

**Sermon at Brecon Cathedral**  
Candlemass  
Sunday 01 February 2015  
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Dean of Brecon

Who among us this morning is over 65? Or, who among us have a parent or grandparent over 65? Or, who among us know someone over 65? There are questions arising from living longer, and the value society places on the elderly. A parent recently asked her child ‘what would you like the Dean to talk about when he comes to preach?’ and the response was ‘anything, as long as it’s not about old people?’ I find comments of that nature quite troubling.

There is an irony relating to the efforts of extending human life in a youth orientated society. Older people become isolated, live on low income that cannot keep pace with inflation, and 30% of our elderly live in fuel poverty. If a young person and an older person needs an organ transplant, and one organ becomes available, who should receive it? These decisions are made by the medics based on how we value life according to age. This is a solemn moral question. While the state and charities are providing better health, recreational opportunities and care facilities for the elderly, it is not enough. Society is increasingly becoming older thanks to medical science, and provision, not only for their care, but valuing the contribution they bring, needs more careful consideration. The provision of care we offer to the elderly must be on the political agenda of the May election.

In a technological age, older people do not have the skills for modern life. Even our television remote controls have become complex and we need to call a teenager to help us use it. Young people do not go to older people for knowledge and wisdom any more. Instead they type ‘Google’ into a search engine on computers. The social and family ties are more likely to be broken between over 65s and their family, as their children and grandchildren scatter across the country to live, or even the world. And so, older people are more likely to be isolated from their family than at any other time in our history. Yet, when grandparents live close to family, they provide quality care for their grandchildren, saving on paying high fees for child care. Grandparents do this, not for monetary gain, but out of love. There is no other motive. They are care givers of grandchildren, not because it is a job, but because they love and care. What a great value that is.

The cultural values and context of Simeon and Anna in our Gospel today were very different to ours. If Candlemass is for anybody today, it is a Gospel of encouragement to our ageing population that they are still of immense value. Candlemass presents a challenging question about the value we place on the knowledge and wisdom of older people in our society. One of the most treasurable

tasks of a priest is taking Holy Communion to older people who are unable to attend Church. I miss it. I remember taking communion to a woman who was 94 when I served a parish in North London. She was wise. She gave me her deep wisdom about human relationships. She had no ego, but she had time to listen and draw on her experience of relationships. She had no need for an ego to get in the way of the conversation. She had a repository of knowledge I did not learn in theological college and through academia. She used to say to me, 'I can't do anything now at my age. But, I love seeing you and talking. And, at least I can pray for you and your ministry.' She took an interest in the life of the Church. She read PCC minutes and parish Newsletters. What was different about her was, she also read The Times, the Telegraph, the Financial Times, and the Sun, every day. She knew what was going on in the world and had something to say about it. The over 65s are resourceful and repositories of knowledge and wisdom that the politicians of the May election do not have. Politicians will be leading the economy, education and health care of an increasingly aging population. What value will they place on our elderly, and what provision of care will they offer?

I think Candlemass should be a national day of celebration for the value of our elderly. Today's story about two elderly people is an encouragement. Both Simeon and Anna, faithful and old in years, knew that Jesus was the Light. Jesus is the beacon of hope in a darkened world that Simeon and Anna prayed for faithfully and waited for patiently. The way we reflect this light in our lives is firstly through our discipline of prayer, something we will all find difficult most of the time. The more we are caught up in the outer struggle of the world, the more we need to carefully guard the things that refresh and feed us, like prayer and worship.<sup>1</sup> Whether we feel strong or weak in prayer, we are mindful that we all have a long way to go in regulating a discipline of prayer that draws us closer to God. Our life of prayer is a courtship with God, guarding the events and relationships that refresh us. If we are either gifted or weak in prayer and attending worship, we need to give ourselves permission to rest, play, and sharing time with those who are important to us. And that includes time with God. And, it is important not to be fretful if our prayer discipline if we are not regular or fixed, or often if it feels chaotic. We are not called to submit to a routine that makes us slaves to prayer. Our lives are places where God's love is often hidden, or not recognised, even when we offer more attentiveness to the task of prayer.

Simeon who waited for the light of the world to come to the dark place. He waited, prayed, and hoped for salvation, believing the light would come. Candlemass encapsulates a murky enigma between the dark and light places in our lives. We worship a God who occupied the darkness of the

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<sup>1</sup> George Giver CR, *Company of Voices: Daily Prayer and the People of God*, (London: SPCK, 1988), p.156.

tomb, because he knew human beings were no strangers to darkness either. This Cathedral is the holy place where we centre on God. In the Eucharist our lives are sustained as Disciples of Christ amidst the murky enigmas of life. It is here that we expose ourselves to God's company. This is what we are doing here. Simeon and Anna, faithful into their old age knew this. They waited, they worshipped, they prayed. They knew the Light of Christ would come to lighten the darkness. So, at the end of the service, when we hold our candles and offer our prayers, remember that no matter how old you are, you are of immense value to God, the Church and society.

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