

HOW OLD IS OLD?

Pastor Rob Schubert

When I was a child, teenagers looked so old and mature. When I was a teenager, thirty seemed ancient. At thirty something, fifty was over the hill. I have come to the conclusion that old is about fifteen years older than your present age! Children love getting older. For a child, being older means growing up, being able to do more things, and be more independent. Aging is an exciting journey to be embraced.

Teenagers look forward to being older, too. It means getting a driver's license, leaving school, reaching their goals and building a life of their own. Getting older means more opportunities.

But something happens along the way somewhere, and birthdays don't have the same magic anymore.

We don't look forward to being older in quite the same way.

Maybe that's because there comes a time in life when getting older doesn't represent gaining new strength and new skills.

The speakers on the TV and car radio seem to lose volume and clarity over the years.

Our arms seem to grow shorter when we read the paper.

100 metres is a lot longer than it used to be.

And we see our doctors so often, we wonder if we should invite them for Christmas drinks.

There comes a time in life, when aging means we start to lose the strength and abilities that we once had. We can experience age as loss, and grieve for our youth.

Aging is seen as a problem.

It doesn't help that there are stories out there expressing concern about our aging population. We are told that an aging population puts pressure on health care and other social services, and we are told that the government won't be able to afford to provide a pension in years to come.

Not only do we as individuals view aging as a loss, our whole society sees too many older people as a loss.

In a purely economic sense, older people are non productive units, who need to be looked after by the productive members of society. Too many older people in our society are a problem and threaten our affluence.

This attitude treats older people as useless and burdensome.

We live in a culture that idolizes youth. Our young, fit football stars are paid huge sums of money. Youth is celebrated in the fashion industry and the entertainment industry. In our work life and in business, young people have an advantage. In almost every aspect of life, youth is valued, age is to be avoided.

Many people spend huge amounts of money on products and procedures - from face creams to cosmetic surgery to hair loss treatments - all in an effort to stave off the enemy of age.

Age becomes something ugly, an unwelcome visitor to be avoided.

But the Bible has a different view of aging.

'The glory of the young is their strength; the grey hair of experience is the splendour of the old.'

Proverbs 20:29

Aging brings with it something that youth doesn't possess. Experience. Grey hair is something to be embraced as a symbol of experience. Better not tell the hair colouring companies that. It could damage sales!!

'I will be your God throughout your lifetime — until your hair is white with age. I made you, and I will care for you. I will carry you along and save you.'

Isaiah 46:4

So aging for Christians is seen as adding something to human life rather than taking something away.

God's promises last for a lifetime. God doesn't stop being God when we get old. Our worth to God is not tied up in what we can do, or how well we can see or hear, or how strong we are.

God values us no matter how old or young we are — and he's promised to stick by us, through the whole of our lives.

In the Bible, there's a great expression for what it means to get old. "Full of years". The Bible tells us that when people like Abraham, Isaac, David and Job died, they were "full of years". I love that expression. It's as if we as human beings are vessels to be filled with years and life experience, and when the cup is full, there is something to be thankful for and celebrate. It's an attitude that acknowledges the blessing of age, and celebrates the gains of old age.

There is something beautiful about aging. There is something about being older and collecting life experiences that has its own grandeur. It's like the great Karri trees in the forests of Western Australia, or the Bunya pines in Queensland. As a small tree they are pleasant, but their true splendour and beauty is seen in their old age. They impress us with not only their size, but their ability to survive droughts, floods, fires and lightning.

Last year's vintage of Grange Hermitage is a valuable bottle of red wine, but carefully cellared its true value will only be appreciated in years to come. I have never tasted a 100 year old port, but those who have, tell me that there is a complexity in the wine that isn't there in a young wine. Age and age alone brings complexity, maturity and completeness.

Shouldn't we value the great Bunya pines, and rare and precious wine among us?

Could it be that we are missing one of the greatest opportunities available when we don't get to know the elderly and associate with them. All too soon these towering pillars of faith and wisdom will pass from our midst and the loss will be tremendous.

Age doesn't mean that people become useless. You might be surprised by the wit and humour of older people, and their ability to bring calmness and wisdom to tough situations.

There was an older man in my church when I was growing up. He was a bachelor. I thought he was about a hundred, but in reality he was probably about 70. Every week at church he would shake my hand, and ask me about what I was learning at school, or the hobbies I had, or a trip that I had been on with my family. He would listen, and contribute gently to the conversation. I can't remember anything that he specifically said to me, but I do remember feeling encouraged by him, and having a sense that he understood me, cared about me and nothing would faze him.

Younger people can learn a lot from older people. I don't mean trite advice, or stale proverbs. I mean real lessons on how to live well, love well and value the gifts we have.

Growing old is not a disease, or a failure.

Even though life can get more difficult as we get older, it's a privilege allowed by God, and a gift to those around us. It's an opportunity to be useful and productive a little longer, in a way that younger people can't be.

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