

'Physician, Heal Thyself'

3. Clergy in Retirement

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Writing this just before submitting to another operation. I have been made more aware still of the increasing limitations placed upon us as age increases, and of how our welfare in retirement is largely dependent on the way we face and deal with those limitations.

Such limitations, of course, can work positively as well as negatively. The psycho-analyst Rollo May told how the famous musician, Duke Ellington, explained that since his trumpet-player could reach certain notes beautifully, but not other notes, and that the same was true of his trombonist, he had to write his music within those limits. The result, he confessed, was that he found it creative and inspirational. Setting out on a voyage by sea with the limitless ocean on the horizon can be exhilarating, but it was Winston Churchill who used to say that it did not really matter how far you went out to sea – providing, and only providing, that you knew for certain that you could get back to base. That limit was essential to avoid disaster. Clearly, in early life especially, to struggle against limits imposed by external circumstances or by our own internal inadequacies, is healthy and conducive to our personal growth. It is essential always to keep on trying to push back the limits in our lives: some of the saddest people are those who seem to have nothing to fight for or against.

But that is only half the story. Futile struggle against the inescapable limits imposed on us by our health and time of life can only produce in us frustration and bitterness. (That is not to deny that a positive attitude and serene spirit in illness can powerfully affect the outcome.) The temptation to kick against such limits are many and insidious. Perhaps the most insidious is not to accept the reality of our present position. We can fondly imagine that, because of our past experience, we will still be listened to, still have influence – or worse still, have the right to judge what goes on after us according to our own standards, and of necessity, of course, it is always inferior. (How often do we think that things in our sphere of life are better now that we have gone?) Two national examples come readily to mind. It seems to me that Ted Heath spoilt himself and marred his own achievements by constantly carping at his successor, Margaret Thatcher. Again, Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher sadly did his well-deserved reputation little good by his many ill-judged letters to *The Times*, criticizing his successor at Canterbury, Michael Ramsey. That backward-looking

perspective, that constant looking over the shoulder to judge, can only lead to a poisonous sourness.

Like it or not, we have moved on to another place, and to try to live in the present through the past will not do. Men and women who have retired often imagine that when they choose to visit, they will be welcomed back with open arms at their former place of work, and are surprised and bitterly disappointed when it does not happen, and even more poignant, when they are scarcely remembered any more. Such is the pace of change today, and the mobility of labour, that they are often seen as no more than dinosaurs from the dark ages. There is surely a lesson in all this for clergy and ministers. It is a common experience for us after many years perhaps 'in charge' of a church, to see that which we have cared about for so long, and people we have cared for, *hurt* by a successor whose ideas, priorities and ways of working are quite different from ours. But we have made our own limited contribution, and need to remember that there are varied approaches to the Kingdom. We have to let matters rest in the hands of One wiser than we are – and be at peace.

For several years, I have spoken every quarter in an Adult Education Centre, on 'Attitudes to Retirement'. The students are largely those who have worked in factories since leaving school. We explore first what they are positively looking forward to, and then try to uncover those often hidden and negative fears they have about retirement. Quite understandably, their retirement-horizon at the beginning, is filled, like those setting out on a sea-voyage, with a sense of exhilarating freedom: freedom from routine and from working to someone else's demands, freedom to get up when we like, and so on. Without quite saying it, they are cherishing a freedom in the future 'to do what they like', and the freedom to choose, when to go on holiday, the hobbies they want to pursue, the people they want to socialize with. Not unnaturally, 'less money' heads the list of fears. But as we go down the list, the threat of increasing ill-health and the possibility of boredom are just two of the negative factors which cast a dark shadow on the glorious prospect of freedom with which they set out. What is only realized after retirement has taken place is the loss of those oases at work which make a tedious job less tedious, and which are just taken for granted. I think of the friendships, or if that is too strong a word, the matiness, the teasing, the tea-break spiced with gossip, the psychological satisfaction of being part of an enterprise which, whatever their grumblings, they want to see flourish. Consequently, there ensues the trauma that takes place between the last day of work on Friday and the first day of 'Freedom' on Monday. Research statistics illustrate that the number of men in particular who die within the first two years of their retirement is frighteningly high: such a trauma coupled with an uneasy adjustment to retirement and a different life-style, in which very often their feeling of self-worth has plummeted, obviously takes a heavy toll

physically – and incidentally, makes preparation for retirement essential.

Underlying all this is a deep philosophical truth, which has very practical effects. Our faith tells us, and as clergy and ministers we have probably preached on this theme in many different ways, that every one of us is a loved creature of God, whoever or whatever we are, or whatever we do. It is not our function or our good works which secure that love for us; it is simply that we *are*, that, like Mount Everest, we are *there*. But this truth is in severe conflict with the deeply-ingrained assumptions of the society in which we live. Since the Industrial Revolution, that society has seen men and women as functionaries, economic units, there to keep the wheels of industry and commerce turning. So the assumption has been made that we become and are valuable not in ourselves, but in so far as we make a practical contribution to the running of that society. It has its roots in the Calvinistic ethic of the importance of work, and found earlier justification in St Paul's assertion that 'if a man doesn't work, neither shall he eat'.

So in our society, those who do not work, even when the 'fault' is not their own, are downgraded, and even when unspoken, thought of as shirkers or scroungers. Clearly, this assumption affects the unemployed mostly, but it rubs off on to some of those who are retired. How damaging it is we can see from the example of handicapped people. They make no practical contribution to the running of society, and indeed they often have to take out of the resources of the welfare state in order to survive. But there are few people who wouldn't believe that handicapped people are valuable, simply because – again – they are *there*. Further, there are abundant testimonies from the parents of handicapped people to illustrate their feeling that they have gained more from their handicapped children than they have given to them.

All this argues the necessity for a big shift from 'doing' to 'being', and the health of our future society depends to some degree upon it. To make that transition is a prerequisite of retired life. It is easy to forget that Christ's redeeming work was accomplished not when he was engaged in doing good work, creative in teaching and healing, but when he was still and lifeless on the cross. 'Being' in retirement will take on for clergy and ministers a much more reflective and contemplative character; that in no sense diminishes our effectiveness in what we *do* for other people, simple by *being* who we are.

How does the clergy experience of retirement mirror the secular experience? There is, obviously, and rightly, great joy in being able to choose the pattern and details of our lives rather than being tied to duty and routine: the joy of shedding a 'role' and being to some extent liberated from other people's expectations of us, the joy of putting on a tie and mingling with the crowds, the joy of increasing freedom from relentless phone calls and correspondence and the inconvenient ringing of the front

door-bell. There are going to be blank spaces in the diary, an ability to dawdle, to re-invigorate old friendships, to spend more time with the grandchildren, to read the books that have been lying on our bookshelves for years, and are still unread. The more it is spelt out, the more attractive it sounds. But such joyous freedom can be a deadly temptation unless it is exercised within the limits we impose upon ourselves through our own self-discipline. If we are not going to abuse our freedom, we continually need small goals to accomplish in a set period of time. We choose the goals, and they may be goals which are connected with a creative hobby, further study, or a task in the community in which we live. Only that way lies the psychological satisfaction which impinges positively on our physical health. A tragic experience in retirement is that of complete aimlessness, which can quite often lead to clinical depression, an aimlessness which stems from a lack of structure in our lives. To be flexible within a structure which we have devised for ourselves seems to me to be essential in retirement. Just as in bereavement, sticking to a daily routine can be therapeutic, so making a flexible structure for the days of retirement can be beneficial.

I have just mentioned a 'creative hobby' as if it were the most natural thing to pursue in retirement. Would that it were so! The greater our conscientiousness and devotion in our ministry, the more necessary it is to develop a hobby or a pursuit *before* we retire, in which we can be absorbed when we retire. (I use the word 'absorb' advisedly. We can easily develop a 'bits-and-pieces' approach which is ultimately unsatisfying.) The tragedy of not having such an absorbing pursuit is obvious. Many of us will have heard the apocryphal story of the man who said that he could not possibly die yet: his diary was far too full. Some clergy and ministers are not ready to retire because their diaries have always been far too full, and they have never given any thought or space to develop interests which can be carried on in retirement. I have known two bishops who were like this, keeping in their ministry so many clerical and secular engagements that every other human interest, and certainly the possibility of a hobby, were squeezed out. And the result? Psychological breakdown in both cases, and swift physical deterioration. That is tragic because the possibilities of satisfaction in retirement, working within limits, are boundless. A priest friend of mine has just received his degree from the Open University, having studied Science and the History of Science for the first time in his life. I am beginning a study of Astronomy, which has fascinated me ever since I learnt some astromavigation in the war. A retired Archdeacon told me recently that he has become the baker in his house, making all the bread, even rising to the heights of parkin and Christmas cake! These are only examples of the positive living that retirement can bring: there is no compulsion to study (or even to bake!) if that is not our

particular bent, and it is not to our detriment if we don't. The glory of retirement is that there is no competitiveness, no feeling that we ought to do this or that. We are liberated from 'oughts' so far as our own personal ambitions are concerned. We only need to be disciplined in pursuit of those goals which we personally find fulfilling.

Although there is one sense in which we never cease to be priests or ministers, our loss of status in retirement can be devastating. The other side of the freedom we are given from phone-calls, correspondence and unexpected callers, is the way in which we are silently being told that we are not needed any more. That uncertain status is often reflected in the way we are treated when we are involved in taking services and helping in parish work. Why, for instance, are we only given 'permission to officiate' and not licensed? A friend of mine 'ran' a church for three years with the bishop's knowledge, but with no other status than that of 'officiating clergyman'. It seems as if we are perceived to be some sort of threat to stipendiary clergy, and should be kept away from any suspicion of official responsibility. This same friend offered to assist the chaplain of the local hospital by doing duty on one day a month. The chaplain rejected his suggestion, and refused to say why. Many of us may feel that we do not wish any more to be involved in parish 'management' and 'policy', but we deserve better than simply being seen as 'helpers out' when needed.

Another retired priest friend of mine pointed to the way in which the loss of status shows itself in his church-going. 'I find it very difficult', he writes, 'to be at home in a situation where I only know a small number of the congregation; I also don't like it, of course, that only a small number of people know me! I still find it difficult to make the transition from being an actor in the proceedings to being what, despite all the congregational participation and so on, seems like a spectator.'

Behind that personal feeling of my friend, and all the reservations we have mentioned about the way in which retired clergymen and ministers are looked on, there lies a truth which has been ignored. We are thankful when, although retired, we are given the opportunity to celebrate the sacrament in our local church, and to take services in other churches when there is an interregnum. But in the latter case especially, I find that one essential ingredient is missing: a special relationship with that particular community. The canons of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 insisted that 'no one may be ordained priest or deacon unless a community is clearly assigned to him'. That seems, on the surface, basic common-sense. I cannot exercise my priesthood in a vacuum. But the community in which I am operating as a retired 'service-taker' is not a community for which I have any direct responsibility. I am not 'clearly assigned to it', possibly know little of its present sadnesses, struggles and joys. I cannot, as a visitor, not moving regularly amongst its people, be

sensitive to the 'inwardness' of that community. I have to remain an outsider. That, above all, affects my preaching and the preparation of my sermons. Perhaps the finest sermons emerge from a wrestling to put together insights from the gospel with that which is uppermost in the minds of the congregation on that particular Sunday, whether it be of national, or more likely, of local significance. A sermon is a sermon for that particular occasion in that particular locality, and can rarely be preached again. (One of the most devoted parish priests I have ever known always used to ask his server at the sacrament to destroy his sermon notes immediately after the service.) We are denied that preaching out of a pastoral situation – and it is a great loss. All this emphasizes that priesthood is not an abstraction, relating to some indelible character conferred upon us at our ordination, but relating to the givenness of our present situation, and the community in which we exercise that priesthood.

There is, potentially, a more serious difficulty still. Freed, as it were, from being the weekly guardians of the word and sacrament, and with space to reflect more clearly and unconditionally on the articles of belief we may have taken for granted over many years, may bring us to the brink of a loss of faith. In recent years, I have known this happen to two people, and it has made them feel (quite wrongly) that their previous ministry has been a charade, exercised by a charlatan. That is tragic, but it is my experience in such cases that there still lies dormant, or perhaps half-alive within them the essential truths of the faith, which – simply perhaps through over-familiarity and staleness – have been obscured by the routine of church life. Robert Runcie and David Jenkins have both indicated recently that although they may, as they grow older, be inclined to believe less and less about those matters which are on the periphery of Christian faith, they believe with more conviction those fundamentals upon which we have always relied. It was Bishop Lightfoot, who, at the turn of the century, said, 'I am content to leave a thousand questions open, providing I am convinced on two or three main lines'. Only rarely, I believe, do those 'main lines' disappear.

Where faith falters, prayer often vanishes. A retired Anglican priest tells me that he doesn't find that saying daily Matins and Evensong is helpful any more, but that since he has given them up, he has guilty and uneasy feelings about his obligations! But it was Archbishop Michael Ramsey who used to insist that we must pray in the way that we can, and not in the way that we can't. In retirement, we are surely given the freedom to experiment with different forms of spirituality, the only test relating to the form which gives us a greater sense of reality. My hunch is that most of us begin, if we have not already done so, to lose much of that wordiness in prayer which over many years has become part of our stock-in-trade. We gradually change our emphasis: Martha's role yields to Mary's. Iris Murdoch, echoing the writings of Simone

Weil in her philosophical works, and to a lesser extent, in her novels, illustrates the way in which 'looking', 'seeing', 'giving attention' is of crucial importance to a rich personal life, and an important way of keeping the self in sober perspective. She describes an experience of nature she has had which illustrates the point. She is looking out of her window in an anxious and resentful frame of mind when she suddenly sees a hovering kestrel. Her mood becomes completely altered. She has become thoroughly absorbed in her contemplation of the kestrel, and when she looks away, she finds that her self-concern has vanished. 'There is nothing now but kestrel.' She has been put into perspective. Iris Murdoch goes on to suggest that this is something which we ought to do deliberately: give 'attention' to Nature and Art in order to clear our minds of 'selfish care'.¹ The true 'seeing' of a work of art, as the character Dora does in the National Gallery in Murdoch's novel *The Bell* revitalizes her.

Now if you transpose this experience of 'seeing' into a specific religious context, you can see how it fits the contemplative spirit. The more our gaze is fixed on God, the more our self-centredness shrinks. Silent contemplative exercises can help us. The business of being still and looking steadily at a natural object – it may be a flower, a plant, a winter tree, a picture, a crucifix – for five to ten minutes, helps us to cultivate our 'seeing' eye and our openness to different forms, shapes and colours. More importantly still, in this exercise it is a common experience to be drawn into and beyond the object of contemplation to that love of God which sustains all things in being. And what is that but a step nearer to our ultimate goal: the vision of God? That contemplative spirit develops in us the faculty of seeing the world 'charged with the grandeur of God', and of realising his habitual presence in the midst of the very ordinary things of life. A poet who helps us to do this is the American poet, the late Theodore Roethke, who saw the world as a place enveloped in glory, worthy of the response of reverence for its mystery. He condemns the rationalizing spirit which is so concerned to intellectualize everything that it misses the dimension of holiness, and fails to see the presence of being itself, even in a garden slug.

A mind too active is no mind at all;
The deep eye sees the shimmer on the stone . . .²

Roethke has no wish to moralize on what the deep eye sees: his interest is not in any message that things of creation embody, but just that they *are*. He wants us to see things – and people. He concludes that a poetry which comes from seeing and calls upon the 'lovely

diminutives' of the world is a poetry which calls upon God.

I have dwelt at some length on this practice of contemplation, because it seems to me so apt for our stage in life, where we have more time to be still, where we are not tied necessarily any more to a routine of public prayer, and where we are being led more and more to that Beatific Vision we desire. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God', or as St John put it, we are simply to look forward 'to see him as he is'.

A sensitive area in looking forward to retirement is the necessary adjustment in the relationship with our husbands or wives. Of course, every relationship is different, and there will be many and various ways of coming to terms with the almost inevitable tensions, and making that adjustment. To me, the essential factor is the necessary space we give to our partners in which they can quite freely be themselves. When parish visiting I have often heard a wife who is facing her husband's retirement, expressing an honest fear: 'I don't want him under my feet in the kitchen all day long'. Just as in marriage, too much togetherness can sow seeds of disaster and impoverish rather than deepen the relationship, so being forced together physically can breed irritability and a weakening of the relationship. Retirement can bring to the surface tensions in the relationship which have remained latent for years. There is an apocryphal story about a couple on their Golden Wedding day, sitting looking at the sunset after all their guests had departed from the celebration party. 'You know', says the husband to the wife, 'I'm proud of you.' 'Speak up', replies his wife, 'you know I'm deaf.' 'I'm proud of you', repeats the husband. 'And I'm tired of you', came the quick response, 'so that makes two of us.' We have spoken of the loss of status in the clergyman's role. That can be true also of his wife, especially if she has taken a very active part in parish life, and been something of a leader. A further difficulty arises when the move from the parsonage house to the much smaller retirement home means much less space, and even closer togetherness. There has to be a rhythm of aloneness and togetherness if the relationship is to flourish and remain fruitful. Here, surely, an annual retreat not made together, the pursuit of a hobby which is only appropriate to one of the partners and may involve some time away from each other, can be invaluable.

A word about health may not be out of place. Clearly, unless we are extremely fortunate, we are going to suffer increasing physical difficulties, or, as a friend of mine put it rather colourfully, 'I find that little wheels keep dropping off the machine all the time'. The result is that unless we are careful, we can become obsessed with our physical symptoms. Put two or three retired people together, and you invariably find the conversation swamped by a prolific exchange of medical terminology. Obsession about food can be equally prevalent. We can

¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of God* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 84.

² Theodore Roethke, *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (Faber & Faber), 244.

begin to analyse every item to determine its precise effect on our health and happiness. To counteract this over-emphasis, we simply need a sense of proportion, watchfulness and sensible eating, exercise which doesn't turn into an obsession, and stress on the positive – again, within the limits which increasing age and physical disability impose. (As a doctor recently put it, 'We know now that ninety-five per cent of 65 year-olds can walk half-a-mile, climb a flight of stairs and need no help with the ordinary chores of life'.)

Increasingly, retirement gives us the opportunity to draw together in one coherent whole the various threads and experiences of our lives. There is an old adage which says that life must be lived forwards, but can only be understood backwards. The way we see the past is constantly changing. When we are in the middle of an experience, we interpret it against the experience we have had in life up to that moment. Perhaps twenty years later that perception will change because we have a much wider horizon against which to interpret it. Retirement, then, the last stage of our lives, is the best time of all to interpret the past and give it coherence. A retired clergyman, John Browne, has spent time in his retirement writing poetry, and here is the first verse of his poem called 'Retirement', in which he gives this creating of coherence a high priority.

I need more time to think before I die
about the glimpses of reality
given, unheeded, half-forgotten, swamped
by time-demanding duties, time to see
connections and relationships between
truth given and truth learnt;
time to learn again
the things I have so often taught.

And all this makes the poet conscious, when he looks back over his life, of a particular precious gift, which he hopes will outlast all others.

Whatever time may bring there yet remains
good reason to be thankful for time past.
Of all the faculties which must, in time, be lost
God grant that thankfulness may be the last.³

Not long ago, I was invited to speak to a Pre-Retirement Conference, but warned that any reference to dying and death would not be welcome. Needless to say, I declined the invitation. How can you treat with any degree of meaning, the last stage of life without also looking at preparation for death? However, in my experience, the church itself is not guilt-free in this

respect. My own simple research amongst adult Christian students suggests that the subject of dying and the process of dying is hardly ever explored in Christian teaching and preaching. And when it is explored, it is nearly always treated simply as a prelude to the realization of the hope of eternal life, rather than having significance in itself for the living of life on this earth. We can so concentrate on that hope that we ignore the reality of dying: the fear of dying, the process of dying and the meaning of death.

Involvement with terminal-care patients and bereavements make it less likely that we ourselves will ignore the subject, but perhaps we all need reminding of the positive aspect of coming close to the boundary of life. Paradoxically, those who have been brought close to it often begin to notice and appreciate people and things in a way they have never done before. For myself, having experienced near-death in a burning aircraft at the age of 21, and a sudden heart-attack 38 years later, I have generally found throughout life that every new day is a bonus. There is abundant evidence from terminal-care patients to show that a richer quality of life emerges as it is looked at from the perspective of death. (That is one reason why the death-denying culture in which we have lived for so long is so destructive.) Who can forget the last moving television interview that Dennis Potter gave shortly before he died, when he spoke of the 'nowness' of everything, looked at from the perspective of death? He looks at the apple blossom in his garden, and sees it as the 'whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there ever could be...'⁴

We live till the moment we die, as the Hospice Movement has always insisted. So often retirement, in its last stages, can become a sort of sad and wistful waiting for death. A proper theology of day-to-day living, as I have tentatively indicated, can save us from that fate. And the Christian hope, whilst not ignoring or softening the experience of dying, will always sustain us.

Let John Donne in one of his 'Meditations', have the last word: 'when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language... God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves together for that library where every book shall lie open to one another...'

³ *Harden not your hearts*, a sequence of poems by John Browne (obtainable from the author at 40, Slack Top, Heptonstall, Hebden Bridge, W. Yorks HX7 7HA priced £2, including postage), 23. John Browne has very kindly given permission for the quotation.

⁴ Dennis Potter, *Seeing the Blossom* (Faber & Faber, 1994), 5.