

Prayer and Older Pilgrims

I use the phrase older pilgrims because I've led an older pilgrims' workshop for the last thirteen years for 70 – 80+ year olds on faith and life issues. They emphasise "we're still pilgrims on a journey". In other words, our faith is active, we're not marking time waiting for death to come and we have not discovered all there is to learn about the will and way of God, we're still learning and questioning. As a supernumary, better, I believe, an active retired Methodist minister, in my eighties, I affirm the older pilgrims' approach to life and faith. In this context prayer is an ongoing conversation with God. One older pilgrim speaks of how prayer provided the space and opportunity to reflect quietly when loved ones were facing death. As a result he shared his concern with God, not expecting an immediate intervention to save the loved one, but being strengthened as a result of time spent with one who understands and cares. Another older pilgrim argues with God during her daily life and struggling with doubt and continuing questions. She feels able, like the Psalmists, to share her anger and question 'Why?' when faced with racism. Yet another older pilgrim believes that the purpose of prayer is to calm one down and get things in perspective. It's not to inform God or persuade God to act but rather to have a calming space to get things in perspective and be aware of one who listens and cares.

Prayer, we see from these older pilgrims' experience, understanding and practice, in essence means opening yourself up to God, to be guided and prepared and to be ready to live and act.

Reflection is a good word to apply to an opportunity for prayer. It requires time, space and an effort of will to keep one's attention on what is important. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor and martyr at the hands of the Nazis in the Second World War, writes in his book *Meditating on The Word*: "Do not pray in general, then, but in particular for the people who are on your mind" (1) It is too easy to be discursive and lack focused effort in prayer, if we are not careful. In our older pilgrims' workshop we begin and end with reflective prayer concentrating on the theme for the morning's workshop. Together we are engaged in an act of faith and life before God. Many years ago, when we still used to have epilogues on TV, I remember The Rev Edward Rogers, then General Secretary of The Christian Citizenship Department, presenting an epilogue in World Refugee Week. He ended by saying that if our hearts and concern had been targeted on the needs of these people so like me you will have been praying for them. This, for me, gets to the heart of prayer, which is connecting with God, wherever one is. We don't need a church or special format of words – just to be natural in our approach to God. Older people, in my experience, can often be more open and responsive, reflective towards God in their own homes, in hospital, residential homes etc. They show a continuing concern for the issues of faith and its application to the questions and challenges of everyday life, because they have been facing them across the years and had to cope with the practicalities of dealing with

them. Of course, not all older people fall into this category. We are no more homogenous than any other generation in the community for we have our share of moaners and groaners, as well as brave, generous and adventurous spirits.

It is a matter of sadness to me that there is not more recognition of the resource older pilgrims represent with their life experience of faith and practice. We represent the larger part of congregations and church membership but there is no acknowledgement of this within our church, for in common with other denominations, there is no overall policy for ministry with and to older pilgrims, in spite of longevity. The church, rightly, has youth policies but our generation seems invisible. Now there's a subject for reflection and directed prayer. What about intergenerational work and enabling mutually shared experience between the generations? Yes, we have Messy Church and Godly Play but they lack the focused undergirding of serious reflection on our faith situation and life experience. How far do our churches acknowledge the need for focus on end of life issues, which is a real concern for many older pilgrims. We claim to be a community of hope but do not seem to engage in debate and discussion about the future hope which is a major feature of our faith. The whole issue of 'a dignified dying' is one which ought to be faced with honesty, attentive listening and debate within the church for it is a major concern arising from longevity.

Two sociologists, Berger & Luckmann in their book *The Social Construction of Reality* make the point that human beings from birth to death are *work in progress*. (2) This seems to me to accord with our Christian focus on followership and learnership of Jesus, and so we older pilgrims are still work in progress. It should give cause for reflection and hopefully for prayer and action.

(1) *Meditating on The Word*, Bonhoeffer, D., (1986), Cowley.

(2) *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger, P., & Luckmann, T., (1991), Penguin.

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