

Michael Flanders (of Flanders and Swann fame) as a young man had everything going for him: Oxford scholar, actor, orator, athlete; as a RNVR officer he even survived his ship being torpedoed in 1942. But in 1943, still at sea, he contracted polio, which left him wheelchair bound for the rest of his life.

That may have been the last interesting word to say about him, except that he went on to be the broadcaster, humourist, lyricist, and actor with whom many of us will be familiar. (If you're not, get a recording of the musical revue, "At the Drop of a Hat.")

The songs he wrote - Swann composed the music - tended toward gentle satire, many revealing the inevitability of whatever life has in store - *The Gas Man Cometh*, *The Slow Train*, *A Gnu*, and of course irrepressible love: *The Hippopotamus Song* !

Yet it was an unset piece of his verse, which I came across recently in the back of a song book, which made me think again of the humour of it all. Good humour works as it does because there is an understanding of life's inevitability, which we all have in common, and requires humility to accept it.

In this verse, Flanders lists the numbers allocated to him in life; his date of birth, registration, address, service IDs, passport, NI, driving licence, telephone, NHS, bank, union, VAT, etc. It ends:

*And TIME LIFE International (Amsterdam) Inc.*

*addresses me as Mr Flanders 581 101 L03 FLAN-063 M 992*

*but refers to me in private as 400000 00840 0 1 00183N 06 S 29.*

*My days are numbered.*

And so they were. The year after he wrote that, 1975, at the age of 53, he died suddenly of a ruptured brain aneurysm.

Flander's story seemed to be that we have the capacity to smile with confidence at the inevitability of life. Our days are numbered, as so often the season of Autumn reminds us. So let's live them in their fulness. That's what Jesus came to free us up to do. And what psalm 90 tells us, too:

*[Lord] teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.*

*Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*

A good prayer to start the day, whatever the season.