

CHURCH TIMES

The way of
victory

MANY a lay person has begun a retreat or pilgrimage out of a sense of duty, perhaps to "support the Vicar," only to find that it becomes a delight. The effort he or she puts into the exercise reaps unexpected rewards, when it is time to return home. The experience has changed the individual in some way — brought refreshment, and perhaps profoundly altered his or her perspective. But there is also a risk that a change of circumstances, break from routine, or opportunity for introspection may precipitate an emotional or spiritual crisis. All is not necessarily lost. Another Christian is likely then or afterwards to be of help: listening, comforting, advising, perhaps (if a priest) giving absolution. The long-term outcome may well be positive, even if it is not easy to foresee at the time.

Holy Week and Easter can play a similar part in the spiritual life. There is a true sense in which there is no such thing as a stay-at-home Christian. Housebound communicants also embrace the journey through Holy Week to Easter, along the way of sorrows to the empty tomb, and the glad recognition of the Risen Lord which came to St Mary Magdalene in the garden. None of the faithful is left exactly where they were before. For some, it will be a painful journey, because of the exposure of divided loyalties, or because the liturgical observances can revive memories of past times of stress or bereavement. But revisiting these can also be a way to healing and peace of mind, as the Christian considers them under the light of the Lord's compassion, and in the fellowship of his Church.

Palm Sunday is not, therefore, a folk-religion festival featuring a donkey, but the hinge in Passivité between the acclamation of our Lord by the crowd and the rejection of his mission which led to the cross. As the Passion is read or sung, the tone is set for the week's meditations, which will be illuminated briefly by the subdued joy of Maundy Thursday, before the bitterness of Good Friday and the odd emptiness of Holy Saturday.

The old rite for blessing the palms, attributing to the crowd foreknowledge of a later faith, said: "That happy multitude understood that even then this was being prefigured: namely, that our Redeemer, compassionate our human miseries, was about to battle with the Prince of Death, and, by dying, to triumph. And hence that crowd dutifully ministered such things as should signify in him both triumphant victory and abundant mercy."

Churchill offends Natal

The Church Times.
April 6th, 1906.

[The Colonial Secretary, Lord Elgin, Winston Churchill's superior, had intervened to postpone the execution of 12 natives for a double murder in Natal, a self-governing colony where this incident was part of a continuing native rebellion, later quelled. The colonial government had resigned in protest at interference by the imperial government. Lord Elgin had given way on 30 March, and the executions had taken place on 2 April.]

SOUTH AFRICA is proverbially disapproving to reputations. In its dealings with the Natal question the Government has suffered loss of prestige. It unfortunately is represented in the House of Commons by a reckless spokesman, who, a member of the Labour party, thinks, ought to be "muzzled". Mr Winston Churchill

certainly has a way of saying the wrong thing on every possible occasion, with a curious disregard for the consequences of a life-word. It will be a long time before his utterances are forgotten in the history of Natal, neither will the ties which bind the Empire together be drawn closer by the interference of the Home Government with the powers of a self-governing Colony. And the worst of it is that His Majesty's Ministers, without the smallest warrant, acted upon the assumption that the responsible authorities in Natal are indifferent to the welfare of human life, as though their moral standard was lower than that of their fellow-subjects in England. It is true that they have succeeded in averting a crisis, but it was only by executing an ignominious climb-down, by which, however, they have seriously offended a considerable group of their supporters, and nowhere have increased the respect in which they are held.

IT'S OUR NEW
YOUTH LEADER.The Church's forgotten
power-house: old people

Churches are failing to tap into the potential of older members of the congregation, argues James Woodward

TWO REPORTS last week highlighted the question of care for older people. The first, *Living Well in Later Life* (www.dh.gov.uk) told of how there is still a lack of consultation with older people when planning services, and a lack of respect in the way they are treated in hospital. For example, staff often eat meals away before they can be eaten, and discharge older people to free their beds, without making suitable arrangements.

In the second report, the King's Fund made another reasoned plea for society to fund personal care for older people (www.kingsfund.org.uk).

These findings should attract our attention, if only for the selfish reason that more of us are falling into this category. The fraction of the population aged above 55 will reach one quarter by 2051. But we should also care because each of us is made in God's image, and should be valued at every stage.

It is therefore surprising that the Church fails to make older people a priority; it disempowers them and often deprives them of an opportunity to participate as children of God. Too many of us in the Church apologise for our congregation with words such as "I am afraid we are all elderly here."

We ought to see those in their second half of life as our natural spiritual constituency: people who have travelled further in life, and have become more open to God. We should celebrate our older members, not be ashamed of them.

Churches should listen more imaginatively to older people's experience, and be ready to learn from them. Older people can provide a longer perspective in a time of change. They know about making mistakes, and understand human nature, work, and faith.

We need to find ways of valuing age, and enabling older people to find a voice. The parish magazine can give an opportunity to feature the faith stories and life experiences of older parishioners. During the sermon slot, the vicar could invite older members of the congregation to give their testimony, perhaps through an interview-style dialogue.

We should ensure that older people are offered new experiences rather than assuming that they always prefer the status quo. Older people are not uniform, and many of them are as open to new things as anybody else. For example, older parishioners in Smethwick run two

groups: one arranges trips out, providing the only opportunity some individuals have for getting out of town with others; another meets weekly for tea, games, gentle exercise, and informal support. Many older women, particularly widows, have found this a transforming experience, as they make new friends and enjoy new pastimes.

Older people often appreciate the witness that children bring. Junior churches or Sunday schools can invite older members to contribute to teaching sessions. Older people can get involved in activities such as nativity plays. I once saw a volunteer in a wheelchair, and the children enjoying the aged wise men.

Churches must recognise the wide range of abilities and potential to be found among older members. Reflect on how often a funeral address reveals an older person of talent, who was not recognised as such either by the vicar or congregation. We need to see the person and the possibility beyond her greyness. A person does not have to be productive to be useful.

IN THEIR pastoral care, churches need to be aware of the effects of physical and mental diminution on their older members, and help them to learn to cope with the associated feelings of loss. Our constant emphasis on doing rather than being can devalue the latter.

We need to draw on older people as a prayer resource — an operative ministry of intercession that can surround a place with care. This ministry could be exercised from home and a network developed that connects people and situations across the worshiping community.

If older people become too frail to attend Sunday worship, we need to note their absence, and offer support. There might be a lay person who could have a pastoral watch over older members. We also need to explore ideas of worship at different times and places. Why do many churches offer BCP services only at 8 a.m., and evensong after dark in winter?

"Too many of us apologise: 'I am afraid we are all elderly here'"

Churches should be conscious that older people are themselves carers of spouses, parents, other elderly friends, or grandchildren. We need to find ways of encouraging them in this task of caring. Offers of help can give carers time, while a formal support group that listens to them can help to relieve pressures. We don't always think of older carers when we talk of our "family church". Family is at all stages of the life cycle. We should also remember older carers in Sunday intercessions.

As Peter Speck said (Comment, 3 March), churches should recognise that older people feel challenged in their beliefs as they cope with losses, and can be looking for help to come to terms with past experiences. We need to respond to these questions rather than change the subject: this is important theological work.

The Church also needs to be prepared to give time to the harvesting of memories as a resource for bringing souls to Christ. Some older people are natural evangelists. They have time for people and for spiritual friendship. Their lives often reflect many of the virtues of discipleship: empathy, patience, and compassion. These are attractive resources for mission. There has been an eight-fold growth in our congregation among the over-55s here in Temple Balsall.

Churches should act as beacons of intergenerational activity, so that the young may learn from the old, and vice versa, and that neither is seen as more important than the other. I am not suggesting that the Church sack all youth workers, and begin to employ older people workers, but nearly all dioceses have posts for youth and older people workers, but few have them for older people.

We should work to build all-age communities, where older people are respected part of the body of Christ. To do this, we must combat some of the fears that surround ageing. We must also exercise spiritual imagination to the root out ageism.

Older people are an overlooked minority who deserve our energy. They are our natural spiritual constituency — let us stop apologising for them.

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