THE EXPERIENCE OF AGEING:
A CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIAN BELIEF

Helen Oppenheimer

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Leveson Paper Number Eleven

The Experience of Ageing: A Challenge to Christian Belief

Helen Oppenheimer

With a response from
The Very Revd Gordon Mursell

This paper is part of a series produced by the Leveson Centre.
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About the author

Helen Oppenheimer was born in 1926 and educated at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. She is a distinguished writer on Christian ethics and theology. She received a Lambeth Doctorate of Divinity in recognition of her theological work. Lady Oppenheimer has served on various Church of England Commissions, especially on marriage, divorce and personal relationships, and on the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission. Her books include The Hope of Happiness *(SCM Press 1983);* Looking Before and After *(Collins Fount 1988),* Finding and Following: talking with children about God *(SCM Press 1994) and* Making Good *(SCM Press 2001). She has also edited an anthology,* Profitable Wonders *(SCM Press 2003).*

The Experience of Ageing: A Challenge to Christian Belief

The varied experience of ageing

When I was taken to church as a child it used to worry me that the congregation seemed to consist entirely of old ladies. When they had gone, would the Christian faith die out? Now I realise that successive generations have kept following on. Congregations still seem to consist largely of old ladies; and now I am one of them. You could look on me as Exhibit A. I'm a genuine septuagenarian who knows old age at first hand. It's been suggested to me that I might like to look today at the experience of ageing, and build on the thoughts I have had about growing old, to go on to ask theological questions about what to think of our lives and where we are heading.

The first time I was asked to write something on this theme, about thirteen years ago, an older friend said, 'But you haven't got any experience of ageing.' It occurred to me then that although what she meant was quite true, in fact we all have experience of ageing as far back as we can remember. It begins with some grown-up telling you not to be babyish, saying, 'You're a big girl now.' Then one day you suddenly and sadly realise that you cannot pretend that this doll belonging to a friend is a real child. Maybe 'old' means 65, 70, 80 … but the experience of being *too* old can start at three, four, five … The baby brother is the one on her lap, while the older sister has the alarming excitement of going to school. We keep on leaving our junior selves behind: it's only that as we get older the pace seems to quicken and we add year to year rather than month to month.

So we can think of ageing as something we have always known at first hand. I have to say first that I must not fall into the trap of treating my own experience as typical. I have enjoyed getting older, so far, especially as I have never been athletic. Nowadays instead of saying, 'Come *on*, Helen,' people kindly give me a tolerant or even a respectful hand down the steps. I no longer have to persuade myself that plunging into cold water is a treat. There are things, like wearing fashionable but uncomfortable clothes, which I am old enough not to have to do. Better still, it is not up to me to say 'No' to enterprising and argumentative children when really I am on their side.

All that sounds trivial; but it is not so trivial if I put it more generally in terms of our human need for self-confidence. Much of our happiness depends upon whether the lives we live with other people are positive or negative; and how we handle our relationships is likely to improve with practice. Experience may not make us wise, but it can make us more careful. We can recognise in advance *some* of the toes we might tread on and the silly mistakes we might make.

If we can learn to be more careful, we may even find that we are able to be bolder. To be gauche is a youthful affliction. When one has grown out of

feeling awkwardly immature one may have the fun of being a little eccentric. An analogy I particularly like is making mayonnaise. The more oil you have already put in, the more stable the emulsion gets and the more brave you can be about adding the oil faster. Elderly people may not after all need so much protection from alarming innovations. That is too easy a stereotype. It's young people who are surprisingly conformist in following the current fashions, even when they think they are being rebellious. Older people may feel able to be less timid about absorbing new ideas than the young ones who are in the thick of the struggle and have to take the responsibility. Grandparents may allow themselves to be less shockable than parents dare allow themselves to be.

Of course old people must not be type-cast as serene any more than they should be type-cast as easily upset. Peter Coleman in his Leveson Lecture strongly emphasised the cruelty of foisting on older people the notion that they must all reach 'exalted standards of serenity and wisdom.' (Coleman 2004, 18) It can hardly be stressed too strongly that old people are individuals just as much as young people are. To treat them as distinct characters, to take the trouble to find out what they are really like, may be the main way to honour them. Having said that, let me still reiterate: often it is happily true that the famous serenity of age is not a myth.

There really are blessings still to be hoped for and we do well to encourage one another to look forwards as well as back. *But*: I have now reached the big But, which indeed is the main thing I want to say. The older I get the more evident it becomes that 'the experience of ageing' is *not monochrome*. For some people ageing means maturing; for others it means becoming more decrepit. Some of us achieve our long-standing goals and some of us realise that there are plenty of good experiences that we shall never have. Whatever good we find ourselves able to say about getting old must *not* be unsaid, but it has to be balanced by what there is to say on the other side. It would be smug and insensitive to join unthinkingly in singing the praises of the stage of life which is now being called the 'third age'. (Coleman 2004, 12) The passage of time does indeed endow some people with 'honour, love, obedience, troops of friends'. Some of us are blessed with the awe-inspiring pleasure of seeing our children's children. Some, like the Psalmist, 'shall bring forth more fruit in their age: and shall be fat and well-liking'. (Psalm 92:14) *But*, likewise, it is just as ordinary an experience for the passage of time to take away the everyday blessings which we could once take for granted and leave us the prospect of 'second childishness and mere oblivion'. (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II viii 165)

The experience of growing old is less uniform now than ever. (Coleman 2004) For one thing, more of us live longer to have the experience of growing old, both for ill and also for good. When people grumble about the modern world as if all its changes were for the worse, I remind them of modern medicine. Keats died at 26 of tuberculosis. Jane Austen died at 42. Today they could surely have lived longer to leave us more of their work. Shakespeare's 'old

John of Gaunt' could be called 'time-honoured' in his fifties; and Shakespeare himself died at 52. Probably a good many of us in this room have recovered from conditions from which a hundred years ago we would have died. Modern medical expertise has given us a reasonable hope for a sort of slab of good time interposed between maturity and departure. People retire from their jobs but not from satisfying activity.

But still I have to admit that what doctors can do for us is patchy. As we grow older in a new millennium there are still plenty of illnesses and disabilities lying in wait for us. Many people do become too frail to live in their own homes any more. Many more are cut off from easy social living by deafness. There are still a large number who lose the sight of their eyes. I sometimes think that this happens to a cruelly large number of scholars who depend on reading. When someone past threescore years and ten has a human lapse of memory, the word 'Alzheimer' trips readily off our tongues, perhaps in the hope that we can fight fear better by naming it.

The characteristic hopeful and good aspects of ageing mostly seem to belong to the time of life which is being commended to us today as the 'third age'. We have to reckon with the fact that at some time, and let me emphasise some *unpredictable* time, the 'fourth age' begins. People's lives are suddenly or gradually dismantled; and reorganising their habits and their belongings is not the positive experience that moving house can be in one's youth. Growing really old happens to people in varied, and even random, good and bad ways: peaceful for some, traumatic for others. Many people, and more nowadays, reach a stage beyond maturity, when all the would-be encouraging language, like 'elder', 'senior', 'twilight', 'golden oldies' begins to sound evasive, and simply 'old' is the *mot juste*.

One of the hardest things for people who are used to being reasonably effective is to become a back number. The struggles we fought in our youth simply do not matter any more and the comprehension we reached is no longer relevant. The things we learnt the hard way are now of no account. Honouring the old means being polite to them and trying to provide them with comfortable surroundings. It doesn't have to mean asking them for their advice.

Teilhard de Chardin in *Le Milieu Divin* established his Christian optimism by starting with an eloquent acknowledgement of what he called the 'diminishments' of human life. (de Chardin 1957) In a section called, rather forbiddingly, 'The passivities of diminishment', he identified 'that slow, essential deterioration which we cannot escape: old age little by little robbing us of ourselves and pushing us on towards the end … what a formidable passivity', he exclaimed, 'is the passage of time … ' (de Chardin 1957, 60–61) He meant, I take it, the fearful relentless uncontrollability of time moving on.

It's the arbitrariness, the lack of control, which hits hard. When we reach the age of outliving our contemporaries and going to more funerals than weddings

we find ourselves asking rather helplessly the Victorian question, 'Who next will drop and disappear?' Robert Browning wrote characteristically, 'Grow old along with me: the best is yet to be'; but Elizabeth Barrett Browning did not grow old along with her husband.

You may think I am weaving about from bad to good and back again. I am doing this on purpose. The point of this 'on the one hand' : 'on the other hand' argument, this mixture of appreciation and foreboding, is to put in a plea for honesty. To be counter-suggestible may be the most honest stance to take up: to decline to think what we are told to think and to refuse to relax in a given point of view.

Truth demands that we shall not call anything good when we ought to know that it is not. We need not, we *must* not, adopt a relentlessly rosy outlook and pretend that old age is bound to be simply splendid, as if anyone who finds it a burden must be ungrateful or faint-hearted. That doesn't mean either that what we need is a compromise, some sort of middle view. It's easy but not much help to say that of course old age is partly good and partly bad, so that we can be *moderately* content about growing old. That may be honest; but only by not saying anything in particular.

I have a slogan which I find more useful than 'either/or', and that is '*both/and*'. Truth is found, not by denying one set of facts, nor by sitting on the fence, but by setting opposites alongside each other and trying to be fair to both. The optimists and the pessimists about old age are both justified. Looking around us we have to say that old age is full of hope *and* fear. If optimism is to prevail, this will not happen by people refusing to recognise the fear and saying 'This is all for the best', but by people doing something about what makes us afraid.

There is plenty which is being done about the trials of old age and plenty more which could be done, and there are many people here who indeed are doing it. As I am not a pastor nor a politician, and do not even live in England, it would be folly to suppose that this particular Leveson Lecture could contribute significantly to these *practical* discussions. I am supposed to be a theologian, trained as a philosopher. My contribution must be to help us to *think* rightly about these questions, in the hope of encouraging the people whose task it is to make the decisions and act on them. I might indeed say both/and again about these apparent alternatives, thinking or doing. Human beings are the kind of animal which both thinks and acts. Their thinking itself is something they *do*; and most of them think in order to do. Thinking is not always a specialised academic exercise. It has practical results. Taking thought lays the foundations for practical activity. If people today think justly about growing old, people tomorrow may act wisely and the optimists may really hope to prevail over the pessimists. Meanwhile we have to acknowledge that at present both have reason on their side.

The challenge of ageing for Christian faith

Strange as it may seem, it is especially important for a Christian to take due heed of the pessimistic side. However serene people may feel about ageing, most of them do not actually look forward to being really old and many of them dread it; and often their apprehension is reasonable. It is not good enough to set one's teeth and doggedly celebrate the blessings of old age whatever happens. Some people's dismal experience of the reality of ageing makes it hard for them, and indeed for their families, to trust anyone who tells them blithely that in charge of everything there is a loving God.

The fact that long life is often not a blessing at all is an aspect of the ancient problem of evil which thoughtful believers cannot escape. For unbelievers, the trouble is practical, desperately practical: but they are not required to find a theoretical answer. If there is no God and the universe is not on our side, there is no reason to expect heavenly comfort to be provided for us and one just has to do the best one can. It is for Christians who believe in a good God that there is a huge theological question about why God's creatures should be made to suffer so.

In the face of an intractable problem, it's a natural tendency of human beings to look for someone to blame. Once, religious people assumed that the answer to the problem of evil was simple: we are to blame ourselves. All our troubles are the result of the Fall of Adam and Eve, so that bad fortune must be accepted as what the sinful human race deserves. Without sin we could all have grown old gracefully, or perhaps even stayed in our prime for ever.

Sooner or later that simple reply becomes incredible. We cannot and should not be satisfied with the notion that unhappiness is always merited. The Book of Job is the biblical witness that the question, 'What have *I* done to deserve this?' is a fair question. Innocent suffering is a real problem. It's not surprising that honest people reject the idea that it's all their own fault and find themselves blaming God for the way human life is set up. But they are not allowed to blame God; so they stop believing. The problem for faith has even got harder since Darwin made it easier to stop believing. Darwin did away with the argument that however bad the world is, there must be a Creator who knows best, to explain how human beings got here at all, to live and grow and diminish and die. Since Darwin showed that living creatures can evolve without God, many people can and do solve the problem of evil by shedding their faith.

I am speaking as a Christian and eventually the answer I give must be a Christian answer. If I could not reach some sort of Christian answer I would have no right to go on calling myself a Christian. But if I am satisfied too quickly with a glib answer, I shall have no right to call myself a thoughtful human being. Christians must not expect to find rabbits in their hats.

I assure you that I do believe that there *is* somewhat more to say than, 'Cheer up: it's all marvellous really', or even, 'It is not for us to question God's

inscrutable will.' But if I am to claim any right to try to explain what a Christian may say, I must go by way of entering into the problem and properly acknowledging the integrity of the people who are defeated by it. It is far from Christian charity to say *only* 'You must have faith'. There are, as it were, interim things which ageing Christians and unbelievers can say to one another for encouragement and comfort; and Christians in the name of our shared humanity may and should take heed first of how far we really are in agreement with one another, before we can expect our piety to carry any weight.

If Christians could understand, and be seen to understand, that to mind when life-diminishing troubles beset them is not faithless, they could allow themselves to believe that human happiness really is important in God's eyes. To want this life to be worthwhile is not just part of our sinful greed. When we are told that Jesus 'went about doing good', that means attending to people's infirmities, even on the Sabbath day, not just preaching to them about their souls. People are afraid of 'humanism', but I think we could afford to be *more* humanist, more concerned about human life, without being less Christian. Then the Christian hope would carry more conviction, that in the end God's creation may truly be called *good*. We could believe that we are being promised something we might actually want. It is not in the least heretical to believe that there is more to the meaning of life than keeping moral laws and that there is more to the purposes of God for us than dutiful obedience.

There is much understanding possible between people with and without faith, understanding not to be achieved by arguing and requiring concessions, but by recognising how much we have in common. Most of what I still have to say about the predicament or opportunity of growing older is meant to be acceptable at least to agnostics. If I respect the integrity of unbelievers, I may hope that they will accept my integrity when I try to give some indication of how I believe that Christian faith comes in.

If we find ourselves all in the same boat, we should be ready to look for ways of coping with the alarming roughness of the sea, not supposing that hopeful navigation is only possible for people who are fortunate enough to have faith. Especially there is bravery which we all need, and which neither believers nor unbelievers have the right to commandeer. The cardinal virtue of fortitude was first a pagan virtue and is no less a Christian virtue for that. Anxiety is a besetting temptation which spoils human happiness, from which believers are not exempt. Christians are apt to forget how important in the teaching of Christ is the commandment not to be anxious. It is noticeably more prominent than the emphasis on chastity which we seem to hear much more about.

Worry about what old age will bring is itself an important kind of human suffering which needs to be overcome. C S Lewis had a practical suggestion, that worry itself may be the affliction we have to undergo and must face. (Lewis 1942) Anxiety is a challenge we can identify. We might anyway come to understand that courage does not require us to resign ourselves comprehensively to

every possible ill, as if they were all going to come true together. I am not expected to feel contented in advance about being blind *and* deaf *and* arthritic *and* impoverished *and* all alone. Whatever comforts and compensations there may turn out to be cannot appear until the situation has arisen. To try to cope faithfully now with imagined troubles is counterproductive, like trying to swat a swarm of midges. Let me commend to you a comment by the Duke of Saint Simon in the early eighteenth century: 'For want of other comfort I lived on my courage, telling myself that we seldom experience all the good or all the evil that there is reason to expect.' (Saint Simon 128)

Let me offer you another culinary comparison which appeals to me. It is said that the mustard manufacturers get rich on all the mustard which is never destined to be eaten but is left on people's plates. Likewise we may imagine the devil getting rich on all the worries to which people help themselves. The dismal things which do happen are often not the ones people have dreaded. A great deal of worry is wasted.

A major worry which is apt to be in the front of people's minds, often nominated as *the* major worry the prospect of ageing brings, is the fear of loss of autonomy. People say, 'I don't mind so long as I don't get dependent' and of course it's only too clear what they mean. Helplessness is a dreadful trial, even to the extent of undermining people's humanity; but perhaps some of even this worry may be wasted. Heaven forbid that I should seem to treat autonomy as not important; but when it's built up as the one thing that matters, I do begin to find myself counter-suggestible.

I think there is a balance here which needs to be corrected. I detect a tendency, in the name of 'respect for persons', to value autonomy so much as to make an idol of it. In everyday life we are all dependent in innumerable ways, not all of them bad or even regrettable. Some people bake their own bread or service their own cars, but few of us eat entirely home-grown food or make our own clothes, and we should not be better and stronger people if we did.

Dependence is a matter of degree and the extent to which human beings find it irksome is also a matter of degree. Some people find being molly-coddled not an affliction but a temptation. They are the ones who need stirring up to value their autonomy more. Laziness which battens on other people, and can be quite unscrupulous, is unmistakably a *sin*. Let me agree; but let me say, on the other side, that prickly pride is a sin which is still less endearing. It's more human to acknowledge our indebtedness with gratitude and grace, than never to incur any indebtedness. When people's friends and neighbours take real pleasure in being kind, it would be fitting to honour, or even humour, their efforts rather than rebuff them.

It's a pity to set up a self-defeating competition for the status of helper rather than helped. To be fixed in either role is diminishing: human flourishing needs both. Wordsworth learnt from the old Cumberland Beggar that one way of

being good to people is to accept their goodness to us: ' … the poorest poor' – or we might substitute 'the oldest old' – are glad that they *themselves* can be kind to somebody. The ethics of the Christian gospel are more concerned with *inter*dependence, bearing one another's burdens, than with autonomy.

If believers find themselves enabled to cope with their anxieties about old age, they should beware of gloating about the consolations of faith. They ought to appreciate the courage of their contemporaries who have to be brave without a God to put everything right. A secular funeral may set a good example of how honesty may be more encouraging than trite comfort. Christians can try to enter into the way that some people without religious belief come to terms with death, by accepting that life goes on and that one generation makes way for another. If people cannot have permanence, they can still look for a kind of fulfilment in the beauty of shifting and developing patterns.

Indeed the normal rhythm of life, being born, maturing, letting go, is a foundation not only for human comfort but for good theology. 'Those who want to save their life will lose it.' (Mark 8:35) A grain of wheat has to fall into the ground and die to produce a harvest. (John 12:24) That is a hopeful analogy for the way life may come from death. Of course analogies must not be pressed too hard. Seeds do not perish distressingly as some human beings do. The problem of evil remains; but the universal processes of ageing and mortality need not, in themselves, be at the heart of it.

From childhood to old age, human beings find satisfaction in shaping experience into stories; and Christians can be glad to enter into this encouragement. Telling the tale of what has brought people where they are now allows them to fit it all into their life histories, whether to mourn or to celebrate.

> 'With weeping and with laughter
> Still is the story told,
> How well Horatius kept the bridge,
> In the brave days of old.' (Macaulay, *Lays of Ancient Rome*)

Shakespeare's veteran of Agincourt will

> 'remember, with advantages,
> The deeds he did that day … ' (Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV iii 51)

The generations are bound together by recollections, re-collections indeed, of small occasions, little rituals, childish jokes, special traditions. Anyone who has happy memories from youth of beloved older people may have gained more than agreeable entertainment at the time. Once we ourselves are old, we have to beware of entering into what has been agreeably called our 'anecdotage'; but many of us have opportunities to offer young people some idea of what it was like to be young in our time, why we see some things differently because of the experiences we have lived through. Rationing may have made us

obsessive about waste, or discipline imposed on us in a time of emergency may have spoilt our tolerance of juvenile disorder. Sometimes we can recount how things have improved. My grandmother planted somewhat feminist seeds in my mind by telling me how uncomfortable it was to wear an obligatory hobble skirt.

There are narratives which can gather a life into a whole and make some sense of the way people mature and decline. Some people, like Tennyson's Ulysses, can treat old age itself as a journey of exploration:

> 'Death closes all: but something near the end,
> Some work of noble note, may yet be done … '

For the aged Ulysses the siege of Troy is already long ago, but the poem draws past and future together into one story:

> 'It may be we shall touch the happy isles
> And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.' (Tennyson, *Ulysses*)

Time and retelling can give shape to our experiences when we look back upon them. Some of us look back on our schooldays, not I hope as the happiest time of our lives, but as a big adventure. Some things which made us downhearted at the time we would not now wish otherwise, when they have become part of a larger whole. Even a tragic story may turn out to have hope in it, if it can eventually be understood as a victory. That is part of the explanation of how tragedy can be a satisfying art form.

Even if we can find meaning like this, not just in fiction but in real human experience, we need not expect to find it all in a moment. If comfort is rushed, it becomes simply unfeeling. An important aspect of courage, of en*courage*-ment, is patience. If people, especially religious people, are in too much hurry to tell the story in their way, they will be no help.

I think it is time for me to say what story I would tell. Christianity, like Judaism and maybe even more so, is based on a narrative about what God has done. As someone who believes the Christian narrative, let me reiterate that the message is *not* 'Everything happened according to God's will.' I find more encouragement in the parable of the man who sowed good seed in his field and tares came up among the wheat. The explanation given is not 'these things are sent to try us' but 'an enemy has done this'. (Matthew 13:25) Faith does *not* affirm that God planted our troubles for our own good. What faith affirms is that the tribulations which beset us, including the sad diminishments of old age, are in the end compatible with God's purposes: that somehow good can come of them, enough good to make the troubles worthwhile. Sometimes it is terribly hard to see how this could be. If Christians try to maintain that all is well already, no wonder there are so many unbelievers.

The doctrine of Providence can be a cruel doctrine and I believe that it has been over-emphasised by pious people. It is insensitive to assure one another

that the tares in the wheat were put there for our benefit. The problem of evil is more serious than that. Some aspects of ageing are severe challenges to faith, for all the serenity some wise old people achieve.

To describe things differently may be a help and it may be the best we can manage; but the problem of evil is too weighty to be dealt with solely by creative imagination. What the troubles of real life need is a story which is not just inspiring but true. The Christian story for the universe is that the Lord has been here. Christians are not called upon to worship a God who sits on high looking down upon our struggles, but a God who knows what it like to feel forsaken by God. I would dare to say that only that God has the right to make a world like this in which some creatures suffer so badly.

If Christianity *is* true, Christians in distress have no need to say bitterly 'It's all very well for God.' What they say is that God is able, and willing, to be present whatever happens. Not everything happens for the best, but our hope is that it can be made good. For this faith to be enough help, it needs to be completed with the resurrection, which makes the story a victory. Without Easter, the cross would be no more than a heroic and compassionate disaster. If we may believe that *God* could be present on the cross, then we can believe that God is not remote from people who are bereaved, or in pain, or isolated, or incapacitated by frailty. The creator of the universe is 'acquainted with grief.' (Isaiah 53:3)

But here we run into a difficulty. We have to notice what has been called 'the scandal of particularity'. In living a real human life, the Lord could not experience at first hand every possible human situation. Because Jesus was cut off in his prime, how can he be alongside us in old age? Can his sufferings really be representative of *all* kinds of human troubles? Peter Coleman called his Leveson Lecture 'Is Religion the Friend of Ageing?' and pointed out that 'Christianity of all the great religions gives apparently little significance to ageing. Partly', he explained, 'this is because Christ died in early adulthood at an age that came to be seen as the perfect age … ' (Coleman 2004)

Women may particularly understand this difficulty. For generations they have been told that Christ is the perfect *man*: so they could not be the sort of human being who can represent Christ. They may wonder as they get older how Christ can be the sort of human being whose trials can represent theirs, since the Lord never had to cope with the mortifications of having become an old woman. The answer to this problem must be that Christ's Passion can *represent* every human ill without actually exemplifying every particular human ill. Can we think of any woes of men and women which cannot find their counterpart in the terror, savagery, pain, grief, loneliness and injustice of the cross? The Lord never grew old; but people who have found growing old a bad experience can find their troubles truly represented by the physical weakness and suffering of the cross; by the closing down of the satisfying activities of life; and especially by the inexorable loss of control.

I must not let this lecture turn into a sermon. It is meant to be an argument. I am arguing that we can and must acknowledge honestly how hard old age *can* be, but that we still need not draw the conclusion that either troubles of our own, or our compassion for other people's woes, must refute belief in God.

People who are not already disposed to believe will pick out the gaps in the argument. For critical sceptics, the biggest gap is likely to be what believers take as the biggest encouragement: the persistent conviction that the troubles of this world will be made good in heaven. Cross and resurrection are part of the same history. The story of the cross is only too easy to believe. If I did not think the story of the resurrection *possible* to believe, I could not call myself a Christian.

What the present argument is about is whether the Christian story has hope to offer when we realise that we are all ageing. When people are unhappy at the prospect of growing old, and when they are distressed by the negative ways they or their fellow human beings may experience ageing, the cross offers them company in their trials and the resurrection offers them victory over adversity.

Of these, the idea that God is present is the easier. The idea that God will make all things well is more difficult to grasp. 'You *must* have faith' will not do; but what I think we can say is, 'You *may* have faith.' A lot depends on the notion of *renewal*. Let me say that countless seemingly reasonable human beings down the centuries have found this notion of regeneration illuminating. The analogy of the seed and the plant affirms that decay is compatible with new life and may even be a condition making new life possible.

When we think about heaven a certain agnosticism is appropriate. It is hopeless to try to specify with any precision the requirements of a world in which we shall all be young and strong and healthy and all tears will be wiped away from our eyes. The fact that we cannot imagine it doesn't make it nonsense: think of explaining to a four-year-old child what it's like to be grown-up.

Let me suggest to you two approaches: and I do mean approaches, not answers. One is to consider how I have sometimes felt when somebody I know well has died after a long time of going downhill. The expected has happened; and now when I call the valued person to mind I am no longer confronted by the figure of the reduced human being I knew recently. The lively companion of past days and happy times seems vivid again to my imagination in a way that had been blocked. I'm inclined to say that the stages of a whole life seem to be gathered up. Is that what heaven does in reality and not just in my mind's eye?

A more fanciful approach is another favourite analogy of mine. If you visit an aquarium and look up past the fish in the tank to the surface of the water, what you see is an impenetrable boundary. A grandson of mine described it as a silver skin. But in some aquaria you can look down into the water and then you can see both the ordinary world above and the fish swimming about in

their world below. This is not meant to be a way of proving that there's a heaven, but a way of not being defeated by our present ignorance.

Let me finish by going back to both/and. In my efforts to be honest I've put a good deal of emphasis on the negative aspects of old age, in a way which may have been, or at least seemed, regrettably dispiriting. I've used ageing as an example of the problem of evil, because we are here today to think about ageing, and at all stages of life we have to take evil into account. If we want what we say to be reliable, we always have to reckon with human vulnerability.

It's only fair to conclude by putting in a word to redress the balance. I think I am old enough to affirm from experience that, more than just compensations, old age can indeed have blessings. If we have to say that ageing is a struggle, can it be an exhilarating struggle? What matters is not to leave one another to struggle alone. People can encourage each other to find old age more worthwhile, not least if they are fortunate enough to find the Christian story about human life believable .

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Response by The Very Revd Gordon Mursell

Gordon Mursell was Dean of Birmingham Cathedral at the time of this lecture but had just been appointed Bishop of Stafford in the Diocese of Lichfield.

Any response, especially an off-the-cuff one, to so profound and thoughtful a lecture is bound to be inadequate. All I can offer are a few biblical underpinnings, so to speak, of what Helen had to say. Three in particular come to mind.

First, Helen spoke powerfully of the need for honesty in relation to old age and our attitudes to it, and in particular of the natural tendency of human beings to look for someone to blame in the face of an intractable problem. This finds an echo in the sharp contrast between the 37th and 73rd Psalms. Psalm 37 is the prayer of an old person who is able to declare:

I have been young, and now am old,
Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken. (Psalm 37:25)

We may admire that serene certainty but it is unlikely that we can agree with it. Most of us have known all too many occasions when the righteous have indeed appeared to be forsaken, or at the very least to have suffered grievously. By contrast, the writer of the 73rd Psalm takes a quite different attitude: he or she has seen the innocent suffer and is outraged at it. What is significant here is the way the psalmist takes that intractable problem and wrestles with it, in prayer, 'in the sanctuary' (Psalm 73:17) – and discovers, precisely by so doing, no easy answer but rather a new awareness of God's intimate presence in the midst of his or her bafflement. This is one way we can engage with an intractable problem like ageing, with both hope and integrity.

Secondly, Helen spoke of how our loss of autonomy as we grow older is in fact a gradual process – and of how easily we make autonomy an idol. In the closing chapter of John's gospel, Jesus asks Peter three times, 'Do you love me?' When Peter insists that he does, Jesus says, 'When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go. (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God)' (John 21:18) Peter's understandable response to this sobering prophecy is to look round at someone else and say indignantly, 'Lord, what about him?' (John 21:21) But Jesus' words to Peter offer us one way of coming to terms with the progressive loss of autonomy: to recognise that it may be precisely in our willingness to accept a further degree of dependence, of being taken 'where we do not wish to go', that we can in fact glorify God – perhaps even more than when we are proudly drawing attention to our heroic and autonomous achievements.

Thirdly, Helen spoke movingly of the perils of excessive anxiety as we address the reality of ageing. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul comes out

with a defiantly counter-cultural statement: 'Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). This is subversive of worldly wisdom, which takes for granted that physical health and spiritual maturity belong together. Nonsense, says Paul: to be a Christian is to look forward, and to go on looking forward, in the face of physical decline, not in order to ignore what is happening to us but instead to contemplate it directly in the light of that greater and fuller life which is yet to be.

Finally, Helen Oppenheimer counsels honesty as we address the reality of the ageing process; and this must be right. One is reminded of the elderly Roman Catholic woman who, having heard a confident young curate preach a sermon on marriage, went up to the parish priest at the end of Mass and said sadly, 'Father, I wish I knew as little about marriage as that young priest.'