

When I was leaving my first parish to be inducted into the next one, a wise old priest friend wrote with his good wishes saying that he found chapter four of St Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians "a great comfort" and so it has been to me, for it starts: "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart". In this chapter, Paul is looking back on his ministry with nostalgia and the onslaught of old age, as did Job for different reasons – and as I will next week! In the verse following today's second reading (4.16) Paul says again: "we do not lose heart! Though our outward humanity is in decay, yet day-by-day we are inwardly renewed.

Some people spend thousands of pounds on cosmetic surgery to look young and attractive: though that is not necessary in my case! But we cannot stop the uncomfortable reminders that we are getting older: the print appearing smaller; the stairs getting steeper; the policemen seeming younger. Paul was aware that his physical and mental powers were declining when he wrote "in this present body we do indeed groan". But he provides an answer to the question 'What is the Christian way of dealing with the ageing process?': and my text gives the first clue - do not lose heart!

There are the outward and the inward situations. Paul reminds us that "he who raised the Lord Jesus to life will with Jesus raise us too". The Easter event guarantees us a life that is permanent. It ensures that truth and love endure. Coupled with that is the Easter principle of life becoming, through death, death to self. The inward part is renewed daily as we say 'Yes' to God ever more deeply, and surrender ourselves ever more completely. The inner 'me' does not decay. A closer and closer walk with God ensures that we stay inwardly young; having a spiritual beauty and attractiveness that does not wither. It has been said that in heaven there are no old people.

Second, there is the seen and the unseen. Dorothy L. Sayers, in her series of plays called "The Man born to be King", has a scene where Lazarus is asked what it is was like to be dead. Lazarus replies: "This life is the weaving at the back of the loom. All you see is the crossing of the threads. In that life you go round to the front and see the wonder of the pattern". We are all tempted to identify the real with the material: the things we can touch, taste, see and handle. St Paul invites us to have our eyes fixed on the unseen, for there we shall find the real. What does this mean? Here are just a few examples. A Beethoven symphony or a Strauss waltz is far more than just collections of notes played by instruments. Poetry is much more than a sequence of words and sentences in prose. A kiss is more than flesh touching flesh. We know that deep personal relationships have an intangible quality that is truly real. Similarly the bread and wine of the Holy Communion service have an unseen significance. They all point beyond themselves. Love, truth, and beauty, are weaving a pattern which one day we shall go round the front to see. Then it will be like seeing the heavens shot through with stars.

Third, there is the temporal and the eternal. Growing old faces us with finitude; with the unfulfilled and with what we are, rather than with what we do or have. But our society is geared more to

having and doing, than being and becoming. The assumptions are - making money, acquiring goods, increasing status, and so on. Busyness becomes an end in itself, until our bodies can take no more and they develop ulcers and have coronaries. Like buildings, they begin to crumble and decay. Age does wither. But, says Paul, we have a building that is eternal; the qualities of character, right attitudes and values, which make certain that we do not become extinct. A tourist visiting the leper colony farm run by our church in Malaya years ago saw a missionary nurse tending to the suppurating sores of the leprosy patients. It looked very repulsive and it prompted the tourist to say: "I wouldn't do that if they paid me ten thousand pounds". To which the nurse replied: "No, neither would I". Those two attitudes display the difference between the outward and the inward; between the seen and the unseen; and between the temporal and the eternal. Such service not only brought healing to the leprosy patient, it was enriching for the nurse. It was an experience age could not wither, and brought daily renewal. Though I had a certain amount of sympathy for the tourist for I vividly remember the first time I shook hands with a leper there. No wonder Paul says 'we do not lose heart'! And neither do I for my glass is always half full, never half empty – unless you are paying!

This applies to the dilemma facing every preacher trying to speak helpfully to a congregation whose ages may range from 9 to 90. If we speak only at the factual level, we will fail. But if we speak at the spiritual level in faith, God can use our words to answer the congregation's individual needs; provided they respond by listening in faith. You all know the difference between factual and faith. It is a fact that I am speaking to you from this pulpit. It is only faith that makes me believe that you are listening! So whatever your age, please accept the love of God for each of you, in faith - and pray for all preachers, not only for me but particularly for your new priest who will be inducted here in a few weeks' time.