

St Mary Abbots & Trinity Hall Chapel
Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 and 1 Peter 1:3-12
Father Christopher

*Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
There is a time for the evening under starlight,
A time for the evening under lamplight
(The evening with the photograph album).
Love is most nearly itself
When here and now cease to matter.
Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast water
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.*

How do you cope with the passage of time?

On Thursday evening I was at St. Stephen's Gloucester Road for our local service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the church where TS Eliot was church warden. I suspect Fr Philip, the Vicar, is rather fed up with the constant connection with Eliot, much as he also loves him, and I riled him with another priest's suggestion that they instal enormous fibre-glass cats outside to attract tourists. I said to him that I had been thinking about the way in which scripture and poetry present us with so many different metaphors for the passage of life, and that I was trying to write a sermon, but could not think how to pull it all together - for there to be a point to such a sermon.

We have the idea of the race that is set before us from St Paul: '*Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls*', '*ready to be revealed in the last time.*' '*Which things the angels desire to look into.*' We have Dante's descent into Hell, followed by his ascent through Purgatory and then Paradise. And yet strangely the images which people seem to find most beautiful are, if you think about them, rather bleak.

King Edwin's counsellor in Bede's Ecclesiastical History describing our life on this earth as being '*like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your theigns and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came.*' People are comforted by the idea of a roaring fire in a king's hall, forgetting that this envisages a vast cold emptiness before and after this life; and the counsellor goes on to say that if Christianity can give us any further knowledge, then we should follow it.

Then we have this glorious passage from Ecclesiastes: '*a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted*', so beloved of people at funerals, is actually rather fatalistic. Contrasted with St Paul's race towards salvation, the author, King Solomon in rabbinic tradition, tells us that everything is pre-ordained by God, and that we are destined to

travail during our time on earth. *'He hath made every thing beautiful in his time'* however, even if we cannot search out the meaning behind our fate.

These various images have occurred to me particularly recently as I have spent time with those who are dying. This is one of the truly great privileges of ministry, and attending to the dying is, perhaps more than any other element of the priestly life, about doing just that: giving them your attention, full and entire.

Aside from their deserving that and mostly desiring prayer, you learn a lot from such encounters. Some are frightened. I remember one person who had always had a strong faith, but as the end drew nearer, was less sure of the reality of heaven. A more common attitude is a certain lightness of spirit. Yes, there is gravity, particularly concerning those who will be left, but the burdens of life and our hopes and fears somehow sit less heavily, perhaps for obvious reasons.

In Oscar Wilde's immortal words: *'the tragedy of old age is not that one is old, but that one is young.'* When we are young we look forward to our whole life, imagining the endless possibilities, all lying open before us; and yet the gravity of such decisions can make the young more serious than the old.

In middle age we have chosen a career; we may have committed our life to another person; we may have children. We can of course change our course (though we cannot easily undo having children..).

I changed course after 11 years as a barrister. I was then 34. I am now 42, and the possibility of having another career has in those years imperceptibly evaporated. I don't mind that, because I am very happy as a priest, but that happens as the years pass. And soon I'll be one of those priests in their 50s saying, *'I've probably got one more job in me'*.

I mentioned to someone at her deathbed recently that I had noticed the shift in perspective, between looking forwards and looking back, and she said to me, *'Yes, and I suppose you're about halfway through.'* Candour often comes with age too!

But why am I saying all this? On one level I don't know – I normally have an argument in a sermon, but I just find all of this really beautiful, as Solomon did. Just as I find noticing the marks of age, the liver spots, the deepening wrinkles, and the thinning skin things of great wonder. You may find it, and indeed this sermon, deeply depressing, but I look at scars, wondering at what point in a life they were gained, and what a person was like then.

We are supposed to preach the Good News. And I have been asking myself, what is the Good News in this string of observations, just as you may be. I think it is the connection between these perspectives. The connection between the young person you are at 18, and the middle aged, who still feels as though he's only just left university (and yes, that's me), and the person seeing the end of life approaching, and assessing what the string of incidences and experiences is that forms a life: giving it a narrative arc, as we humans cannot help but do.

All of those metaphors, the linear race, the cycle of life, they are all ways of connecting; and of connecting ourselves to others; to God even. We spend most of our life reaching, rushing to the point at which we think we will find happiness. 'Then', 'if only', 'when'.

The profound truth that our faith teaches us however, is that we will never reach that point fully in this life, even if we glimpse it from time to time.

Back to Eliot:

*Blessèd sister, holy mother,
spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in His will
And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated
And let my cry come unto Thee.*

Let my cry come unto Thee.