

Sermon

29.10.17

The Dance Goes On

Ecclesiastes 11, 12

2 Timothy 2: 1-7

*May I speak in the name of the living God who is Father Son and Holy Spirit - Amen*

*Please be seated*

One could be forgiven for sensing a certain melancholy to this evening's readings - perhaps complementary to a late Autumn evening at the turning of the year and the clocks going back. The summertime is gone, the nights draw in, the old sun is weak in warmth, the mornings are dark, winter quietly approaches. In Ecclesiastes we heard the poignant concluding two chapters of that rich Book that speaks so much of our place on earth, of time passing and that we are all from dust, and shall turn to dust again. Now we are ushered to old age, the days of sunlit youth far gone. And there is poignancy too in Paul's second letter to Timothy, written from prison in Rome to Timothy far away in Ephesus, for later on in the letter Paul refers to his imminent death as a prisoner of Rome, that the time for his departure has come.

When we are young we think we are indestructible - vanity of vanities might the writer of Ecclesiastes put it: all-knowing (so we think), fleet of foot perhaps, sharp of mind, our looks un-lined and unchallenged, even inventing love for the first time (so we think), possessing both energy and languor- the sweet sleep of youth is a thing to be envied in later life when in the still small hours lying awake, we fret about work, or home, or nothing at all, just worry about worry itself.

In my late teens and twenties my friends and I regularly would drive all night from Cambridge or London, all the way up to the harbour town of Oban on the west coast of Scotland, and from there catch the first boat of the day to the Island of Mull, and my friend's house. We would set off at nine or ten at night, leaving the dark busy City behind for the motorway where, after a while, the traffic would thin away and on we would drive, crossing the border at Gretna, passing sleeping Glasgow, on and up to Stirling, through silent Highland towns and villages, receiving by headlights the shadowy salute of an avenue of trees near Callander as we passed, until the pinky - grey dawn would break over the mountains, and we were in the Highlands, and ahead of us lay the sea. Or in summer parties long passed we would dance and dance and dance all night, and dance as the sun came up.

But no more; for as much as I still go to Mull, I cannot stay awake to drive all night; I do not want to stay awake all night. It seems my dancing days are over. Perhaps you can tell that I have a grief of sorts for that time passed.

Ecclesiastes paints a portrait of ageing quite beautiful in its poetry - albeit a little despairing, or so it seems, set out in a long list of metaphors for degeneration that includes apparently an alarming need for an on-call Urologist. And neither Ecclesiastes nor Paul writing to Timothy avoid the inevitability that in life, and as a witness for Christ, there is suffering.

So is life then but a slow and at times painful, despairing progression to nothing at all?

Ecclesiastes reassures us of the eternal mystery of life itself: that as we cannot know quite how the breath is breathed into our bones in the womb, neither can we predict what will happen to us in life, for good or bad. Life has no answers in one sense, but the light of life itself is sweet, and we should enjoy it while we can.

Looking deeper, our readings tell us to **rejoice** in our humanity, and our inevitable ageing. Yes our fears may increase, yes our once busy households may fall quiet, yes our bodies are not as quick, or strong as once they were - and yes ultimately our breath that so mysteriously came to us will return once more to God - **but that is the privilege of being human**. We are not indestructible - the vanity of youth gives way to the appreciation of days; we **exchange** our years with the marks of the years upon us; and the years of exchange will lead to the ultimate and final exchange of breath breathed in and breath returned.

There is value in this exchange of years, and herein is the key. This is **not** despair.

It is in that exchange of breath given and breath returned that we **live**, living on as vital to God as we ever were, however much we may once have flashed bravely and beautifully and brilliantly once upon a time. We can be confident in that enduring vitality because Paul tells **us** so as he tells Timothy in **three ways**: **firstly** Timothy is to be strong in the grace of Jesus Christ; **secondly** he is to take all that Paul has heard and taught him through many witnesses, and entrust that grace, knowledge and love of God to other faithful people, who **in turn** will teach others; and **thirdly** to be confident in sharing in God's grace as the worker who receives the first share of the crop.

Although in our lives and the exchange of days we suffer for the privilege of being human, as we lose our youth according to the immutable rules of life, we nonetheless **triumph** by the rules of life. Our triumph is in fact **precisely** in our ageing, because as we live we live in the here and now of God's love for us, we live strong in the grace of God. In our lines, in our grey, in our compromised senses, and in our fears and fatigues, every line is our human story, beautiful in its own right, written in us of testimony to the breath of God and the grace of Jesus Christ. We are participants in the grace of God, living in the grace of God, ageing in the grace of God.

Then in our ageing **it is we** who become the living witnesses to the generations to come, witnesses to the life of the world to come. Paul tells us that each of us is in effect a precious link in this chain, (the second entreaty to Timothy). Paul is the vital

link in the chain of testimony: Paul is the eye witness to the eye witnesses. Paul sat with the first disciples in Jerusalem, Paul listened to the first hand witnesses of Christ's life, teaching, crucifixion and resurrection. Paul has taught Timothy, and now awaiting execution Paul entreats Timothy to take on the message. Now Timothy is the link in the chain, those who hear Timothy are the links in the chain, those who hear his listeners will be the links in the chain. And so it goes, all the way down to us. We are Timothy: we are the listeners, we are the teachers, we are the testimony, our listeners will be the teachers to listeners who become teachers and so down to the end of the age.

Three or so weeks ago this Church was humming to the Harvest ceilidh - the band was on the chancel steps, the chairs pushed back, and young and old together danced and danced, hand in hand, arm in arm, linking in and out and up and down. There is one dance called Strip the Willow - in that dance all the dancers are in two long lines facing each other; the top couple meet in the middle and dance arm in arm and are then returned one to each side to link arms with the person in the line and then be returned back to the middle and their partner; they link arms again and dance and return to the side and back to the middle all the way down the line, working the whole line as a chain, whilst meanwhile behind them, the next couple take off and do the same and so suddenly the row is filled with a chain of dancers linking and passing and returning and repeating on and on. It is a wonderful dance.

Our lives in God are that dance. Our dance is the chain that links us from young and youth to age and space, we too pass on and are passed on, we receive the legacy of Christ and we pass the legacy on. There cannot be a chain without the links before and now and those to come. In our ageing, according to the privilege of receiving the breath of being human, we are dancing for God; passing on and doubling back, linking arms and hands with all who come to us and all to whom we reach out and reach out to us: lover, friend and stranger.

Our dancing destination may have in one sense an ending that Ecclesiastes describes as judgement and darkness, but the ending is the very harvest of life. There can be no condemnation in dancing for God - flat footed or nimble, dancing is dancing, and so the darkness is lightened with the light of Christ, the grace of God, to the end of the age.

So it is that we are all precious to God - links in the chain - assured of God's love - enjoined to pass God's love on. Age and our infirmities do not hinder - never hinder - this dance: we are all dancers for God.

Much as I miss my starlit drives to the Western Isles, my true dancing days are not over. Our true dancing days are not over. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow shall be, for all of us, our dancing days.

Amen

Andrew Hurst  
Ordinand

