



Stay Faithful Luke 2:21-38

One of the big gift areas this year has been products with the contents of this poster on it.

KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

It's a wartime poster designed in 1940 and printed for distribution should there be significant losses during the war. It was never circulated much but a few copies survived. In 2000 a bookshop in Lincolnshire got hold of a copy, and realising it was out of copyright (Crown Copyright only lasts 50 years) started to make products out of the design. Now there is a whole industry making various versions of it:

KEEP CALM AND PHONE A FRIEND, OH, WHO ARE YOU KIDDING, MAKE A SARCASTIC COMMENT, PRAY.

KEEP CALM AND STAY FAITHFUL

ON GROWING OLDER

I was reminded over Christmas about growing older. We live in an age where people don't like the idea of growing older or getting old. There is a vast industry out there of age defying products: face creams that get rid of wrinkles, cosmetic surgery, hair dye, suggestions to stay trendy, fitness regimes, dieting regimes. We want to look as young as we feel, but being 21 gets really hard when you're in your 50s or 60s! And if we're older and suffering health problems, then I'm sure we would love to be at least a few decades younger again; and maybe we fear the future.

For all the attempts to get rid of ageism in Britain, people don't think it's particularly cool to be older – even many people who are older themselves. None of us like the idea of losing our vigour and faculties. I know lots of people who don't like to tell others their age when it's their birthday. Many even keep that a secret. There is a fear or shame in admitting that you are over a certain age.

This morning's sermon isn't about staying young but valuing age – and that includes valuing our own age if we are older. I'm not going to mention age ranges, retirement or define old and young. I'll let you do that in relation to yourself.

Christmas is all about the birth of Jesus. To Mary and Joseph, it was a surprise because either was expecting a Messiah to be born, let alone one who was going to be in their family. The shepherds were not expecting it, Herod was not expecting it. In fact he saw himself as a kind of Messiah and that's why he and all Jerusalem were all troubled when they got the news that a Messiah was going to be born.

So who was all ready for Messiah. A group of Magi from the East saw His star – but they were Gentiles. So was there anyone of the people of God – the Jews – the people who should have been ready – who were actually prepared for the coming of Messiah. Yes – two old people.

First of all there was SIMEON. He had been told years previously that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's promised Messiah. And he was getting very old. But he remained faithful. Then there was ANNA, a prophetess. She was 84, yet always found in the temple daily.

I wonder what people thought of them? Talking about Messiah coming in their lifetime – really? They were so old, but where was Messiah? For the very fact that there weren't loads of people awaiting the birth of Messiah means that they were just a couple of older people: not taken seriously.

VALUING AGE

We live in an age where older people are not taken seriously by and large. There are some older people that are highly valued, like the Queen, Sir Alex Ferguson, Sir Mick Jagger and the like. Otherwise, celebrated people are younger people. It reflects into the church.

Modern church in Britain is an ageing church. Many of us have seen children and grandchildren take no interest in a faith that's precious to us. They think we are old-fashioned, superstitious, cranks, weird, killjoys, boring and the rest. Where's the value in church?

It's tragic. We have the very words of life and hope. We are in relationship with God, and we're not taken seriously just because we're getting older. People point at the way by which Christians run counter to modern culture – we're not modern when we say marriage should be between a man and a woman, that homosexuality is a sin, when we promote Biblical values. They point at all the scandals and arguments in the church even if it isn't ours. And they don't want it.

It's not much better within the church. Younger believers can see older Christians as far too moralistic, stuck in their ways, inflexible, conservative. There will always be an age gap. When I was young I found the older men who ran the church as irritatingly old-fashioned in the way they dressed, in their music, in the way they worshipped, in the way they ran the church. I would be different when I was older, when perhaps I was in their position. In truth, I'm now their age and I'm all the things I said I would be and younger people say about me and people like me what I said when I was young! Someone has said that the only thing we really learn from history is that we never learn from history.

Why am I saying all this? Because despite all the idiosyncrasies of being an older person, age brings advantages once we look beyond our culture. It's a lesson younger people need to learn about older people because they need to value age. It's a lesson older people need to learn – so they value themselves. Simeon and Anna faithfully hung on to their values and continues to expect God to do great things and continued to worship Him – and they were right!

We may dress uncool, act uncool, talk uncool but we know God. When we say that Jesus is the only way of knowing God, we don't say it because we are old fashioned, we say it because 30, 40, 50, 60 years of living with knowing Him tells us that it's true? Why don't people sit up and listen!

And that's what we bring. The wisdom of experience. We don't say something because we've just discovered something and think it's a good idea. We've lived with it for some time, we've proved its worth. And whether that's just coming into a living relationship with God through following Jesus, or whether it's living Christian values, learning from our mistakes, living through difficult times and the like. We have the wisdom that experience brings. We know that there is nothing new under the sun as Solomon said. Perhaps the modern take on that is what goes around comes around. The technology changes, but the sinfulness of man never does, but the answer to sin doesn't change either.

So where does this sermon take us this morning? Simeon's faithfulness was vindicated when the Holy Spirit led him to the baby Jesus. He didn't hesitate to thank God and give Mary advice: VERSE *"This child is chosen by God for the destruction and the salvation of many in Israel. He will be a sign from God which many people will speak against 35 and so reveal their secret thoughts. And sorrow, like a sharp sword, will break your own heart."*

He wasn't afraid to speak truth as the Holy Spirit revealed it to him even though it was quite a bitter message for Mary because there would be sorrow in it for her.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO SPEAK TRUTH

And that's the lesson we must learn here. Our experience means we can speak truth to others. That said, make sure it is truth we are speaking. One thing a long lifetime brings is knowledge of a lot of bad teaching, prejudice and set ways. We are God's people and we speak the truth that's revealed in His word. Don't speak anything else however good your opinion is.

We live in a society where the culture is not to offend. So when do we speak. Simeon was led by the Holy Spirit and his prophetic word was etched into Mary's memory. Let's be worshipping people and use our experience of life, God's word and most of all the Holy Spirit to speak truth that etches itself on people's hearts.

Secondly there was Anna. What did she do?

ANNA VERSE

She never left the Temple; day and night she worshipped God, fasting and praying. That very same hour she arrived and gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were waiting for God to set Jerusalem free.

Anna arrived at the temple and immediately had a prophecy which she spoke out to everyone waiting there.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO BE CONSPICUOUS ABOUT YOUR FAITH

Anna was a conspicuous worshipper. She was noted for her devotion to God. And again her devotion was

justified – she got to see Jesus. It must have been a massive boost for her. It was the culmination of her life's work. Both Simeon and Anna show us that age does not limit how we are used by God. They had faithfully served God and in their latter years got to see the Messiah – the only people expecting Him. Anna remained faithful and conspicuous in her worship.

Retirement is not a God concept. It does not appear in the Bible. Some of the best service in the Bible was done by very old people. Moses, Noah. The main difference between serving God when you are old rather than young is that you must measure it to what God wants you to do.

Anna just faithfully worshipped. That's all she could do. Just be in the temple – and she was there at the right time to bear witness to this great moment. What if she had decided to miss going to the temple because she was retired? Or she had a family function? Or someone had invited her to lunch? Or maybe that someone younger should be doing it. We live in a culture that because non-Christians are in the majority that we are under pressure to bend to it.

She was there, at the temple, waiting to see what God was going to bring. And He brought Jesus. She didn't let her 84 years to bend her away from doing what her 84 years of experience told her: that being in the presence of God was the best place to be.

PRAY AND KEEP FAITHFUL

The advantage of age is experience. If you're younger, listen carefully to those who are older. Respect it. They've been there. And one day you'll be in that position too.

If you're older, remember that your experience makes you useful. You never lose your usefulness to God. You can still be present and part of defining moments in the church. Your counsel, advice and encouragement can still be challenging and life-changing to others.

Most of all, never be ashamed of your age. God has given you many years of life. Use your advantage and look for the blessing as you remain faithful to Him.

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