



Sharing Your Faith with Older People

By Ian Knox

When I surveyed 200 people on 'the person with whom I would most like to share my faith' only one mentioned the older generations. I find very few churches think about reaching out to older people. This is a huge mistake to make! The world is filling up with older people. This may be the last time we will have people around who have a background knowledge of the Bible: in 1955 over 80 per cent of the population had been to Sunday school. 'Older people' is better than 'elderly' as a term. When does it begin? Some say in the 50s (Saga holidays start at 50). When you were 21, when did you think 'old' started? I put it, when I was 21, at 40. Only when I reached that age did I realise how young 40 was. This is not a 'debate of the age', but about faith-sharing. Having made your hackles rise if you are 55, let's look at sharing our faith with older people.

The problems

- It is hard to change as you grow old. We may want continuity, not a radical change of lifestyle
- It is hard to admit that a lifetime of beliefs (or non-beliefs) was wrong. This is the generation that says, 'I did my best', 'I did it my way,' 'I never did anybody any harm, 'I'm as good as the next.'
- It is hard to live with an increasing lack of mobility, an increase in loneliness, bereavement and ageing itself
- It is hard to face death, and easier to avoid thinking about it.

The pitfalls

There are three things to remember when getting involved with older people:

- Don't try to show you 'understand'. How can you, if you are much younger? On the other hand, if you are older yourself, you are the ideal person to share your faith with your peers: that's why evangelism has no retirement date.
- Don't underestimate an older person's intelligence. They probably know more than you do. They may even know more of the Bible, with a Sunday school and church background.
- Don't patronise. We tend to speak to very old people as if they were children, which is insulting.

The potential

With nearly a quarter of the population over 60, here is a potential army of older followers of Jesus Christ. Their lives could influence and even change, the whole nation. Robert Browning, in his poem 'Rabbi ben Ezra' wrote:

Grow old along with me
The best is yet to be
The last of life, for which the first was made.
Our times are in His hand
Who saith 'A whole I planned.
Youth shows but half; trust God:
See all nor be afraid'

Browning in right: the older years should be ones of fulfilment, and the prospect of growing older with Jesus is wonderful. Link this with a life forgiven, peace with God and a future in heaven and don't you get excited about sharing this future with an older person?

The plan

More than with almost anyone else, friendship is the answer here. Love and respect are vital. Even family members sometimes have little time for older members.

Here are four suggestions on how to approach faith sharing with an older person:

- Speak of their potential. When David says 'I was young and now I am old' (Psalm 37:25), his words are interpreted today to mean 'I'm useless', 'I'm forgotten', 'I'm hopeless'. God says otherwise. He speaks of being with us in our 'old age' and with our 'grey hairs' (Isaiah 46:4), helping and keeping us. His plan is for us to 'still bear fruit in old age', staying 'fresh and green' (Psalm 92: 14), echoed in Browning's words.
- Speak of God's love for older ones and his respect for old age. The Bible is full of amazing stories of God using older people in his plans: Moses, Caleb, Anna and Simeon, Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth -the list goes on.
- John 3 is a passage for older people: Nicodemus is, on his own admission, 'old' (verse 4). John 3:16 is for older people! Jesus gives new lives for old.
- Eternity, and its answer to death, is a great subject for an older person. They may well know the first few verses of John 14 by heart. I sat with an old man, a neighbour, and started to read, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled...' (verse 1). I was amazed as he recited along with me right up to verse 6. It was so easy to talk about heaven with him. He trusted Christ as a result - and died a fortnight later.

In all your faith-sharing, do include the older ones.

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