

Can Geriatrics Find Faith?

Genesis 12^{1-4a}; Psalm 121; Romans 4^{1-5,13-17}; John 3¹⁻¹⁷

How can anyone be born after having grown old? (John 3⁴)

My Grannie used to say, *Old age never comes alone!* by which she referred to the various medical complaints that added up to the terminal hypochondria that she suffered from: no-one was more surprised than she when she finally managed to die! You would hope that with old age would come wisdom, dignity and serenity. That is not always the case. Old people can be amongst the rudest of the population: in my experience they can insist on speaking but do not listen; they insist on manners that they do not practice them (I have experience of very sharp elbows being applied in supermarket queues etc); and when they say, 'please don't take offence' that is precisely what is intended. I can't wait to be that old!

The first reading and the Gospel today introduce two old men. Abram is 75 and Nicodemus is old enough to be on the ruling council (the Sanhedrin) in Jerusalem.

Abram became the father of a family, a nation and now there are three faiths that claim his as a Patriarch.

Nicodemus seems to have been too afraid to commit, although he does protest after Jesus' arrest that he should not be condemned without a trial and then finally appears with an extravagant quantity of spices to anoint the body of Jesus. We don't know if he ever found the courage to become a disciple.

The question that faced these two chaps - and faces us all - is, can we find the courage to change?

- ✦ For Abram that meant hearing God's call to leave everything he had known and to go to a place **that I will show you**. As a parent who had no children it meant accepting God's promise that **I will make of you a great nation**. It meant putting his trust in God that he meant what he said - **I will bless you**.
- ✦ It is that simple faith that is expressed in the Psalm (a Song of Ascent). Whatever the threats or opportunities that the hills surrounding the pilgrim may have held, the one certainty was God (who unlike the pagan gods did not sleep) - he wasn't just the guardian of the people but was in word and experience the guardian of the individual pilgrim. The road may have gone via Jerusalem but the road led safely to God.
- ✦ Despite his age, his family situation and anything else that could have been mentioned as a delaying tactic, the text simply tells us **So Abram went**.

That is faith! Age is no barrier, except for the security we have built around ourselves and do not want to disturb. The difficulty with that is, faith is disturbing!

- ✦ For Nicodemus, this upper class, conservative Pharisees, a leader in Israel, things were not so clear. Some thing that the fact **he came to Jesus by night** signifies that he was afraid. It may also mean that he thought himself above encountering Jesus in the crowds that followed him by day and arranged a private audience; perhaps even thinking that there was a 'different' way for 'better' people to come to God.
- ✦ Jesus is unequivocal: **no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above** (or *born again*). To belong to the heavenly kingdom you have to be born into it! The question he asks Jesus, **how can anyone be born after having grown old** is obvious at a practical level, but it may just mean, *How can a man whose habits and ways of thinking have become fixed by age be expected to change radically?*
- ✦ **Water** and **Spirit** seem to be clear references to those outward acts of Baptism and Confirmation - but they mean little if they are not a reflection of one's inner change. Yet, in these, we make public our commitment to God and our willingness to obey him (that is why those who aren't baptised or who are not confirmed should consider it seriously).
- ✦ The Churches purpose is summed up in John 3:16 **For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life**. That continues, after an assurance that God is not against us, with **that the world might be saved through him**.

How easily I could fall into the trap of frightening sermons, focusing on who is in and who is out of God's kingdom: for Abram the people of faith were the people of the Covenant (but Paul points out that is ineffective without faith) and for John is those who are born from above - God loves the whole world but to stand apart from his love is to exclude yourself.

How much better to find the courage to allow God to change us and to accept the life that is his gift.