

## Advent Sunday 2014 Evensong – Reflections on Being Sixty

Psalm 25, Isaiah 1 vv 1-20 p685, Matthew 21 vv 1-13 p988

Sixty today! It hardly seems possible. I don't feel very different except for the odd twinge in my right knee. I have lived sixty years and nearly half of them as Rector of Cuxton and Halling and living in Cuxton Rectory. I must like it here! What strikes me, as I suppose it must strike all old people, is the paradox, that, on the one hand, it all seems to have gone so quickly, but that, on the other hand, childhood and youth seem so long ago. It was a different world back then. *Lord, thou hast been our refuge: from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made: thou art God from everlasting, and world without end.*

In recent years I have come to appreciate to some extent, what I did not take in at the time, that, when I was a child in the early fifties, the War was still very fresh in the memories of most people. Indeed many of the adults around at that time had been through both world wars and the poverty of the years in between. I didn't give them enough respect. Of course the young never do fully appreciate their elders until it is too late, and, as my grandfather used to say, *it's no use telling 'em*. By the time they've worked it out, they'll be old themselves! *O remember not the sins and offences of my youth: but according to thy mercy think thou upon me, O Lord, for thy goodness.*

I remember being fascinated that the streetlamps in my grandmother's road were powered by gas. Actually, we didn't have streetlamps at all in Betsham where we lived, only the moon and the stars. Of course, on the one hand, you're better off with streetlights being able to see where you're going at night, but, on the other hand, you become to that extent divorced from nature and the brightness of artificial light dims the beauty of the heavenly bodies. *For I will consider thy heavens, even the works of thy fingers: the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained. What is man, that thou art mindful of him: and the son of man, that thou visitest him?*

Although we lived in a new bungalow, the mod cons were only just coming in for ordinary people in the fifties and sixties. I remember the excitement of the arrival of a spin drier to replace the wringer, a 'fridge to prevent the milk and the meat going off, a vacuum cleaner to make cleaning the carpets less of a chore and a twin tub washing machine which subsumed and simplified the functions of both the copper and the drier. When we moved to Wigmore, we even had a car and a telephone in the house, not just in a red kiosk down the road. Whatever would we find to do with all the time we would save with all these gadgets and appliances? Yet, a few days ago, a report in the "Times" suggested that we now no longer have time for the most important of all. *The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider.*

Speaking of cars, we were talking this week about how much longer it took to get anywhere before the motorways were built (from 1959 onwards I think). It's possible now to get to places and back in a day which not so long ago would have been a major trek. Before the M2 was opened, a daytrip to Margate included hours in traffic jams through the Medway towns and Sittingbourne. On the other hand, the motorways bypass everywhere. You don't actually visit the places on the way and this can be a metaphor for a too rushed life. We're in such a hurry to get from A to Z that we never get to appreciate B, C, D and through the

alphabet to Y. You can get to Ashford without going through Wye! *Be still then, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, and I will be exalted in the earth.*

It isn't only the physical universe which has altered over the last six decades. Our laws have changed so that what was once illegal is now not only permitted but celebrated, and liberties which used to be regarded as the inalienable rights of free people are now regulated or forbidden. I often complain about this along the lines that, whereas I have no wish to commit suicide or practise witchcraft, which were against the law in my youth and are now no longer prohibited, I would quite like to take Max on the beach, which is now forbidden in many seaside towns, but would have been an unquestioned freedom when I was a child. Of course in many ways, the law is much improved on what it was half a century ago – not least in the abolition of corporal and capital punishment. The fact that human laws can change, however, makes the point that no human law is perfect. If it were perfect, it would never need to change. Only God's Law is perfect – God's Law as revealed in Holy Scripture and fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ - and it is by God's Law that we must measure all human law-making and law enforcement. *The law of the Lord is an undefiled law, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, and giveth wisdom unto the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, and rejoice the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, and giveth light unto the eyes.*

Whilst on the subject of God's Law, I should be failing in my duty, as a minister in the Church of England, if I failed to celebrate the fact that we do not have to justify ourselves by works of the Law, by being good. Jesus justifies us by grace through faith and makes us fit to stand in His presence. Good people obey the Ten Commandments not for fear of the consequences of disobedience, but simply because they are good people. *For sin shall not have the dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.*

It's not only the law which has changed in sixty years, but also customs and fashions. Who would have thought fifty years ago that a time would come when grown men would be able to get away with wearing shorts in public? And no tie! Other more important conventions have changed – some for the better (like being more careful not to use offensive language about and to other people), some perhaps for the worse. I am not ashamed to say that I was still mildly offended last week when someone, conducting a telephone survey, having established that I wasn't married, went on to ask me if I had any children. Like the law, like everything important, changing customs and fashions can only be measured by the standard which Jesus sets. It is what we are that matters, more than what we do or say, because what we do or say depends on who we are. We are, I hope, Christians. *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.*

One convention which has changed for better or worse (generally I think better) is the use of Christian names. In this last week, junior doctors have been warned that allowing patients to call them by their first names could undermine the professional character of their relationships. I was in my teens when people started calling vicars by their Christian names.

(According to Anthony Trollope, Mrs Grantley called her husband *Archdeacon* even in bed.) I'm not sure quite where I stood in that social revolution. I was one of the last of my contemporaries to start calling our curate *Peter*. On the other hand, I ran into trouble when I first went to secondary school for telling one of the masters that I did not think he should call us boys by our surnames. If we were Christians, I argued, we should be known by our Christian names. I still object to *forenames* on official forms and often change it to Christian names and, if people ask me what my forenames are, I sometimes tell them that I only have two names, two Christian names, that is. It is a serious point, however, that we Christians bear the Name of Christ and that, therefore, we live accordingly. *Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall no more go out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name.*

When I left school, as many of you know, I thought I would become a doctor and did two years at medical school. When I changed to training for the priesthood, I used to joke that, in the end, there comes a time when the doctors can do no more for you, but all of us will always need what the Church has to offer, eternal life through the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ whom he hath sent. It seems like everyday on the radio there's some group of campaigners or, worse still, experts demanding new laws to force everyone to eat celery or to wear cycle helmets, or is it that we are supposed to wear helmets while we eat up our salad? My risk assessment is that a caterpillar on the lettuce might metamorphose into a butterfly and inflict a nasty injury as it attempts to flutter by you on its way to the great outdoors. Seriously, these campaigners, will tell you that adopting their particular nostrums will save so many preventable deaths each year. Now, that is nonsense. Wearing helmets and eating rabbit food might well postpone our deaths, but there is no such thing as a preventable death. We shall all die and stand before the Judgment Seat of God to give account for our lives. To pretend otherwise is foolishness and not to think about it isn't much more sensible, although it does account for the skewed priorities of so many people. *Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither rust nor moth doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.*

Finally, and most importantly, in giving thanks for my life, are the people. Thank you, friends and family, who are able to be with me to celebrate today. Thank you too, Father, for all the many people who care for me and have cared for me over these last sixty years, among them many whom we love but see no longer, *those who*, in the words of Eric Milner White which we shall hear at the Nine Lessons and Carols service, *rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which no man can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom, in this Lord Jesus, we for evermore are one.* At a time of family bereavement, the Archdeacon of Rochester reminded me that I now have two more among the communion of saints in heaven. God is love and love is His gift to us. Thank God for human love. *For the joy of human love, brother, sister, parent, child, friends on earth and friends above, for all gentle thoughts and mild: Lord of all, to thee we raise, this our sacrifice of praise. Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and*

*finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

*Then sent Jesus two disciples.* We are all called by Christ. We are all called to be His disciples. We are all called to walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called. We are all called to do the good works which He has prepared for us to walk in. I've talked about the many changes I have seen during my sixty years on earth and I have tried to make the point that everything that happens on earth and how we respond to what happens have to be seen in the light of eternity. The Cross of Jesus is *the measure and the pledge of love*. I've also remarked on how quickly these sixty years have gone and, as we get older, time seems to pass quicker and quicker. It's not something to worry about. Wednesday I remarked that I wish my body was still 24 and could still run marathons, but Thursday a lady about to celebrate her eighty somethingth birthday in a wheelchair told me she wished she was still sixty, which made me a little ashamed. But these are not things to get depressed about. The life God has given us here on earth is but a foretaste of what He has prepared in Heaven for those who love Him. A very Advent thought *for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed, for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed,*

Let me conclude by reading to you the BCP epistle for Advent Sunday, which says it all really.

*Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.*