

View from the Rectory window September 25

While searching for a theme for my September article, I asked a friend (who had no children herself) what would be a suitable subject to write about. Her reply was ‘back to school’. Although for many families September does mark the return to the school routine and the end of the summer holidays. How does the theme of ‘back to school’ relate to all of us – because I believe it does.

I always remember a well-known television actor being interviewed about the sad loss of his child through illness, and how he had come to terms with his grief by describing it as though the child had passed the exam of life early and therefore gone straight to heaven. Such an interpretation may be like the expression ‘only the good die young’, which I personally do not relate to at all. Perhaps the common thread is not to equate moral or spiritual merit with the longevity of life. But in some shape or form to acknowledge that a person (child or adult), if they are fragile, sensitive and delicate in body, mind or spirit find this world too harsh, unforgiving, and painful to endure. Tragedies always remind us how fragile life is, how all of us are only ever a breath away from our mortality. Moreover, I do not believe that we should go down the theological path of predestination for ourselves or others, in terms of life span or events that happen in our lives.

Psalm 39:4

“Show me, Lord, my life’s end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is.” – Psalm 39:4

James 4:14

“Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” – James 4:14

I do not feel these references from scripture imply that God is responsible for setting a limit on any one’s life expectancy, young or old. Instead, I believe scripture continually reminds us of the fragility of human life compared to the awesome power of his creation. And that compared to the almighty power of creation young and old are all equally like a fleeting mist. A fleeting mist that is as much a gift from our loving God as every grain of sand on the beach and every bird in the sky.

How is this related to going ‘back to school’? It is in a twofold sense, firstly that while we may become too old to learn ‘new tricks’, we are never too old to re-learn/remember eternal truths or lessons of the past. And secondly, much of our later lives can be a process of learning how much we think we know but in fact do not. Archbishop Rowan often wrote of the Christian life being a journey of unlearning, shedding the falsehoods of human intellect and worldly presumption, to attain the standard of faith, belief, and true love.

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