

On this seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time I sit pondering the word of Paul to the Ephesians 4:1 : I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to lead a life worthy of your vocation.

It is a fine sunny morning which would normally tempt me to go for a brisk walk, but alas, I realise that I too am a prisoner, not only of the Lord which is a welcome state, but of my own body, which is far more challenging! For while a little fall can happen to anybody without mishap, at a later stage of life the consequences can be more dire, since they may require surgery and prolonged recovery, which is what has happened to me. A nice brisk walk this morning is thus out of the question.

Hence my reflections as an ageing prisoner in the presence of the Lord.

Ageing? Well, yes, that is a fact. Unfortunately the ageing process is often seen in our society as an inevitable decline into senility and incompetence. Perhaps this is why some people try either to camouflage the obvious signs of ageing, or devise so-called 'bucket lists' in the hope of keeping decline and death at bay with constant and sometimes costly activity.

But inevitable senility as such is far from being a universal truth, as we all know. Beautiful examples of active centenarians who are still interested in life abound, as well as many older persons who suffer incapacitating illnesses with great fortitude and patience, even humour, and gratitude for those who care for them.

My recent experience in hospital provided me with a great example of the resilience and competence of older people. In my ward there was a 94 year-old woman in constant pain, but invariably positive and gracious, and concerned about her neighbour. This person was 91, fractious and confused for a day or two, it is true, but still very aware of her circumstances. The fourth elderly 'inmate' was a strong, kindly and independent woman who was longing to return to her little council unit and get on with her life. At 84 I was the youngest woman there, soon on my feet and ready to be discharged, but - temporarily shackled to an appliance for assistance and in need of immediate further care.

These musings led me to consider the challenge in the rest of Paul's sentence: I implore you to lead a life worthy of your vocation. Am I worthy

of my vocation? After all our church has always insisted on our inherent unworthiness!

Without going into an historical explanation of why this came about, I recall the declaration of the Second Vatican Council which, inspired by the Spirit, stated unequivocally that we are all called to holiness. That is our vocation. And why? Because God is love and God cannot create what is not inherently lovable and good, and therefore capable of holiness. Worthiness, as such, has nothing to do with it. What Paul seems to be saying is: Accept your vocation of holiness, stand up and live it to the full, and he tells us how to do that: Bear with one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience.

These gifts are surely on display in all those around me, but I am nevertheless challenged to forget my 'unworthiness', to concentrate on, and live in God's infinite love for me, for others, and for all of creation. That is to put on the mind of Christ who came to reveal the Father's love, not just for some, but for all.

As we grow older we hope that with hindsight and experience will come wisdom and serenity. High ideals, indeed! But not just for those we consider to be saints, beyond our reach. Such gifts are the prerogative of every child of God, already conferred upon us by our loving Creator. True fullness of life is attained by coming to see ourselves and all others with the eyes of God and rejoicing in what we see of God's goodness in them. Gratitude for the gift of life and such abundant love should be, can be, our hallmark.

If, as we age, we find ourselves imprisoned in our bodies, let us remember that we are really being granted the wonderful privilege of having time to reflect, to look around us and beyond our personal aches and pains, to see the face of Christ in others and to respond with warmth and gentleness, recognising their need as something that is often greater than our own. Our infirmities will then no longer imprison us and we will live the true freedom of the children of God.

Thank you, Saint Paul. You prayed that God would remove the thorn from your side and God simply replied: My grace is sufficient for you. May it be sufficient for me too, and for you.