

Christians on Ageing CONFERENCE CALL

Light of Faith: Reflections on growing old by Bishop George Appleton

Notes from the Conference Call on 21 March 2023 led by Dr David Jolley

We were: Julie Burnett-Kirk, Vikki Bunce, Sally Richards, Joseph Cortis, Barbara Stephens, Joanna Walker and David Jolley

David outlined an approach to using the booklet produced by Bishop Appleton and published by *Christians on Ageing* 1995 and reprinted 2022,

Bishop George Appleton

George Appleton's father was head gardener at Abbey House Estate, Windsor. He came from humble stock – he was one of three brothers and five sisters. George's mother had been a cook in the same establishment. She had been orphaned as a child and was brought up in an uncle's family. She had only limited education before entering service in her early teens.

The family moved with their employer to Marston Magna in Somerset, and then to a small town in Berkshire. George was joined by a brother and two sisters. Their education was in village schools and greatly involved with church life, George being a choirboy. He was recognised to be bright and by the age of seven he told people that his ambition was to become a missionary. Grants, gifts and scholarships allowed him to continue his schooling, and he won a place at Selwyn College, Cambridge University 1921. He gained his BA 1924 and went on the train for ministry at St Augustine's College in Canterbury, followed by the post of curate at St Dunstan's, Stepney. At Stepney he was serving a population of multiple ethnicities, languages and several faiths. From there he determined to work as a missionary in Burma – which he did for 20 years, during which time he married his childhood girlfriend, Marjorie ('the companion on my journey'). They were blessed with three children. George became Archdeacon of Rangoon, but returned to England following the invasion of Burma. He served as vicar of Headstone and then rector of St Botolph's Aldgate, later becoming Archdeacon of London and canon of St Paul's Cathedral before being appointed Anglican Archbishop of Perth, Australia 1962. He became Archbishop of Jerusalem 1969 and served there for six years in close harmony with Jewish and Arab leaders before retiring to become assistant curate at St Michael, Cornhill in the diocese of London. He continued in active service until 90 years old, writing books and newspaper articles even beyond that.

Marjorie and he had three children: Margaret, Timothy and Rachel. Marjorie died 1980, and George 1993.

Our booklet is based on his thinking and writing during his retirement, and some years after Marjorie's death. We can complement its content by drawing on his autobiography: 'Unfinished: George Appleton remembers and reflects', which was published 1990, and 'Journey for a Soul' which was first published 1974 and revised several times.

Acceptance:

Now in his eighties, Bishop Appleton begins with a section he heads: 'Acceptance' and reflects that he sometimes wishes that Jesus had lived to experience old age: 'so that he could have shown us how to accept the failing powers and humiliations which it brings'.

In the wish that Jesus had lived longer, he will find much support, with its potential for more teaching by words and example. His equating of age and failing powers and humiliation has to be questioned. It may rest on his personal experience, but is uncomfortably close to the general view and expectation of later life, which does not stand up to further inquiry: Pathologies do become more common in the decades beyond 70, but do not affect everyone in similar mode or severity. Something can be done to reduce their incidence and much can be done to ameliorate their impact. Preservation of strengths' added to the benefits of experience and wisdom, can make later life a time of riches.

Appleton's reference to Jesus' words to Peter (John 21:18) relates to the particulars of Peter's life and pathology, rather than our generality

The assurance from Isaiah (46: 3-4) 'I am your God and will take care of you until you are old', is well taken. We will not be deserted.

'God's grace will support us So that we can grow old gracefully in a double sense.' (I am not really sure what the double sense might mean.)

Quoting then from remembered words from a valued colleague. Appleton gives us: 'while there are certainly many ageing people, there are so few who are genuinely old and wise.'

Quite wonderful, as he brings us to think of 'genuinely old' as a positive characteristic and virtue to be sought after, rather than denied for shame.

There is criticism for us if we persist with prejudices, criticise others, cling to past privileges and pleasures and positions.

Well-adjusted old people bring: 'their serene presence and detachment.....They are not afraid any more....They are characterised with simple goodness'

From Psalm 90: 'So teach us how to number our days, that we can get a heart of wisdom'.
We discussed what numbering our days might mean.

Appleton then turns to the stories of Simeon and Anna (Luke 2: 22-38): devoted older people, both with strong faith and special relationships with God.

The insights of Simeon are often rehearsed in the Nunc Dimittis. Appleton recommends it for recitation as 'a song of gratitude for our past lives and a quiet peaceful trust for what lies ahead.'

'Lord now lettest thy servant depart in peace.....'

The service and worship of Anna as an old woman have inspired and sustained Anna
Chaplaincy: [BRF | Leading Christian charity enabling ministry and mission | Anna Chaplaincy](#)

Anna Chaplains are male or female and may be of any adult age, including old age. Their mission is to take notice of the spiritual strengths as well as the needs of old people in churches, and those who are not associated with churches.

Appleton reminds us of St Paul's observations as an old man: (2 Corinthians 4: 16-18)

'O we do not lose heart. Though our outer natures are wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things which are unseen are eternal.'

Such a powerful and helpful perspective: speaking from Appleton's position of age in this life equated with frailty and loss of vigour, but referencing a broader spectrum in which this is a short interlude which will be followed by something more marvellous. This seems to be a message which Appleton would share with us all. He shares with us his prayer of thanks and anticipation:

'I see how your love and goodness have been with me.....Then I have felt your presence near.....Forgive my slowness, my failure in grace, smallness of my love.....Accept my heart's thanks for growing knowledge of you.'

Pain:

The header for this second section in the booklet confirms Appleton's view, and probably experience, of later life as a period of suffering:

'In old age there is not only a process of slowing up and a failure of powers but often acute or chronic pain'

We will do more work on the notion of old age as a time to expect and accept loss of competence and relevance

He quotes then from Edith Barfoot: The joyful vocation of suffering. Edith Barfoot lived with pain arising from rheumatoid arthritis for more than 50 years. Her evidence is surely an honest description of her experience and how she dealt with this in prayerful interaction with God. But her experience was exceptional. Hardly a balanced review of the prevalence and significance of pain in late life and how it can be helped, understood by individuals or the generality of old people.

There is no doubt that some of us experience pain in old age, from the various pathologies, particularly of the bones and joints, but also from more sinister and neurological conditions.

[Prevalence](#) | [Background information](#) | [Chronic pain](#) | [CKS](#) | [NICE](#)

Appleton draws attention to St Paul's writing about his 'thorn in the flesh' and his discussion with God about it: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 New International Version

'Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that

Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.'

This is not to detract from the need to identify the underlying pathologies which are giving rise to pain, and the exhibition of curative or ameliorative treatments, but they give a framework for working with the experience. It is important not to be frozen out of normal activities because of fear of pain. Doing things is almost always therapeutic.

Living with pain is one thing. Elevating life with pain to a condition to be desired because it brings you nearer to God, is not right.

Appleton introduces us to the wonderful Jesuit teacher, biologist and Saint Teilhard de Chardin, and his observations on physical and spiritual suffering and death.

'O God, grant that I may understand that it is you who are painfully parting the fibres of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within Yourself'.

So this relates to the particular situation of pain in association with the end of life. Much can be done to avoid or alleviate pain in terminal illness, and many deaths will occur without pain. The issues of death are addressed later in the booklet. Never-the-less, having a framework in faith for living with pain which is brief, or ongoing, or returning is an important issue for some of us at any age.

We will do more work on the issue of pain in later life:

Depression:

Again Appleton begins with a downbeat representation of normal ageing: 'Despondency is frequent in old age'.

In fact, although old age is often quoted as a risk factor for depression: [Risk factors | Background information | Depression | CKS | NICE](#)

Studies find that depression and anxiety are less frequent amongst people in their sixties and seventies, than amongst middle aged and younger people: [SN06988.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](#)

That is not to say that depression/anxiety does not occur in late life, the studies found roughly 6% of men and 12% of women 75+ had such symptoms. When they occur, these are serious symptoms and have implications for morbidity and mortality – and for spiritual life.

Appleton asks, via the psalmist: 'Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? (Psalm 42: 5)

He recommends looking for reasons, perhaps alone, perhaps with the help of responsible and trusted others.

He quotes the psalmist's solution: 'Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. Psalm 43: 5)

And he offers a longer prayer which he uses when these other approaches have failed. 'Let me hear you whisper'.

He addresses the phenomenon of loneliness, which is strongly linked to depressive mood rather than simply being alone.

'Remember that God is in every place. Nothing can keep Him out. He is Spirit and can enter locked doors, prison cells, lonely bedsides in home or hospital.....He can our out inexhaustible love, grace and help.'

We will do more work on the issues of depression and loneliness

Memory:

Appleton references 'Four Quartets' by TS Eliot who urged old people to explore

Of memory, St Augustine enthused:

'Great is the power of memory, exceedingly great. Men go forth to wonder at the height of mountains, the huge waves of the sea, the broad flow of rivers, the extent of the oceans, the courses of the stars – and forget to wonder at themselves.'

So here, he is seeking perspective and humility in what we value. He goes on to appreciate the wonder of the human memory, much more impressive than any manufactured computer: 'Memory gives us personal identity and continuity: without memory we should have only the rudimentary consciousness of an animal, but should not be able to reflect on it.'

In this he gives a very blinkered account of human and animal cognition and consciousness, which does not stand up to a modern appreciation of the facts.

But his discourse on memory as the means by which past, present and future are brought together, is sound and helpful.

A reference to Memory and Character in Revelation and time concepts in near-death experiences are thought provoking.

He suggests that looking back, via memory, gives us chance to be thankful for blessings and for people- to get right the past and find hope and guidance for the future.

There are things to be ashamed of and to seek forgiveness. There is opportunity to continue dialogue with 'those we speak of as dead'.

'In old age we have time to explore inner space. We look back in memory and on the journey of life so far.' There may be regrets, dismay pride, happiness, grief and hope.

Appleton's section on human memory recognises its importance to the spirituality of each of us and expands on some of its wonders. There is no exploration of the changes to memory function which come with normal ageing, nor is there any consideration of pathological states, including dementia. We heard in discussion of syndromes which do not sum to a

global loss of cognitions as in dementia, but superficially erase the facility of memory. Every day presents a clean slate. Living with such changes poses great challenge.

We are working to supply additional references to memory and disorders of memory

The future:

Beginning to share his anticipation of the end of his life on earth and 'crossing into the new dimension'.

There is no doubting his confidence in the continuity into the life beyond.

'Best of all, we can look back from the border of this new country.....

God has prepared even lovelier things which will surpass both our understanding and our desire'.

Facing death:

In his eighties and beyond, Appleton confirms that time is given to thoughts of death: 'We cannot sidestep the thought of death. What should the spiritually minded person think about it?'

He turns to the words of Psalm 23

'I will fear no evil, for you are with me I shall dwell in your house, O Lord, for ever.'

Appleton says: Death is not an end but a new beginning. It is like another birth.

In this he was ahead of developments in palliative care thinking, which now talks of midwives for the dying: [Midwives for the Dying - The Atlantic](#)

[He](#) goes on to share his communion with God, in prayer, looking to join Him in the life beyond and to find loved ones whose deaths have given grief.

'You have told us that you are preparing a place for us: prepare us also for that happy place, that where you are, we may be always, O dear Lord of life and death'

'Our belief in life after death depends not on scientific proof, but on our belief in God.'

'Death is like going home to the sphere where we finally belong, to the Eternal Father who created us, values and loves us.'

And he finds comfort in the poetry of others who have written about continuity with others they have loved, in the life beyond.

He finishes with words from George Herbert, who died at 40, and looked for death as rest.

This was a very moving session – moving with the words of the booklet and the generous reflections of this great man as he had attained a great age. His reflections are not confined to the phenomenon of age, but include consideration of the essence of being, in this life and beyond. The transition is not always linked to old age, but those of us who live to become old have time and opportunity to consider these matters.

Bishop Appleton's reflections stand the test of time, but perhaps it will be useful to complement them with observations of our own, and set them in context with commentaries on some of the issues he covered from other sources.

I have included *comments in italics within the text*, and where these relate to an *intention to produce more work, these are coloured blue*.

The morning took on some attributes of a workshop – a new adventure. We must follow this up by producing relevant new publications on the key topics identified

David Jolley March/April 2023