

'A Job for Life'

At the age of 95 Prince Philip has announced, quite understandably, his intention to retire from public engagements. His decision has of course the full support of the Queen and is well deserved, but it raises a question in my mind: what does it mean to 'retire'? And more specifically, what *should* it mean for a Christian?

The idea of retirement is a relatively new one. Indeed it was only in 1889, less than 150 years ago, that Germany acquired the honour of being the first country to introduce it. Before that time, low life expectancy and the absence of any pension arrangements made it unthinkable. The only clear reference to retirement in the Bible is in a description of the work of Levitical priests:

“Men of twenty-five years old or more shall come to take part in the work at the Tent of Meeting, but at the age of fifty, they must retire from their regular service and work no longer. They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the Tent of Meeting, but they themselves must not do the work.”

(Numbers 8: 24-26)

The physical labour involved in carrying and handling the Temple furnishings and equipment (cf Num. 4:29-33) probably lay behind this provision, but it is interesting to note how the older priests continued to 'assist' the younger ones after they had reached the age of fifty. It is a reminder to those of us who have given our lives to God and to Christ, that even when it is right to 'retire' from a particular ministry, we may still be called to continue working in other ways. Older people always have a contribution to make (eg Titus 2:2-5). Think of Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38), for example, and the prayerful ministry which they exercised in the Temple at Jerusalem.

Work is fundamental to our God-given nature (Ps.104:22-24; Isa.65:22-23). Genesis speaks of Adam and Eve, the archetypal human beings, being put in the garden “to work it and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15). It can of course, when carried out for the wrong reasons and under wrong circumstances, be corrupted by sin and turned into dehumanising toil (Gen.3:17-19); the work performed by the Israelite slaves in Egypt is obviously a case in point. But at its best it is central both to our well-being as humans and to our calling as Christians, and it is a mistake therefore to regard retirement simply as an opportunity to indulge oneself in a selfish way. The spiritually fruitful life should be characterised supremely by love (Gal.5:22), rooted in relationships, and inspired by a vision of the world as God would have it be – his kingdom 'on earth as it is in heaven'.

There is a vast range of fruitful activities in which older people might feel called to engage. One of the most important, for example, could be to pass on to future generations their spiritual inheritance. Let no-one underestimate the positive impact on children or grandchildren that a genuine faith, experience and example of Christian living can have. As we contemplate 'retirement' (whenever and whatever that may be), may the words of the psalmist be our prayer:

“Even when I am old and grey, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come”

(Psalm 71:18).

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