

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 12th September 2021

There was one message on the telephone answering machine when I returned home on Monday afternoon. I sat down to listen to it to see if it demanded my immediate attention.

“Good afternoon. This is the Cooperative Funeral Care in Prestwick. I am phoning to arrange a time for the interment of the ashes of Fraser Aitken. I wonder if you would kindly get back to me when you can.”

I played it again to make sure that I had heard correctly the first time.

Nipping myself, and wondering if there was something of which I should have been informed about my state of being, I started to laugh, and played it a third time.

That “news” was a bit more serious than the rumour that had been prevalent in Ayr the week before that Fraser Aitken was going around on a mobility scooter!

Now, I am fully cognisant that it does come to us all eventually, but I felt that, in the case, it was a tad premature.

It was Mark Twain, you remember, who said, “The report of my death was an exaggeration.”, and I take heart that through the years, countless people from all walks of life have been proclaimed deceased, when they were still far from their appointment with destiny.

Pope John Paul died and came back to life more times than Jesus, if we were to listen to the news bulletins.

And when the death of Lady Thatcher was about to be announced in some of the newspapers, it was discovered just in time, that it was Thatcher, the cat belonging to the Transport Minister, John Baird, who had passed on!

I'll bet God giggled too!

I am still here, though, as far as I am aware, and I am doing my best to continue that way.

My GP is also a dear friend, and between him and me there is a generation gap, but we get on famously. When I visit him in his surgery (and he is one of the old school who still actually insists on seeing patients face to face!), he asks all sorts of pertinent questions.

“Have you any trouble sleeping, Fraser?”

“Well, Dr, I don't have any trouble in the mornings. I usually have a nap before lunch. And I have good nap watching the Six O'clock News every evening, and I mostly fall asleep reading the paper about supper time!”

“How much exercise are you getting?”

“I do manage to get up in the morning and drag myself to the kitchen to prepare breakfast, and I do get to the table for lunch and dinner. I get a good workout walking on Prestwick Prom most days.”

He was underwhelmed, I think.

If we are going to grow old gracefully, it is paramount that we retain our sense of humour with the passing years, laughing at jokes along the lines of “You know you are getting older when your idea of a good time is turning the electric blanket up to high!”.

Yes, my own mortality keeps whacking me on the nose. I am not so agile in bending down to pick something up that I have dropped; going upstairs I am not particularly nimble; my memory sometimes lets me down; I don't have the stamina or the energy I once had.

The late Revd Professor William Barclay of Glasgow University was once asked what he was going to do when age forced retirement from his academic duties. “What am going to do?” he asked. “I am going to live till I die.” And for him that meant preaching and writing and counselling and comforting others.

And that grand old man of the Kirk, a former Moderator of the General Assembly, the Very Revd Dr Archie Craig, said in his 85th year, “I am so busy these days; you see, I am preparing for my finals!”

I have taken to retirement like a duck to water, but I know of many others for whom retirement is hell. They don't know what to do. They are all at sea.

However, after having lived in large Manses for forty years, I love living in my wee house with its secluded and attractive garden; I so enjoy having the time to read more; socialising frequently with family and friends is wonderful (without looking at my watch); I have been investigating the family tree; I look forward to making new friends in church and community, and when this Pandemic is behind us, I have plans for all sorts of things – using my bus pass for days out in Glasgow and lunch at Rogano's; a visit next June to the Passion Play at Oberammergau (postponed from 2020); and a trip to Bavaria, stopping off at Vienna en route!

The Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, urged his father,

“Do not go gentle into that good night,

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.”

To be frank, raging doesn't really accomplish anything anyway. Except burnout.

Age is a degenerative disease. Ageing is a skill we all need to learn. Because more and more of us are doing it. I heard on the radio a couple of years ago that the town of Ayr has the highest proportion of over 55's in Scotland – and I was one of them!

And, of course, the Government is running scared of us because they know that us “oldies” could suck the economy dry with our demands for pension and health provisions.

Yes, I realise that I am at the beginning of the last third of my life. The actuarial tables tell me that I have a good chance of living to my mid 80s if I keep taking the tablets.

I have heard many senior citizens say, “As long as I have my health...”. Well, that is only partially true, for you can have all the parts ticking away wonderfully like a finely tuned BMW, but if that car has no one in it, and no place to go, it is really just a well-polished pile of junk.

I have met several healthy seniors with nothing important to do, and nobody to do it with, who are some of the most miserable and cranky old bores you would ever have the displeasure of meeting!

When all is said and done, however, that telephone from the Cooperative was a bit previous, I feel!

A premature obituary led, in a very roundabout way, to one of our greatest celebrations of human achievement.

When Alfred Nobel’s brother, Ludwig, died, newspapers mistakenly ran his own obituary instead, calling the dynamite inventor, “the merchant of death”, who had grown rich by developing new ways to “mutilate and kill.” Alfred Nobel was shocked by this description and that is what persuaded him to devote his fortune to charity. Nobel became so obsessed with his posthumous reputation that he rewrote his last will, and the Nobel Prizes came into being, being handed out in 1901 for the first time, and to this day the awards are still handed out every December 10th, the true anniversary of his death.

Nobel listed five awards in his will, (a sixth, for economics, was added in 1968). Three were for the greatest discoveries or inventions in the fields of physics, chemistry and medicine, while a fourth was devoted to the author of the “most outstanding work” of literature. The fifth award, “The Peace Prize”, was designated for “the person who shall have done the most for fraternity between the nations and the abolition or reduction of standing armies and the formation and

spreading of peace congresses.” All financed from the vast majority of his estate – worth around £250 million today.

There is indeed nothing like death to focus your living!

Right, I am away to phone the Cooperative to see about those ashes!

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister