

Identity and the Approach of Retirement

Retirement is a strange time of life. Often it has been eagerly anticipated – after all those years of longing for a break from the grind, finally there is the opportunity to slow down. No more early mornings – or shift work. No more commuting on trains – or sitting in traffic. No more hours spent in front of a screen. No more deadlines, staff tensions or inboxes that just can't be cleared. No more politics. Surely, it's the dream. But, when it begins to come close, other emotions can arise.

There are practical questions that people need to wrestle with in this season of life. Is my pension provision adequate? How do I leave my job well? How will I spend my time once retired? Is this the moment to take up bowls or golf? But there is so much more.

Changes in identity

In some ways, retirement brings significant changes. We will no longer be the valued employee – or the respected boss – or the long-serving assistant. We will lose a title, lose a structure, even lose a community of colleagues some of whom may have become very close. We will cease to be an active breadwinner. If we have been in management, we will cease to have authority and there will be a significant shift in our level of responsibility. These are all things that may have been deeply important to us over the years. Their loss may be experienced as a grief – one that can be poured out to the Lord in lament.

Questions of identity

Retirement can bring profound questions too. With all those losses mentioned above, what's left? Am I still needed? Am I still wanted? What is my role in life? How do I now fit in society? Do I have value? How will others see me now? The more dominant a particular job or career has been in our life, the deeper those questions are likely to sit. If we are good at our job, maybe it has been something that provided us with a sense of self-worth, purpose and security. If we love our job, maybe it has become something we cling to as a comfort, a joy or a hope.

Idols v identity

If any of this is sounding familiar, it is worth asking ourselves whether our job has been playing too big a part in our life. Work, from Genesis 1, was God's very good idea – we are made to work, it's an expression of who God has made us to be. And we are called to work as if working for the Lord (Colossians 3:23). But it is not work that provides us with meaning. What we do does not define us. How we are viewed at work offers us nothing more than a transitory identity. If we have been putting our hope – our heart – into our employment then it is possible it has become a false refuge for us. Rather than a place to express our identity, it may have become a place where we have maybe created a temporary identity – one where we are the one who is needed, the one who is to be followed or seen to be entirely competent. Transitory identities are ones to be set aside. Repentance, in the loving arms of the Father who is full of grace, is our privilege and call.

Identity in Christ

Bowled over afresh by grace, approaching retirement is a key moment to refocus on our identity in Christ. In Jesus, we are given the status of a chosen child of the King of all things - an identity that has nothing to do with our activity and everything to do with the gift we have received from the Lord of all things. We are as precious when we are retired as we are when we are working.

But we also have a role in retirement. In God's world, we have a commission to hold out words of life to those who do not yet know the glories of Christ. In his church, we have the call to live lives of holiness and encouraging each other to become more like Jesus, as we speak the truth in love to one another (Ephesians 4:15). Retirement may bring a change in what we do, but it is not a step down in the importance of what we do. Every relationship, every conversation – however small, is an opportunity to show the love of Christ and make an eternal difference to people's lives. Indeed, there may be greater opportunities to focus on informal ministry when other roles are set aside.

Identity investment

The transition into retirement won't necessarily come easily. Relationships outside of work will take time to be developed. A new pace, a new routine, will gradually form through trial and error. Learning to spend more unstructured time with a spouse can be a transition that requires much grace and forgiveness. But coming to see that our value is still rooted in God's undeserved grace and that the most important labour a human can engage in still lies firmly within our remit, is a beautiful way to enter into the rest of our life.