

Moravian Women's Association - Home & Overseas Paper - May 2018

Waiting for the Last Bus - Reflections on Life and Death by Richard Holloway (Canongate £14.99, 156 pages)

Its impossible to catch all of a book in a short review, but this book is a thoughtful, inspirational, and easy to read reflection on being old and facing death.

Richard Holloway is a retired Church of Scotland Bishop of Edinburgh, now 84 years old. He started life as an entirely conventional career priest, he is also a writer and broadcaster.

Old age is as Bette Davis said "*not for sissies*", its a continuous series of losses.

He reflects on his life as a priest who has lost the religious certainties of his youth. Being a member of a Church congregation is to watch chairs emptying, as death accomplishes its work. Sitting in Church, he is often more aware of the presence of the dead than of the living, He remembers where they sat, a hymn they loved, sung again this morning, and maybe the bitterness of their passing. But he finds this fortifying, not depressing, a reminder that this is how it goes and he must be reconciled to it. One day *his* seat will be empty.

He understands sorrow at the loss of the Church itself, as it slowly fades from the national landscape and becomes just another sect among many. However, he cannot mourn the passing of the moral attitudes those vanished Churches of his youth represented. He has learned that our values and moral norms are provisional. He no longer feels at home in busy reactionary Churches, harking back to a past golden age, mostly ignored by the young. He suggests trying choral evensong at a Cathedral, where they leave your soul unmolested for an hour, and you can avoid recruiters out to press-gang your mind.

Holloway goes on to discuss freewill, and how we can be dismayed when we look back at what we did not achieve in our lives. He refers many times to his favourite Apostle Peter, with his passions, terrible flaws, and human reactions to events.

He considers what we know about the moment of death, the consolations of religion, art, and music. How funeral services have changed from being about the hereafter to celebrating the life of the deceased, and well known forms are abandoned for individually crafted expressions. The dying can

help their loved ones' grief by thinking ahead and preparation - writing letters and leaving instructions.

Some things about ageing have to be accepted. Holloway's wife of many years has gone deaf, and he admits it irritates him. If we are not careful we start to resent the elderly with their minor irritations, slow movements, and memory loss. Holloway and his wife deal with their fading energies with humour and understanding. He also has to face giving up the prospect of the future - not knowing what will become of grandchildren.

Old age can be bitter if it is not a calm preparation for death, but a grim battle to keep it at bay. He faces squarely the envy the old have for the young - for being young. Each generation has to learn to take a bow and leave the stage.

Holloway is in favour of examining our lives as we come to the end of life, and realises that what he regrets most was rushing through his life, so that he "*missed it*" whilst in the midst of it. He spent too much time impatiently racing through the world. He is now sorry that he did not pay more attention particularly to close friends and family. "*Looking ahead*" rather than "*looking around*". He blames his own impatience, but also catching the religious bug early.

He is grateful to old age for slowing him down at last before its too late, and wishes he'd figured out sooner that we only get to play the cards we're given, and *how* we play the last card can win the game. A death well faced, brave, and reconciled, can perfect an imperfect life. He prays that he will do his own dying well.

"Anxiety fades as I recognise that my name has been enrolled in the great democracy of the dead. Sooner or later the bus will be along for me. But I've been a walker all my life, so when I hear its approach afar off I hope I'll have time to lace on my boots and set out to meet it. I'll try to take it easy this time."

Naomi Hancock

Please note, this is a *book review*, not my personal opinions on the topics Richard Holloway discusses.