

IF YOU DIDN'T KNOW and had to guess, what would you say would be the most widely circulated magazine in the world? *Time* magazine, perhaps? Or maybe *National Geographic*? Reasonable guesses, but both wrong.

It is, in fact, AARP, a magazine of the American Association of Retired Persons. Their magazine is claimed to be the most widely circulated periodical in the world. The world is getting old; not just in Europe and the US, but in Asia too. And the ageing is speeding up, just as it seems to do in a person's individual life.

Of course, generally speaking, people don't like to age, and they often don't like to *admit* that they're ageing. The particular copy of AARP that I scanned happened to have Clint Eastwood on the front (by the time you read this he will be eighty!), but the editorial noted that many movie stars who have passed sixty decline to be AARP cover stars because they don't want Hollywood to be aware of their age. Facing the facts about our mortality and other limitations has never been easy, movie star or not.

There is a psalm about ageing which I find particularly moving: Psalm 71. In it David celebrates the fact that God has always been there for him—through the exuberance and the adventures of youth, on into adulthood, and now old age. There has never been a time when God wasn't there. Even when David wasn't aware of it—even when he was still in the womb (vv. 5,6)—God was with him. But now that David is old and approaching death, he needs and longs to feel the presence of God all the more.

Let's take a look at just two passages from the psalm: "Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth" (v. 9). If others are inclined to shun us as our faculties diminish and we are no longer at the centre of things as once we may have been, God will not do so. David, now acutely aware of his own limitations, pleads with God not to cast him off. This is an interesting metaphor and one worth dwelling on for the imagery it conjures up in English.

The expression 'to cast off' is used in knitting, for instance. You cast off when the end of a garment or a particular portion of it has been reached and there is no more knitting to be done. We also use the expression 'cast offs' for clothes that we

have spurned or that no longer fit. We don't want them anymore; they're no more use to us. But God will not do that with us in our old age, even if society does. He will be there *in* the weakness and *in* the pain. And, just to make sure, David pleads with Him to ensure He doesn't forget!

Let's take another passage from the psalm: "I will go in the strength of the Lord GOD: I will make mention of Thy righteousness, even of Thine only. O God, Thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared Thy wondrous works. Now also when I am old and greyheaded, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed Thy strength unto this generation, and Thy power to every one that is to come" (vv. 16-18).

By this point in his life David is running out of steam. He is no longer able to go in his own strength as once he may have. But this enables him all the more to do what he always should have done (and mostly did): to go in the strength of the Lord. It's very powerful to have these verses about *strength* in a psalm about ageing.

David also notes what he will talk about. He will not tell of his own exploits, of the prowess that once was his as he fought with lion and bear, slew hordes of Philistines, or marched triumphantly forth as king. His talk will not be about *himself*. Instead, he will "make mention of Thy righteousness, even of Thine only". A common characteristic of old people is that they like to reminisce. This is all well and good, but David's example here of reminiscing about *God* rather than about *himself* is superlative.

And even now, at whatever age he is as he pens this psalm, he still has a goal. What is it? It is that he may yet be able to show God's strength and power to this generation and to those that are to come. In his own days of human decline we can be sure that he did. He did it through his attitude and spirit as the frailties of humanity came upon him. Through the words recorded in this psalm David is still making known those attributes of God even today. And we can be sure that God will not leave his soul in the grave, but will raise him to newness of life, so that one day he may be able to speak again of the strength and power of God to the generation to come, in the Father's Kingdom.

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