

OUR WINTER CELEBRATION

Oh God, You have taught me from my youth...Now, when I am old and

Grey-headed, do not forsake me, until I declare your strength

To this generation. (Psalm 71:17-18)

If there is one thing that cannot be avoided, it is the passage of years and our inevitable demise. The only difference is that some of us will have a longer life span than others. Many of us may well want to live forever but since, even with today's medical phenomena, this is highly unlikely, our next best option is to make the most of our remaining years.

Today, I am sitting at my desk, and staring out the window as opposed to merely staring into space. The early morning mist and chill have lifted. Sunshine streams in caressing me and warming the room. The velvet midnight blue of the Dandenong Hills contrasts sharply with the clear icy-blue sky above. But it is the trees which are grabbing my attention.

In this somewhat melancholy mood, I contemplate their remaining magnificent autumn colours of amber, copper, gold, dark greens and browns. It has been a long, warm autumn which I think has confused Mother Nature. Perhaps the trees are struggling to know what they should be doing although many have already succumbed to old habits and their leaves are fluttering gracefully to the cold, dank earth below.

In contrast, the natives smile and nod sympathetically at their deciduous neighbours' confusion as they observe them shivering in their newfound nakedness. Soon they will be forgotten and no longer admired until this winter is long gone. Not writing yet, I continue to drink in the beauty and splendour of this late autumn scenario.

I am reminded of the words of Finbarr Lynch from his book, *Ageing and Praying*, 'Now without the leaves of summer, the tree's inner structure which supported the fruitfulness and summer beauty, is more evident and yields a different beauty to the beholder...' His meaningful words help me to understand that the 'winter beauty' of our lives depends largely on how we have travelled during our 'summer years.'

Time has a way of moving quickly and catching us unaware of the passing years. When we are young, we never imagined that growing old will happen to us. Old age seems so far off. We forget the reality is that growing old happens to everyone! As Groucho Marx observed: 'Anyone can get old. All you have to do is live long enough!'

Again, growing old should not be regarded as a deterrent but as a natural progression of life. Unlike other important cycles in life – birth, coming of age, marriage and death – there are no special traditions to mark the change that accompanies such an achievement. However, when confronted with the tyranny of passing years and oppressed by a culture centered on youth, many people struggle with the problems that ageing brings. It is hard for them to see mature age as a gift embracing the possibility of enjoying a richer spiritual life.

No one is ever guaranteed that growing older will automatically bring contentment. One of my favourite authors, Daniel O’Leary, in his book *Travelling Light*, tells us how these are decades of permission to try out ideas and projects that we dared not to do when we were younger. Exciting new doors and windows should swing open, not slam shut!

Maybe it would be easier not to learn more, not to be creative, not to take up new challenges, not to eat sensibly. Allowing ourselves to become ‘too old’ in our ways is merely a convenient excuse not to improve our lives and prevent its stagnation. This was certainly not true of Helen Keller whose philosophy was, ‘One should never count the years – one should count one’s interests...I am glad I still have a vivid curiosity about the world I live in.’

We need to bear in mind that what we may lose because of physical decline, we make up for in experience and wisdom. Having a positive attitude towards ageing can be very satisfying when we reach that stage in life where there is nothing much more to learn the hard way. Having been there and done that most of our lives we become, we hope, more confident about ourselves.

As we let go of our remembered youth and consciously acknowledge our ageing, the memories that surface need to be gathered and harvested with gentleness, compassion, perhaps a tinge of sorrow, forgiveness, and most importantly, gratitude to our God.

Ends

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