

MY GRANDPARENTS' BREAKFAST TABLE

Alison Sampson, MUC Fellowship@10, 7 September 2025 (Psalm 1)

My grandparents' breakfast room opened off the kitchen. It had a brown sideboard, brown scratchy chairs and a brown shag pile carpet. Whenever my sister and I stayed with them, we participated in their morning ritual. First, we held hands and said grace. Then my sister and I would gobble up our breakfasts while our grandparents were still fussing around assembling theirs. Cornflakes. Sultanas. Bran. A bit of sugar. Milk. Yawn. My sister and I would sit swinging our legs, discreetly itching where the chairs scratched and waiting impatiently for our grandparents to finish eating. But even then, we couldn't get down from the table. For after breakfast was cleared away, it was time for morning devotions.

Out would come the thick little book stuffed with prayer cards and handwritten notes. Grandpa would painstakingly thumb through the pages to the right day. Once he'd found it, he'd adjust his glasses and harrumph, waiting until there was complete stillness before he read aloud a Bible passage, a commentary and a prayer. Then he and grandma would pray freely for everything and everyone they knew: every child, every grandchild and in time every great-grandchild. Every sick person; every person facing hardship; every person who had recently experienced loss. They'd pray for missionaries, and every project of the church. They'd pray for the Baptist movement; they'd pray for the government; they'd pray for rain. 'Pray without ceasing,' wrote the Apostle Paul to the Thessalonians, and it seemed to me that my grandparents did.

For a ratty little kid with no sense of the divine, it was excruciatingly boring. But now I'm older, I look back on this time with gratitude: for the discipline it taught me. For the orientation of their lives. And for the sure and certain knowledge that, until my grandparents died, I was prayed for every single day of my life.

We live in a world which venerates the appearance of youth, the technological knowledge of youth, the culture of youth. Sexy young things beam from every bus stop, every crease and wrinkle airbrushed away. Actors and billionaires fill our screens, hair artfully thickened and dyed, bodies reshaped by plastic surgery, lips and bosoms plumped and muscles pumped to evoke a youthful fertility. Even those who hold great wealth and power try desperately to appear young.

With the words 'Okay, boomer,' anyone over the age of the speaker is instantly dismissed. Those of us who have been made redundant over the age of 50 have discovered just how hostile the job market is. As many of us have experienced, the way some health professionals speak with older people can be deeply infantilising and patronising. And the assumption that older people, particularly older women, automatically need pity is rife. The Western dis-ease with aging, our sense of its uselessness, is everywhere.

Sadly, we often hear this attitude echoed in the church. Perhaps you've heard a pastor refer dismissively to 'the little old ladies,' seemingly oblivious that these women are frequently the powerhouse of the congregation, praying and serving and contributing in countless ways over many decades. More often, 'The church is dying,' we hear. 'Half the church is over eighty,' we hear. 'We have no children. Millennials don't come. We're about to fall off a cliff!' And indeed

there are ways in which this fear is true. There have been enormous generational, cultural and economic shifts which mean the church as we know it does not have a future. We have not retained the young, and we will not have the bodies to sustain such a volunteer-heavy structure for much longer. There needs to be a reckoning, and Spirit-led imaginings of a different way. But this is all greatly hampered when we adopt the values of the wider culture and dismiss the gifts of age.

For discipleship knows no age limits and, as long as there are disciples, there will be plenty of life in God's church. Indeed, the Bible frequently places those of advanced years front and centre in stories of faithfulness. 'Grey hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life,' we find in Proverbs 16:31. In biblical terms, children are incredibly precious, yes, but old age is celebrated as a time of wisdom, fruitfulness, even adventure. To take one example, Luke's story of the birth and childhood of Jesus is almost entirely about older people. We meet Zechariah and Elizabeth, well past the usual age of childbearing, then Simeon and Anna, who have spent many decades watching and waiting for the messiah. Joseph's age is a mystery, and Mary is the only identifiably young person in the story.

Going back further, Moses was forty before he left Egypt and eighty when he died, still leading Israel: and we are told he remained vital until the end of his life. Abraham was a hundred when Isaac was born, and Sarah ninety, when God's promise came to fruition in their advanced old age. Meanwhile, Noah was a whopping 600 years old when he built the ark, and he never spent a cent on anti-aging serums.

Whether you understand these numbers as literal or figurative, they tell us something important: that in God's story, those who live rooted in God's goodness bear fruit their whole lives long. Psalm 1 celebrates this. 'Happy are those who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,' it proclaims. 'Their delight is in God's law, and they meditate on God's law day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither.'

And what lies at the heart of the law? To love God with every fibre of our being, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Happy are those, then, who delight in love, and who prayerfully meditate on God's law. Happy are those who reflect on God's word, and let it shape their lives. Happy are those who in every possible way embody love and concern for their neighbour. Their roots will go deep; their lives will bear fruit; their leaves will not wither away.

I look around at this congregation and see people in their seventies, eighties and nineties who are still active disciples, still bearing fruit. Some of you volunteer with Frontier Services, travelling long distances to erect fences, renovate houses, clean up farms, and build connections with people living in remote areas. Some of you make the Sunday service happen, week after week after week. Some of you facilitate playgroups, forming connections and bringing warmth to parents, grandparents and little children. Some of you are on committees, or run fundraisers, or attend to church governance, or work in the office, or do any of a thousand other things which contribute to God's kingdom-culture in this little pocket of the world.

Your roots must have sunk deeply into streams of living water to show such blessed tree-time fruitfulness, for all these activities are the visible expression of a common life which runs below the surface. Because all these activities are rooted in faith. Faith in God's word, faith in the way of love, faith in the constant dialogue between people and the divine. Faith that faithful people are called to love and serve the world through activity but above all through prayer.

'Pray without ceasing,' instructs Paul. Pray for one another. Pray for the sick. Pray for the government, and your leadership, and the church. Pray in groans too deep for words. Pray when you do not know how to pray. Pray in the name of Christ, in the power of the Spirit, in union with our Mothering-Fathering God. Pray for us, for me, for your enemy. Meditate on God's law, open your heart, and pray, pray, pray. Over and over again, he urges us to pray. For whether formal or informal, spoken or unspoken, confident or stumbling, corporate or personal, liturgical, contemplative, creative or free: prayer is what has always given the church its vitality, creativity and life.

And prayer knows no age limits. Whether you're nine or ninety-nine, no matter your energy, no matter your health, you can always, every day, pray. I think now of my grandparents in the last year of their lives. My grandfather had Parkinson's disease and had become very frail. My grandmother had Alzheimer's disease, and you all know what that means. And so, they went into care. They were assigned small rooms across the corridor from each other, so that when my grandmother went wandering, she walked straight into her own husband's room. In order to move from their four bedroom house with the breakfast room, the dining room and the acres of shag pile carpet, they gave up nearly all their possessions. They retained just their clothes, a few trinkets and photographs, and their precious Bibles and devotionals. The books now had yellowing pages, flaking covers, cracked spines. Like my grandparents, the books had seen better days.

Yet even here, even now, they were well used as my grandparents continued their practice of devotions. They still read scripture aloud, meditated upon it, and prayed for a long list of people and places daily. As my grandmother lost first her memory, then reason, speech, movement and finally any alertness to the world at all, their practice continued. My grandfather would read aloud then pray freely, my grandmother bearing silent witness beside him. And I am confident that the practice which had so profoundly shaped their lives continued its subterranean work and expression even then, even in my grandma. For I trust that the Spirit helped her in her weakness when she no longer knew how to pray, or even that she was praying at all.

Like Roma, like Neil, like all the saints who have gone before us, let us sink our roots ever more deeply into streams of living water. Let us keep loving God, loving Christ, loving our neighbour, our enemy, our selves. And let us delight in God's word and above all pray without ceasing. For in prayer, we do not wither. With prayer, we have a future. And through prayer, the Holy Spirit will flow through our lives and bear an abundance of fruit. Thanks be to God. Ω

Reflect: What practices sustain your faith? How do you anchor your life in the living word, in prayer, in love?