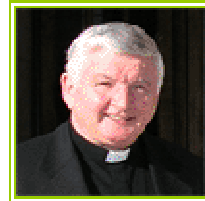


AGE-ism? your old men will have dreams and your young men will see visions ... Joel (Ch 2 vs. 28)

By Fr Michael Scanlon



How often have we heard the following words – oh they are too old, too young, too inexperienced, or the opposite? Somehow, they all come with “...isms”.

We live in a society where who or what we are is more important than who we are before God and the dignity we have whatever age we are.

Not too long ago, we used the phrase “from the cradle to be grave” - implying that society should care for the newly born just as much as for the elderly. Intended to be meant as a kind of social insurance policy it has now been overtaken by an attitude which bears little relation to Gospel values and is a view that serves to uphold those strong enough, healthy enough to maintain themselves with only a “nod on” to those who cannot.

We as Christian Catholics believe, or should, that at every moment of our existence, and yes, even before birth (“before I formed you in the womb – I knew you through and through; I called you to be mine” Jeremiah 1:5 and Psalm 139, 13-15) we are precious to the Father and of great worth. – A child in the womb gives womankind a dignity and beauty, a fulfilment, and also signs God as Creator and master of all.

“Suffer little children to come unto me” Matthew 19:14 – words spoken about the young – Jesus made it clear that the purity and innocence of children is to be valued and that anyone who negates this is unfit for the Kingdom – yet do we really give children a voice, a chance to be heard and listened to?

Throughout the Old Testament there are many examples of the very young being the advisors and leaders and indeed crucial to a forward view; we have David slaying Goliath, we have Daniel defending the truth of Susannah who was being judged guilty of adultery, his witness saved her. We have Naaman and the little girl who directed him to the prophet Elisha who “cured” his leprosy. We have Jesus himself teaching in the Temple. Jesus in choosing the Apostles also chose a youth – John was clearly quite young when Jesus called him ... and wasn’t Our Lady a very young girl at the time of conception?

At every age we see examples of vocation and call. There are many young martyrs and saints as there are older ones. – Each one has a special charism and call to serve; little Jacinta of Fatima, St. Imelda, St. Agnes, Dominic Savio, most of the Ugandan martyrs and the young martyrs of Korea to name but a few.

The opposite is true too – today we value productivity – so those who are not productive are seen as wasteful and not good as resources. – A man or woman beyond “three score years” are suddenly deemed unfit for purpose and those of three score years and ten – on the scrap heap.

Yet once again scripture would suggest that it is the wisdom of the elderly that is to be valued. The prophetess Anna and Simeon who so clearly manifest the dignity and wisdom of age – and recognise Jesus as the Messiah – are good examples.

A recent inquiry by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) that found substantial abuse and neglect of the elderly, even in their own homes, is a case in point. The Commission uncovered a catalogue of indifference, apparent cruelty and inhumane doings by care workers and health workers in hospitals, residential homes and private homes alike.

Obviously the small print from these reports could be argued to read differently but one abuse against the most vulnerable of our society, whatever their age, is one too many. In this case it is, without prejudice, almost certain that most of the carers/healthcare managers would be in the relatively younger age group. It is not unreasonable to question whether, if these persons were our parents, we would treat them the same.

Ecclesiasticus 3:1-17 articulates clear duties towards parents need not only apply to our parents but all the elderly. "Whoever respects the father expiates sins, whoever honours a mother is like someone amassing a fortune....whoever deserts a father is no better than a blasphemer, and whoever distresses a mother is accursed of the Lord".

As advances in medicine and technology continues and relative standard of living continues to grow, it is expected that even more of us shall be living longer. This is something that should be celebrated.

After all many prophets lived to a very very old age and were not rejected because of it, indeed welcomed because of it. Abraham led his people with many years on his back. (In fact, Sarah bore him a son Isaac – at what would be considered an age beyond childbearing). Moses too – father of his people, led with clarity, judgement and wisdom into old age.

And St. Peter certainly was older than the rest of the Apostles. Clearly the Apostles too had a "career change" at different ages – Matthew stopped being a tax collector – Andrew and James left their fishing nets behind – St. Paul his tent making. How many holy men and women have similarly left one place to go to another and serve in quite different ways and successfully as such? Mother Teresa of Calcutta left her community and founded The Missionaries of Charity in her mid forties. The founder of the Samaritans did so in his middle years – The Lord not only values us at any age (in fact, at all times in our lives), but also calls us at any age to serve Him as He chooses.

If we are a chosen people from the start, loved and valued, should this not spill over into the way we treat each other? Regardless of age we have a right to be clothed, fed, respected, listened to, our skills used and our creativity enabled. We have a right to be looked after and protected. Age should not be determining factor of our worth or usefulness.

Subtly we can be lacking in respect for those younger or older than ourselves and soon start to discriminate on the grounds of age. A young person gets up to speak and, even if we are kindly, do we really take notice and listen to what they are saying? Likewise an older lady speaks words of wisdom but her grey hair makes us smile benignly and ignore her comments simply because she is not "cool" or "with it" to use common parlance. We often reject truth from such people, simply because of the age of the deliverer of the message – they are deemed "past it", incapable of comment, lack experience or just "out of date". This is a curious phrase in any case as no one defines what the "date" should be.

This attitude of *disrespect* is now deeply ingrained in our culture and we must as Christians reject it! It must be rejected because it has fundamentally deep resonance.

If we dismiss people as categories we are more likely to be tempted to ignore them but, even more seriously, dispose of them. We now live in a “disposable society”. How easily we translate this from goods to people..... We only have to look at abortion, euthanasia (babies and others), the treatment and care of the elderly in homes, the pre-selection of those deemed fit to live or die (baby girls being seen as less fit than baby boys in India, girls left to die in China). The treatment of people with age related illnesses such as dementia, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and a general attitude to those impeded in any way and by age, as unfit to contribute, is prevalent and, unless we check our attitudes, it is more likely to grow.

We spend vast amounts on products which supposedly help us “look younger” or better – while many people are deprived of the very basic necessities of life. We spend much time in counselling in order to be able to adjust to the normal experiences of ageing instead of learning to accept others as they are and ourselves too. Of course it is not suggested that we should neglect our bodies but rather that we not indulge and get caught up with ourselves to the extent of having unrealistic expectations that would otherwise impede our ability to appropriately, fairly and equitably serve others with dignity, and ourselves too.

How can we forget the impact of Blessed Paul II as he dealt with his age and deterioration?

Haven’t we all got examples of people who are heroic in their determination to live and to live long; to live the life of Christ with great love for others and with their own dignity at the same time?

We are called to witness – and “Jesus took a little child and sat him on His knees” saying, “unless you become like a little one of these you cannot enter into the kingdom of Heaven”. Children have a great expectation of life and love. They accept more readily than we do and are “drawn into openness”. We must become open to all people and see beyond the simple and obvious. We should look at people with the eyes of receptivity and not category. We thus will be able to discern what is being said but without prejudice imposed by external factors of age or appearance.

We should consider and judge people’s ability to do any kind of work as key rather than their age. Likewise we might consider that their inabilities are a result of circumstances, and not their ‘uselessness’. After all, there are many ways of working and all have dignity (*Laborem Exercens*).

If the Lord had adjudged that there was a bar to certain activities then he would have made set times for them and death would be set at a particular point. Clearly he did not do so and we all live different lengths of time. Should we therefore not respect every person of any age as a being, essential to His plan, and accept them regardless of the circumstance of their age? Let us give Christ our earthly appearances, our garments, so that we may receive heavenly clothing.

(Fr Michael Scanlon – December 2011)