

## **Sermon for 16<sup>th</sup> June 2024, Year B, Proper 6**

**Preached by the Revd Jane Horton at St John's Baillieston**

**2 Cor 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34**

### **Sermon**

Well today is Father's Day!

And I'm wondering how those who are fathers amongst our congregation might be spending their day?

If you're a father, what kind of relationship have you had with your children over the years and how do you think they will look back on that relationship in the future? What will be your legacy to them?

And how about the rest of us?

How might we be remembering our own fathers today or those who've been father-figures in our lives? Or the fathers of our children? Both those still living and those who have died?

What impact have they had on us? What has been their legacy?

My own father died just over a year ago, aged 84, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, so there was no chance to say goodbye. Although my relationship with him wasn't always easy as I was growing up, I grew much closer to him in adult life. He was quite a character and could still be a bit grumpy and rather critical on occasion. But he always called me "lovely Jane" and I deeply valued his wisdom and generosity and the knowledge of his unconditional support. I miss his hugs, his company, his gift of listening and our unfinished conversations. It still feels strange not to be able to send him a Father's Day card and a box of his favourite fudge this weekend.

You probably noticed that there's a strong thread running through our Old Testament, psalm and gospel readings today of things – and people – growing and flourishing.

My dad inherited a true gardener's spirit from his own father, my grandad. They must both have spent literally thousands of happy hours over their lifetimes cultivating the soil and growing fruit and vegetables, trees and all manner of flowering things –

But as well as plants, my dad was passionate about seeing people grow and flourish, being a secondary school teacher by vocation and moving into education administration in the second half of his career.

Long after his intensive gardening days were brought to an end by dodgy knees and the gradually reducing energy of heart disease – in fact right up until the week he died – my dad was still hosting book groups and discussion groups; still making phone-calls; still letter-writing; still visiting various elderly, more fragile friends and relations; still supporting the local homeless charity he and my stepmother had helped to found; still taking an active interest in politics, including voting on the way to hospital on the day he died ...

I must admit that I find this paternal example and legacy both inspiring, but also rather daunting! I've sometimes felt that Dad was still busier and more fully engaged with life at 84 than I am in my early 60s!

From all our readings this morning, the verses that most spoke to and stayed with me, are from *Psalms* 92. The NRSVA translates it like this:

<sup>12</sup> *The righteous flourish like the palm tree,  
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.*

<sup>13</sup> *They are planted in the house of the LORD;  
they flourish in the courts of our God.*

<sup>14</sup> ***In old age they still produce fruit;  
they are always green and full of sap ...***

The psalm paraphrase we sang talks about “*the just ones ... bearing fruits in the evening of their life-span*”.

Losing my dad last year – and much more recently, my aunt – has made me think a lot more about death and dying and what it means to grieve.

But I've also been pondering what it means to live an abundant and fruitful life as we get older. Or indeed at any stage of life when health and strength may be limited.

Don't ask which 😊 but various bits of my body and brain have definitely begun to creak and groan and become less reliable over the last ten years! So how do I 'live well' at a stage of life when I can no longer take physical and mental strength and energy for granted?

How do any of us *“still produce fruit in old age”* and stay *“green and full of sap”*?

I suspect the answer to that question and what kind of legacy we will leave will look different for each one of us, uniquely individual as we are. From a faith perspective, our verses from Psalm 92 suggest that the ability to flourish and produce fruit in old age comes from being planted deep in the good soil of relationship with God, at home in him and in the knowledge of being unconditionally loved.

Of course that's also true at any stage of life. Jesus talks about it as abiding in the vine. Paul talks about it as being a 'new creation'.

In today's other readings, the prophet Ezekiel speaks of God essentially as a gardener, planting a tree in whose branches and under whose shade **every** kind of bird will live and nest. Words that find an echo in those of Jesus himself in the parable of the mustard seed in our gospel reading.

That's **every** kind of bird. And a tree that is planted to be a place where **all** will find welcome.

For me, a part of my father's legacy was undoubtedly witnessing the calm, peaceful and patient way in which he contemplated and was able to embrace both getting older and particularly the reality of death drawing closer. He wasn't afraid.

This part of his legacy was made tangible in the gift of a wonderfully profound, compassionate and inspiring book, written by Dr Kathryn Mannix, a retired palliative care consultant. It's called *With the End in Mind – How to Live and Die Well*.<sup>1</sup> Ever the educator, my dad had been so impacted by reading this book, that he recommended it to all his friends and convened a special group to discuss it.

And he'd actually bought copies for his four children and their partners and his eight grandchildren. He had intended to send this book to each of us as a gift to mark his 85<sup>th</sup> birthday – they were stacked up waiting on his bookshelf when he died. It's taken me over a year to begin to read it – but I finished it yesterday and can't recommend it highly enough 😊

I'm my father's daughter and – like him – I love to share good things with others. So please let me know if you might be interested in reading *With the End in Mind* and then meeting in a small group to talk about it.

As Kathryn Mannix writes,

*There are only two days with fewer than twenty-four hours in each lifetime, sitting like bookends astride our lives: one is celebrated every year, yet it is the other that makes us see living as precious.*

*In sharing the stories of so many ordinary people as they reached their final days, I hope that I have shown that, in the end, none of us is ordinary, that each unique individual is extraordinary in their own way.*

*As we approach the ends of our lives we experience a shift in perspective that allows us to focus on the most important things in our own domain. This shift is both poignant and freeing, as these stories illustrate. Living is precious, and is perhaps best appreciated when we live with the end in mind.*

*It's time to talk about dying.*

I'm going to close with a beautiful reinterpretation of those verses from Psalm 92, by the priest and poet, Carla Grosch-Miller, in her book, *Psalms Redux*. Perhaps you might like to close your eyes and make it your prayer ...

*O God of Life:*

*Let these humble ears hear  
the song that hails the new creation.*

*Let these searching eyes see  
the fulfilment of love in this place.*

*Let these veined hands and this weary back  
know their strength and move with grace.*

*Let these hopeful lips sing Your praise  
from the opening of the day  
until my last breath.*

*Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> *With the End in Mind – How to Live and Die Well*  
Kathryn Mannix, pub William Collins 2017

<sup>2</sup> *Psalms Redux*  
Carla A. Grosch-Miller, pub Canterbury Press 2014