



# Remembering Grandparents and the Elderly

**John Cullen**, editor of *Intercom* and parish priest of Ahascragh, marks World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly with his memory of Captain Tom, whose hope and optimism cheered many during the early days of COVID-19.



On the 31 January Pope Francis established a World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly. Two days later, on the 2 February, the pandemic in its indiscriminating cruelty claimed the life of Captain Sir Tom Moore, who was aged 100. Tom was a father of two daughters and grandfather of four grandchildren.

Captain Tom's wistful motto captured the hearts of people through a protracted pandemic: 'tomorrow will

be a good day'. It echoes the wartime song '*We'll Meet Again*' by Dame Vera Lynn, who died aged 103 in 2020. Incidentally, Vera always went by her grandmother's maiden name! Captain Tom and Dame Vera are potent symbols of resilient hope, a can-do attitude of indefatigable determination that always looks at the bright side of life.

The 2nd of February is the day that the Church honours the elderly Anna

and Simeon as they recognise and embrace the Child who is prophetically called 'a light to enlighten'. Simeon and Anna are gospel people who teach us to have a yearning to 'look forward to a new future of consolation' in Christ.

The pandemic has drawn attention to the dark space of a voiceless, vulnerable loneliness that many of the elderly inhabit. Captain Tom's vision led people to bring the elderly out of the shadows and into the spotlight, where they no longer felt excluded and forgotten.

By the age of 99, most of us might think it was time to take it easy and be grateful for a long life. But not Captain Tom! His was no ordinary life. His last year of life was his legacy. He raised £40 million for the National Health Service. Though he couldn't walk far, he decided to walk in his garden. He succeeded in walking way beyond the gospel 'extra mile'. He inspired millions of people, encouraging them not to let their circumstances limit their imaginations. Just like Jesus at the wedding feast of Cana, turning the water of scarcity into the wine of abundance, Captain Tom turned limitation and isolation into generosity and possibility.

Captain Tom's witness is a challenge to all of us. We can be fixated by what we have been deprived of by the pandemic or we can turn our attention to what we have in abundance. Captain Tom did not dwell on his powerlessness. He saw how it could catalyse a

pressurised NHS.

This is our choice every day: to see the emptiness of what we cannot do or to see how our weakness can be the Holy Spirit's opportunity. This is particularly true for our Church today. In the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem there is a chamber of mirrors. One candle is lit that reflects and refracts light into numerous lights. It symbolises that all life is interconnected.

Think about it: in a world of shutdowns and pandemic sickness that was eerily frightening, the quiet light of Captain Tom shuffled into millions of people's consciousness with his walking frame and a modest challenge. He is also the oldest person to ever have had had a number one hit with 'You'll never Walk Alone' recorded with Michael Ball and the Health Service Choir, Voices of Care.

World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly will take place on the Fourth Sunday in July, close to the feasts of Ss Joachim and Anne, the grandparents of Jesus. We salute in prayer the many people who died from the pandemic and who were without the presence of intimate love from family members.

Long after the pandemic is over, the example and dreams of Captain Tom, as well as the dreams of so many elderly who have died, will speak a quiet eloquence to us every day. If you are feeling sad, lonely and dislocated emotionally or spiritually, remember Captain Tom's words 'tomorrow will be a good day'. 💕

