

GOD'S GIFT FOR TODAY'S MISSION - 'THE SENIOR SILVER SERVICE'.

At Lord's Cricket Ground the famous weather vane shows Father Time removing the bails from the stumps at close of play. A majority of worshippers in C/E churches are aware that they are playing after the tea interval of life. As the shadows lengthen over the outfield, they realise that the whole game depends on those last few overs. Our key players are walking to the crease, yet instead of cheering, we are discouraging them, wishing for younger people and investing significant resources in trying to find them... But THE GAME IS NOW!

Thankfully God does not share our view. In Scripture we read that the greatest heroes were not allowed onto the pitch until they were of mature years - Abram at 75 years and Moses at 80 years. We are also given prominent role models in today's world viz. HM the Queen and Prince Philip, Desmond Tutu, and Pope Francis. Contemporary culture seems to idolize youth and marginalise the old. To what extent has the Church bought into this?

THE PROMISE – Isaiah 40 v 28 – 31.

The prophet Isaiah points to the source of effectiveness in Mission and Evangelism as being in the Lord Himself, not youthfulness. Here is a message for the older person. The Lord who does not get weary is able to sustain all who put their hope in Him, irrespective of their age. Our challenge is not about ageing but about sustaining our trust and passion to serve God.

THE CHALLENGE - Romans 12 v 1 – 2.

Throughout his letter to the Romans, Paul has shared his passion for the amazing mercy of God through Jesus, and in conclusion urges his readers to respond by giving themselves completely to God and the service of the Gospel - v1. He then warns them about the insidious influence of the 'pattern of this world' and the need for the Church to have a 'renewed mind'.

In the context of this paper this could refer to the belief that young people are more valuable than older people, and that paid employees (stipendiaries) are more valuable than volunteers (SSMs or PTOs). 'Retirement' in an institution is an acceptable way of managing an organisation by moving people out and making space for others :- but what if an institution aspires to express the Kingdom of God, and that 'role' and 'vocation' are the dominant categories rather than 'job' and 'retirement'?

THE APPLICATION - Job 14 v 7 – 9.

The average age of the UK population is said to be 48 years and rising and the proportion of older people relative to the whole population is increasing. The average age of regular worshippers in the diocese of Chelmsford is 63 years, yet the growth in numbers of older worshippers is not keeping pace with the increase in the population as a whole.

Although we have a responsibility to bring the Gospel to every age group, God has blessed us with a high proportion of older people in the Church. If this is God's gift to us for this time, what is being done to train this remarkable and talented group of disciples to fulfil the evangelistic mission entrusted to the Church of our time? There is a challenge to older worshippers to reach out to their peers, and to cross age barriers and minister to younger people.

There is a huge advantage in deploying older people in Mission. Broadly speaking they are more emotionally stable, more honest, less superficial and self-centred, less concerned with money and less afraid of death. In addition, they bring a life-time of experience to the task and have much more flexible time, since they are not committed to earning a living. This is not a time to marginalise such people, but to value and train them and engage with them in doing the work of the Kingdom. Looked at in this way the Church is seen as rich in people resource. There is urgent need to invest resources and find ways to ignite and sustain a passion for evangelism.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS - Psalm 71 v 18; 78 v 3,4,7.

The Holy Spirit is already preparing the way. Grandparents are increasingly taking the role of child minders. Do we then need Christian Grandparent training? Seniors are running youth groups. At least 50% of Street Pastors are over 65 years and are reaching out to the 18 – 35 year olds. Then there is evangelistic mission to seniors in the shape of Pub Lunch Clubs, Messy Church, Holiday Clubs etc. What must also not be forgotten is that non-Church folk might be more effectively influenced for the Gospel if they are included in the Leadership Team running the event.

During the period of 'Maintenance Mode' in the Church, it seems as if people were trained to live in a kind of zoo, where all needs were met, and there was a culture of dependence. Now, in 'Mission Mode' I believe that the time has come to release the under-used resource of older believers, so they can engage with the world. Let us take courage, trust God and see the Game to its end!