

Loneliness

Gen 2: 18-25, Eccles 4 1-3, 9-16 & John 13:31-14:3

I was out on a bike ride on Thursday morning with a group of other road cyclists and, as I was soon dropped by the bunch, I began thinking about loneliness as I found myself just pedalling alone. Fortunately one of the bunch dropped back and cycled with me and gave me encouragement as we toiled up Dominion Road and then up the Moutere Hill. In reality what I experienced was solitude rather than loneliness.

I read an interesting article in the Guardian Weekly a few months ago. It was by George Monbiot, an author and commentator on current affairs. As far as I know he is not a Christian but his article was entitled “Some deny society exists. Let’s prove them wrong”. He starts with this story, which I presume is fictitious, but nonetheless arresting. “A woman walks into a department store. She takes in the racks and stacks of stuff, the sugared music, the sale signs, the listless customers shuffling through the aisles, and is moved – suddenly and to her own astonishment – to shout. “Is this all there is?” An assistant comes round from behind his till: “No, madam. There’s more in our catalogue.” This is the answer we have been given to everything – the only answer. We may have lost our attachments, our communities and our sense of meaning and purpose, but there will be more money and more stuff with which to replace them.” He went on to say “human society has been pulled apart by consumerism and materialism, pushing us into an unprecedented age of loneliness.” Just ponder that phrase for a moment – “an unprecedented age of loneliness.”

http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/03/society-consumerism-support?CMP=share_btn_link

Mother Teresa said “Loneliness is the leprosy of modern society.” Alison Morgan refers to some work she did with one church in the UK; in the course of some door-to-door visiting, 90% of people in a single street asked for prayer for loneliness (The Word on the Wind p80).

We live in a world of confusing paradoxes.

There are more people in the world than ever before and we now have so many ways of communicating with each other, but yet within the Western World loneliness is the scourge of our age. Something doesn’t add up, it seems in reality we are not really communicating as real humans. All our wonderful technological toys keep people at arm’s length, you can Facebook and Twitter all you like, but your virtual friends can’t, for example, give the comforting arm around the shoulder when you need it. The importance of touch is lost, yet touch is a key part of real, deep communication. And are all these so called friends on Facebook, real friends with whom you can really be yourself and who would drop everything and come to you when you needed them? Or is the whole thing just another way of trying to impress people?

On Friday, The Independent, a UK newspaper, published an article entitled “The loneliness epidemic: We’re more connected than ever - but are we feeling more alone?” The article was written by an English Psychology Lecturer. It began by saying “Modern life is making us lonelier, and recent research indicates that this may be the next biggest public health issue on par with obesity and substance abuse. A recent review of studies indicates that loneliness increases mortality risk by 26%.” Apparently, it’s a problem that affects people of all ages. Studies have shown that between 20 and 80 per cent of adolescents report feeling lonely often, which is compared to 40 to 50 per cent in an elderly population. Very interestingly,

researchers have shown that loneliness and rejection activate the same parts of the brain as physical pain. The writer goes on to say “loneliness is about the quality rather than the quantity of relationships that we have.” A penetrating conclusion.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/features/the-loneliness-epidemic-more-connected-than-ever-but-feeling-more-alone-10143206.html>

We also live in the age of individualism, where the self is the new God. Consumerism feeds all this emphasis on the individual, your status comes from what you own and the labels attached to those things, not what kind of a person you are. Buy this you deserve it, you’re worth it, goes the slogan.

Alison Morgan said “The cultural ideal of the Western industrialised world is the self-sufficient, autonomous individual. We believe that an authentic identity is found not by being part of a community, but by exercising our own choices. In the last half century we have created for ourselves more personal freedom than ever before; but as our freedom increases it seems also that our communities weaken” (Word on the Wind p80). As someone else said “Loneliness is a terrible price to pay for independence.”

I have recently been reading an author by the name of Scot McKnight, who is a Professor of the New Testament in the USA. In his book “Embracing Grace” he says “Individualism is the biggest obstacle to the gospel of embracing grace. Individualism tells us we are our own, and we might be able to make it on our own. Individualism makes God and others into commodities we choose to further our own ends. Individualism diminishes who we are made to be.” As I read those words I thought of what Jesus said “whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt 10:38-39). McKnight goes on to say “Individualism diminishes us because it backs away from commitment and community. If humans are made to relate to God and to others, individualism attacks our very essence. the real problem in the Western world is individualism. Instead we need to see ourselves as individuals, but part of a larger community through which God is working.”

It’s interesting that in John Goldingay’s commentary on Genesis, he says concerning our passage in Genesis 2, “The Bible does not really talk about loneliness. It is a problem of urbanised society; in traditional societies, the problem would be the opposite.” Yet we now have over 50% of the world’s population living in cities, often accompanied by a breakdown in traditional society patterns and relationships.

The antidote to loneliness is connectedness to God and to His people. The Bible’s emphasis is on community. The very God we worship is community – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What is the whole mission of God? It is to call out a **people** for His own possession. As Peter says in his first epistle “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10). Every term Peter uses to describe the church is a plural noun – race, priesthood, nation and people. God’s purpose is to call out a people who will become a bride for His Son.

How does Jesus sum up the whole law of God – love God with all you are and love your neighbour as yourself. The cult of the individual does not fit in the Biblical narrative of the

people of God. Yes, God calls you as an individual to follow Him, but He then calls you into fellowship with His people and you can't have one without the other.

Sin cuts us off from God, from each other and from creation. In Genesis 3 the result of sin was estrangement from God, one another and the created world. Adam and Eve were banished from the garden, from communion with God as they had known it. Adam and Eve were at loggerheads – she made me do it, O no I didn't, it was the serpent's fault; and in the very next chapter Cain kills Abel, the first murder. Humankind was also estranged from the created world, so Adam was told that by the sweat of his brow he would have to cultivate the land where weeds would compete with his crops.

So Jesus, our Saviour, comes to bring us back into relationship with God, back into relationship with each other and back into relationship with creation, although all these things will find their ultimate reality and fulfilment in the new heavens and the new earth. Nevertheless we are meant to demonstrate the reality of those restored relationships in our lives now.

Firstly, a restored relationship with God.

In the later part of John's Gospel, in chapters 13-17, after having had an incredibly close relationship with the Twelve for over three years, Jesus begins to prepare them for the fact that He, in the flesh, will soon leave them. He does not want them to grieve unnecessarily for he has something else for them, they will not be left alone. Firstly, he will return after He has suffered (Jn. 14:18), secondly, He will be with them by His Spirit (Jn. 16:7) and thirdly, they will be with Him throughout eternity (Jn. 14:3). They will not be alone. As I reread those words, I am amazed by His care and tenderness towards them. It was so hard to get them to understand, yet He gently persists in loving them to the end.

As a Christian, we have that assurance that God is with us all the time. The writer to the Hebrews reminds the Christians to whom he is writing that God had said "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5). Paul wrote to the Corinthians "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (2 Cor. 4:8-10). Note that little phrase "persecuted but not forsaken". Paul knew the reality of the God who would never leave him or forsake him.

Secondly, restored relationships with one another.

So Jesus said in our gospel reading – "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). We demonstrate the reality of the gospel message by the way we love one another, demonstrating to the world that all the barriers and hostility that have been erected between us have been broken down by Jesus Christ (Eph. 2). The early church understood that and put it into practice, so Acts 2: 42-47 tells us: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and

generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

Those early disciples had an incredible sense of oneness and belonging, and this was not just warm fuzzy feelings, there was a raw practicality about selling what they had to give to those in need. It would be easy to dismiss this as just the youthful extravagance of the early church but Tertullian at the end of the second century could write about the Christian church “the lowly, the needy, the sick are shown particular consideration. Contributions are voluntary and proportionate to each one’s income; they are used to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls who are destitute of means and parents, and of old people now confined to the house, and such as have suffered shipwreck ... or any who happen to be in the mines or banished to the islands or shut up in prison for their fidelity to God’s Church. One in mind and soul, we do not hesitate to share our earthly good with one another. All things are common among us except our wives.” (Quoted by Michael Green “Evangelism in the early church”)

In Acts 4:32 it says about the early church that “there was not a needy person among them”. At first sight that might appear a great definition of Christian community “there was not a needy person among them”, but this was the result, the fruit of their community, their oneness, their love for one another. The church is not a collection of Christians, it is a community, the family of God with ties between us that transcend all earthly differences and ties.

In his 1997 book “Which way for the church” Rob Frost said this “The church of the new millennium will understand that its communal life is a sign of the kingdom of God. The church will become the antidote for the fragmentation of the family and the breakdown of human relationships. It will work to counter the lonely isolation in which countless millions will live their lives. It will celebrate the contribution of all. Congregations will express the kingdom in real relationships which echo God’s adoptive love. They will discover that worship flows from the richness of their communal life, and churches will not consist of clubs and meetings but networks of deep relationships. Churches will be villages that are the focus of deep belonging. They will recognise that the world is not looking for an organisation to join but a community to be part of.” Those words were written almost 20 years ago but they have a very up to date ring in the light of the articles I quoted at the beginning from the popular press.

I came across this useful description of a friend recently “A friend is one who helps you bridge the gaps between loneliness and fellowship, frustration and confidence, despair and hope, setbacks and success”. How much more are they a friend, when they can, in addition, pray for you and with you.