



From hand to hand, from age to age

As you've heard the whole idea of Circus Spirit (named after our location at Piccadilly Circus) came about when just 2 or 3 of our congregation who were in their 20s, having done the Camino course, thought that they'd like to get together and invite others to an open and accepting space to discuss faith and life.

I did the talk at the first evening and when I asked what they'd like me to talk about they gave me the title "Does religion ruin spirituality?". Among the people who came were the founder of the Sunday Assembly, the atheists' church that meets in North London, and Circus Spirit was born....

So, if we are to believe the analysis of generations, and these are always hopeless generalisations – then our current society goes something like this, see where you fit in:

There are *the traditionalists*, born 1945 or before, whose childhood experience is WWII or immediately post war. There are *the baby boomers*, born 1946 to 1964. There is *Generation X*, born between 1965 and 1976 (that's me by the way). Then there is *Gen Y*, or *the millennials*, born between 1977 and 1995, and then there is *Generation Z*, or *the centennials* as they're called, born 1996 or later. We're due another one quite soon and the babies born now are much more likely than any generation before them to live to 100 years old.

Tomorrow night, I am at St Martin in the Fields with their vicar Sam Wells. We are talking about "reforming the church". And I guess some of what we will talk about is that Generation Z, or Centennials, are digital natives while most of the people in church are digital immigrants, even the millennials and certainly anyone before them. How the church engages with the online world is really key, as that's where most people are now getting most of their information, and inspiration. My generation (Generation X) is the one that built the internet and developed its language (which always seems to me rather weirdly medical – when we talk about online having bugs or viruses) but are now completely outclassed by the millennials and centennials who are digital natives, born and brought up as much online as

irl, which if you don't know, stands for 'In Real Life'.

All this might be fun, interesting, diverting but what bearing does it have on our faith, on our lives lived as Christians? Understanding generational differences helps us in some of the gospel tasks that we commit to as Christians. We commit to deepening our empathy for one another, and that includes across generations. We commit to justice and peace (and that includes generational justice) that one generation is not passing on unjust practices or situations to the next. We commit to love, to cultivate wonder, to celebrate joy in the world. And that means among the generations, from generation to generation.

And the story that Jesus told in the gospels today is about different generations. He starts off, as he often starts off, by saying "a man had two sons". Immediately we think of the story of the prodigal son, usually the second son is more wild than the older one. We immediately have a set of assumptions about these sons. One of them, we're not told if he's older or younger, refused to go to work but then changed his mind and went. The other one promised he would go and then didn't. And as always with the parables, there's a deeper meaning: you could say it doesn't matter half so much what we say as what we do. The older generation ask the younger generation to work. One said he would then didn't turn up. The other refused then did.

It reminds me of a conversation I heard recently. A friend of mine's 20-year-old son asked if he could borrow the car tonight to go out. 'Okay,' said Mum, 'but it would have been really helpful if you'd asked me a couple of days ago as I've now got to change stuff around.' Fair enough, you might think. 'But Mum, he said, 'the party wasn't happening a couple of days ago. We arranged it on Facebook this afternoon.' Two generations operating on different timescales. Our age has all kinds of cultural and emotional meanings attached to it. We celebrate some more than others; 18 and 21, then we seem to

stick to round numbers (30, 40, 50) we say some youngsters have an old soul, and some octogenarians have a youthful spirit. But what we know about ageing is that our bodies change. We observe the changes. If we're able to be at peace with this process, we embrace the changes and adapt as we go along. Sometimes we might feel as if we're fighting our bodies and, in any case, we might from time to time catch sight of ourselves in the mirror and think, 'Who's that old lady?', because inside we're feel just as mixed up as we did when we were 17.

It's being said often that despite being connected more than ever, we are a lonelier society, more isolated from one another. Given the pace of change in this society, it's possible for generations to become estranged, simply never meeting really, well, not meeting to talk. A recent project set up a nursery for toddlers in a care home for older people. Other projects have found 17 and 18-year-olds giving computer lessons to 70 somethings, finding ways for the

generations to interact safely and creatively. Church is one of those places, given the rate of change in society, where different generations who, on one level, experience the world quite differently from each other, can meet together safely and form friendships, deepen our empathy for one another, and keep our hearts open to one another.

From Anna in the gospel of Luke who is 84, to the 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple, to the 30 something disciples to the teenage Mary, we find ourselves whatever our age or generation reflected in Scripture as in life. I pray that we are a church full of people who are curious about other generations, older or younger, curious, respectful, keen to listen, keen to try to understand. And why? The better that we can love one another, tell our stories and be heard, and know more deeply who we are before God, who loves us all our days and who will love us still when our days are passed. Amen.