

Dear Friends,

I recently heard a moving radio programme on Radio 4, called Dear Life (episode 4), based on Rachel Clarke's book, 'Dear Life, a Doctor's Story of Love and Loss'. Rachel Clarke (b. 1972) works as a palliative care doctor and is herself the daughter of a doctor. The programme was an outstanding example of professional reflection on practice. Rachel learns valuable life lessons from her difficult work, and she shares these with her audience. It was both educational and inspirational.

She said, "*Aging is neither a right or a challenge or something to fend off. It is a privilege*". In the light of the work that Dr Clarke does those words are very poignant indeed and remind us all in these Covid-19 days to be thankful every single day for our blessings. I have transcribed a quotation she read from an essay written by the American, Henry Miller, as he entered his 9th decade in 1972. I pass it onto you in the hope that you find it as uplifting as I do.

"If at 80 [or insert your own age here!] you are not a cripple or invalid, if you have your health, if you still enjoy a good walk, a good meal with all the trimmings, if you can sleep without first taking a pill, if birds and flowers, mountains and seas still inspire you, you are a most fortunate individual and you should get down on your knees morning and night and thank the good Lord for His saving and keeping power."

Dr Clarke finds inspiration in the sense of wonder she witnesses in her patients who are approaching the end of life. This helps her to deal with personal challenges relating to her father's health. Reflecting on her personal and professional experiences, she becomes aware of the centrality of love in giving life purpose, and the power of the life force she sees, for example, in her own energetic young daughter.

Many people are beginning to wonder how the church might change as the ground beneath us shifts due to the shock waves of Covid-19. The world was already changing, of course. The way we use our homes has already changed. Fifty years ago, we would boast that an Englishman's home was his castle. But a commentator recently remarked that our homes are now sponges with porous edges. Decades ago, garages were buildings in which we kept our cars. For many people they are now storerooms, gyms, or workshops. Some of us remember being sent to our bedroom as children for a punishment. For

today's children this would not be a punishment but an opportunity to contact friends or play games on electronic devices.

The pandemic has accelerated change in our society. More than half the respondents to a survey doubted that they would ever again work full time outside of the home. Germany is already passing a law giving people the right to work one day a week from home, where this is operationally feasible. For many of us our living room has become our chapel as we have adopted online worship, enjoyed TV broadcasts, or used worship at home sheets. Zoom is no longer what a rocket does, but a way of having virtual meetings.

My personal learning style is that of a reflector. I need to mull things over. Other people learn in other ways. But for me there are still too many unknowns for anyone to be able to predict how the church will change. We know that when pundits make a projection, they use the caveat, "*if present trends continue*" and in today's world who can say which present trends will continue? Who could have predicted twelve months ago what we were to experience during 2020? If there is someone who saw it coming, perhaps they should be consulted about the future direction of the church!

In his book "Center Church" (USA spelling) Timothy Keele refers to the work of Richard Lints, and argues for the need for each local church to develop its own theological vision, based on a firm grasp of Christian doctrine, and a thorough analysis of its own context. He writes from a city centre ministry perspective, but his point has general application. Each church must define its own DNA and understand the ministry and mission opportunities God has presented it with. One of the questions to ask ourselves is, '*How will we make our case to the culture about the truth of Christianity*'.

As we work to serve the present age in fulfilment of our calling, may we be led by God's Spirit to apply our beliefs to our context. We can learn from Rachel Clarke in this process. She is genuine, reflecting on her own struggles and challenges. Her writing is rooted in real life. She acknowledges the difficult aspects of human experience but does not become hopeless or despondent. She offers convincing reasons to be thankful and hopeful. If our churches can take a similar approach, then we will find a way forward that will glorify God.

God bless you,

Keith

Keith Beckingham, Superintendent minister.