another year.

Because every year is under God's control. And our lives are under God's control. And he's using everything that affects us for our good.

Because we do know the promise. That all things work together for good to those that know the Lord and are called by his purpose.

We do know that. And it's rather wonderful that in spite of the pain that we might feel about things that have happened in the last year, that by faith we are able to say that God has a purpose in that. not just a purpose out there but a purpose here for us. So that we should be changed in some kind of a way.

[17:32] Be useful for him and bring more glory to him. We are shaped and changed and used by God by our life stories. so as painful as it may be to think back upon some of the dark times of the last year, somewhere buried away in the midst of that, it's a bit thrilling, it's a little bit exciting just to know that God is at work in the darkness and the pain and the sorrow.

Nothing is wasted. It's said rather remarkably of the Lord Jesus Christ, although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.

He comes to earth perfect but he learns obedience. from what he suffers. He grows.

Something changed for him throughout his 33 years of life through the experiences that he went through so that he became mature and the saviour that we need because he was tempted in all points just as we are.

and he stands at the right hand of God as the experienced saviour.

[19 : 27] The one who's been tested and tried, the one who's gone through dark and difficult times himself, he went to a wedding not just to tick the box but to be part of joyful humanity but he's also at the tomb of Lazarus and alongside the widow of Nain when the body is brought out and he cries real tears not to tick a box but because that was what he had to go through to become our perfect saviour.

One who can sympathise with us in all the situations of our lives. It's rather special isn't it?

There's something else that marks out these four, they served. It's explicitly told of Zachariah and Elizabeth that they observed all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

That was deep and real service. They were righteous in the sight of God. Clean, pure inside as well as outside. And of course Zachariah served as a priest.

He did what was expected of him. And it wasn't the work of a few months or a couple of years but of a lifetime. And there's Simeon, another righteous and devout man.

[21 : 02] And the Holy Spirit was on him. What a great man to be around. A spirit anointed, spirit led man. Anna, it appears, never left the temple.

But church attendance only tells you about geography. Anna's testimony was much more. She worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. They firstly served God but they clearly served others as well.

They blessed their neighbors, they blessed their families and relatives, they blessed fellow believers, they blessed Joseph and Mary, they blessed us. Wherever they went they were a blessing.

Thank God for such service. As we peer into 2015, what service is God expecting of us? Service to him first, service to others, service for others yet to come.

Keeping on with what he's called us to do like Zachariah and Elizabeth, all moved by the Spirit to be doing something that we hardly imagined we might do. So I suggest Christians don't retire, they just serve God in different ways.

[22 : 19] Christians don't retire, they just serve God in different ways. Reminded of the Lord Jesus Christ on the night before he dies, takes a bowl of water, calls the disciples to him and washes their feet.

I set you an example, he says, that you should do as I have done for you, which is service. He says in another place, I came not to be served but to serve.

It's really part of the DNA of what it is to be a Christian, is to be a server, serving God and serving others.

Sayings. One particular aspect of the service of these four people is what they had to say. We've noticed their deeds but see what prominence the scripture gives to their words. There's Elizabeth exclaiming in a loud voice to Mary in Luke chapter 1 verses 42 to 45.

There's Zachariah with unloosed tongue, nine months plus of silence, then filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesying. There's Simeon praising God, Anna giving thanks to God and speaking about the child to all who are looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

[23 : 52] Quite a few conversations, I imagine. what would God have us to say to him in prayer and praise, to a relative one-to-one, to a group of family and friends, to anyone who cares about the kingdom of God and his purposes.

Perhaps there are prayers or a spirit of prayer that needs fresh energy. Perhaps there's something to be said which we never thought we'd be able to say but filled with the Holy Spirit, it will come out. And it is remarkable to see in these opening chapters of Luke the way in which these quite ordinary people speak so boldly, clearly, helpfully, scripturally about the things of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ. We see that with a young girl like Mary, with Elizabeth and Zachariah and Simeon and Anna. They're full of Bible, aren't they?

They knew their Bibles. So when it came to the moment when God wanted them to open their mouths, they had something good to say and we're blessed by it. So I'd like to encourage all of us that we should be people who know the word of God so that we may have something to say to one another, something to bless and encourage each other in that.

[25 : 21] As we face 2015, what words might we offer in God's service? We can all say something which glorifies God and blesses others. It was said of Jesus that gracious words came from his lips.

Well may God bless these thoughts to us about these great people. Think of the significance that God gave to them. Think of their status.

How God looked at them, looked on their insides rather than their outward circumstances. Think of the way that God satisfied their deepest longings and provided for them in their older age.

Think of the way in which they were able to be people they were because of their life stories. And then how they carried on serving and that was what they did and that was who they were and they had something good to say, something good to say about God and something good to say for his people.

May all these things encourage us. Amen. Thank you.