My brief is to write of ageing, in the context of public theology, providing an Anglican perspective. What are ageing persons to the kingdom of God? We often hear of older people, set in their ways, who want old and traditional worship, while the critics say the church should be moving to embrace change and open to being continually renewed.

But is this really so? Can older people of faith be so easily categorised, and understood as one homogenous group? What place is there in the Church, in fact, the Anglican Church of Australia for older people? If the demographic picture of the churches is acknowledged, the Anglican Church is one of those ageing churches, shown overall to be in decline by each succeeding census. In this context we could suggest that the predominance of older people within the church is a sign of the decline of the Church. Yet, if we see the Church only from the perspective of age, we may miss the significance of the contribution of the different cohorts across the life span to the faith and the Church. In fact, the older Anglicans are the bearers of the story from generation to generation. Have we perhaps, in modernity, failed in our telling of the story to the coming generation?

We know now from outside the church, in the wider community, that narrative, our story, is a vital part of being human. Indeed, God has known this from the beginning! It is only within the last few decades that this realisation has been rediscovered. As we consider our place in the history of faith and our roles as Christians, it becomes apparent that there are vital connections to be made and maintained between the generations, in the continuing journey of the church.

In the reading from Matthew (19:16-30), Jesus spoke of the relationship that we are to have first with God, and then with each other. Narrative is central to this relationship.

Too often in the past, the desires of older Christians to tell their story, or to see good order and maintain traditions has been regarded as having...
an established mind-set, even being rigid and set in their ways. And since I am ageing too, I need to look and see if I too am becoming set in my ways. A balance is needed to hold both the traditions of the faith and at the same time, be open to vision where the Spirit is calling us to new ways of expressing the faith.

What assumptions do we hold about older Christians and Anglican Christians in particular? Is it about needing the 'old liturgies'? Not wanting to get with it? What are myths of ageing and what are the realities? Could there be some aspects of worship that do form part of the Anglican way of worship and that are rich and need preserving? And isn't our scripture actually 'old' and yet 'new', at the same time?

As Anglicans we are aware of the need to hold tradition and scripture and revelation as guides for our being Christian. We are also aware of our very diversity within unity of being Anglican.

For many older people the centrality of the Eucharist is held dear, for the current cohort of older people, being an Anglican was often centred on this. There has been a faithfulness of tradition. Knowing the Great Thanksgiving prayer, and living it. This has been a feeding of the people, reconnecting with the story that enables us to move out towards the public of the wider community.

I remember an elderly woman with rapidly advancing Alzheimer's; she was a parishioner at a church I was associated with. She had been a long term pastoral carer in the nursing home across the road. She had sung in the choir for many years. Now she still came, but now, brought by her husband, who had helped her to dress that morning and faithfully supported her in her faith. She still sang with the choir, and at times she had to be turned in the right direction to face the altar. She came to the stage that she mostly only spoke through the singing. Then, as her condition progressed and the priest began the Great Thanksgiving prayer, she too would pray it. This was an awesome time, as she truly entered into the worship she had known for many years.

This woman had modelled an Anglican tradition of being Christian, with her faithfulness in worship and community, by her care of others who were frail and ageing. This is one part of the public face of the church. It is modelled by many older people.

What happens when people like this woman become too frail, or their dementia has progressed too far for them to be able to attend church? Christine Bryden, who herself has dementia has pondered this and says that we, the Body of Christ must then become the memory for these people.
The person may not be able to concentrate with a full length church service, but to deprive them of being part of worship is a real loss for the person who has been removed from the worshipping community.

One of the biggest challenges that faces an ageing church and community is around care of the weak and vulnerable. Those with dementia certainly form an important part of this group. We know that people with dementia can and do respond to emotional and spiritual support, we know that they are still persons, with needs for connectedness and love, just like everyone else. Our care, when they can no longer care for themselves, must be based on love centred in Christ.

Yet, a problem of providing aged care services to the wider community is the question of how these are provided. If Anglicans provide the services, then the services should be of an Anglican flavour. Just what does that mean? It means a biblical base of understanding of the nature of the human being, and of the nature of the work of Jesus in the world. This base becomes the foundation from which social justice of the church is carried forth. Where social justice and service provision interface with government funding, the Church needs to clearly identify its mission within public theology. It may also be that the Church, being faithful in its mission, must act as critique of the mission of the government in the provision of services.

A clear gospel imperative is applied by Christians to ministry by, with and to older people. Aged care services have long been a part of the public face of Anglicanism. Often older people, having time and experience have been the ones to volunteer to care for those in need, due to disabilities or frailty of ageing.

Taking the biblical perspective on ageing, we may model effective ageing for the wider society. For us, the ageing Simeon and Anna are role models who come centre stage to announce the coming of God’s Son into the world. The epistles strongly urge the proper roles of elders, and the role of widows, in the new church, as well as appropriate care and ministry to widows.

While Anglicanism has traditionally engaged in social justice through care of aged people, there is a danger that we may be paternalistic in our care. We may offer services, but fail to affirm older people who are still independent and have gifts, wisdom and experience to offer to others.

We would do well to remember too, that part of the journey into later life is also about continuing to grow spiritually, even as the body declines.
in strength, while engaging actively with life and the journey of faith. This is a journey that we share within the Church and out into the public.

References