

When Maurice Chevalier reached the age of eighty he was asked what it felt like. ‘Pretty good,’ he replied, ‘especially when you consider the alternative.’ Well, like most I chuckled over that when I first heard it, but then I had the over-pious thought, ‘well, that’s not a very Christian attitude, is it? What about Paul’s famous cry - for me to live is Christ but to die is gain - to be with Christ which is far better?’ Now, perhaps because that age is a lot more relevant now than it was then, I am beginning to change my mind.

Although Paul’s cries are usually interpreted as positive affirmations of faith I do wonder if you can read them as coming from a man who is tired. He has had an extraordinary life. He threw up a comfortable job in the Jewish hierarchy and turned into a wandering preacher – Paul of no fixed address. He had suffered shipwreck and imprisonment, and been beaten up countless times by mobs and the judiciary alike.

His enemies were everywhere and his friends seem to cause him even more grief. Even in this letter, which is generally reckoned to be his most cheerful one, he had to tell the congregation to live up to their faith. And on top of all that he was suffering his thorn in the flesh, whatever it was it was a condition which made life uncomfortable for him. I wouldn’t be at all surprised to learn that, in jail yet again, with the scaffold looking even closer this time, if he didn’t toy with the thought ‘OK Lord, I think enough’s enough, take me home please.’

There is a way of thinking about life which says there is a predetermined span 'down here' and then we sequentially get to a more interesting stage 'up there'. The span has of course been pushed out a bit. When the Psalmist muttered that it was three score years and ten, or eighty if we had a bit more, but it was hard work anyway, he wasn't laying down a principle inherent in God's creation, he was merely commenting on life as he saw it over two and half thousand years ago. Scientists today talk of the possibility of a disease free life which goes up to 120 years (I'd vote for that!).

Time on this earth is measured by us to suit our life, but it is a mistake to try to superimpose our timeline on the hereafter. As the old hymn has it, 'when we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun.' Or to put it another way we are not missing out on any time in heaven by being alive on earth, for the concept of time as we know it doesn't apply in God's kingdom. Actually even in this universe time can behave pretty peculiarly as Einstein pointed out, so we shouldn't be surprised.

Our life is a gift from God and we should enjoy every minute without thinking that we should really be 'promoted to glory'. Of course our enjoyment shouldn't be a selfish thing, for God has work for all of us to do and Paul in fact recognized that and so moved on from 'to be with Christ which is far better' to recognize his responsibilities to the infant churches. Vicars often say they never can retire, but in truth that applies to all of us.

The nature of our work may change to match our physical capabilities, but work there will be.

We have just had the parliamentary debate on assisted dying, and who knows what might follow. But I would not like what I have just said to be a condemnation of those for whom life is an intolerable physical burden. We are promised that we shall not be tested beyond what we can endure, and when you see what some people have to suffer from their malfunctioning bodies then the words ‘happy release’ have real meaning. I do not condemn those who say that people who suffer like that should have a say in when their life ends. But even though we may have to make hard decisions with a sad heart, as the lawyers say, ‘hard cases make bad law’ and the general principle that life is good remains. We should fight for life and rage, rage against the dying of the light. Paul in another letter stated that although his body was wearing out and bits were liable to fall off, the real Paul was still getting better and better inside him.

The enthusiasm and joy expressed in today's reading are all the more remarkable when you take into account that Paul could well have been facing a death sentence. He was nevertheless able to communicate the fire that was still burning brightly within.

We too have the opportunity to go on improving in our innermost being. Even if we look like Victor Meldrew, we don't have to think like him. Paul goes on to say ‘living is Christ’. If we see our lives here as an opportunity for fellowship with Christ then we can get

the right focus for our daily activities. What happens afterwards is in another dimension, and frankly we don't have to worry about that now.

I guess that at some time or other we have all been tempted to say, 'enough is enough.' The effort one puts in day after day doesn't seem justified by results and life becomes a drag. And even if we don't actually wish to quit this sphere physically then we say to ourselves 'I've earned my rest, I think I'll withdraw and take things easy from now on.' Paul is saying 'no' to those thoughts. And it is never too late to start working in the Lord's vineyard. In the parable the last shift taken on appeared to their fellow workers to be part-timers, but that's not how God looked at it. What is important is not when we started, but whether we have stopped. We can't wield pickaxes the way we used to but there is plenty to do. Each of us needs to listen out for the still small voice which nudges us towards what God has lined up for us.

Following Jesus is not an insurance policy for a long life and could even result in our time on earth being curtailed as it was eventually for Paul, though perhaps the risk in Britain today is somewhat lower. But however long we've got left here the overall objective remains to live out our lives in joyful service, and who knows we may even last a few more years down here if we do so. That'll be a bonus, not a punishment!

As it was Paul's prayer this is also my prayer, that your love may flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Live a lover's life, a life Jesus will be

proud of, getting everyone involved in the glory and
praise of God