

Thoughts on Loneliness

Half a century ago, The Beatles sang Eleanor Rigby asking, ‘all the lonely people, where do they all come from?’ Loneliness was a common problem then and more so today. It is expected to become worse and affects people of all ages. Children feel they don’t measure up to their popular peers. Young adults face loneliness because of the superficiality of their relational interactions. Divorce, so common these days, splits up families with usually one partner having restricted access to the children, if any. Older people potentially find themselves without having even one person to talk to during a given week. Loneliness is devastating and often results in illness or even suicide.

Very deep down in our psyche we all feel alone. The thought that nobody really understands us. In our spirit there exists a sense of estrangement, as theologian Paul Tillich has pointed out. Not just from God, but from everything. In moments of a deeply seated and utterly private aloneness, we may be confronted with this reality. We keep it at bay by being busy. The immediacy of the internet and its infotainment makes that much easier these days. But it also allows for someone to disappear into their own world devoid of real people contact.

Paul Tillich commented famously that, ‘loneliness is the pain of being alone, while solitude is the glory of being alone.’ It is true. These two types of aloneness are very different. The first is common, while the second is hard to find. Moments of inner rest are precious and rare. In our frantic world people desperately try to access its qualities. Ideas like mindfulness and mental calm are popular. They draw on insights of ‘old-fashioned’ meditation and its related activities, which have become dressed up in a modern garb. It will not achieve solitude though, unless under special circumstances, nor does it aim to.

Solitude involves a mental coming to rest that is different. Busy modern people seek a quick readjustment of mind to the stresses of daily life to enter the fray again soon after. Entering solitude is a much slower process. It involves eliminating restless thoughts and depends much on time and place. It requires a space devoid of people and an inner restfulness that allows for environmental awareness. Places of solitude vary widely depending on circumstance. They may be a forest, a mountain, or being alone in a pleasant house. Solitude is an experience in which we feel unburdened by self and events – free to enjoy our own company and our surrounds without pressure. At ease with ourselves and, for a Christian, in the presence of Jesus.

Mindfulness is different. Modern practices make the self a main focus. Engaging with your inner person and letting go to bring the self into tranquillity. Admittedly, there are benefits to psycho-spiritual health. But you remain stuck, alone with yourself.

A Christian approach will avoid such egocentricity and gives primacy to the realm of God, which is a personal realm. Immediately, you are no longer alone. When a specific aspect of that realm becomes a focus we would call the exercise a mediation. Like looking into the mercy of God. Contemplation is a little different in that God's presence simply is enjoyed with a quiet spirit without a particular focus. The Holy Spirit brings a pleasant calm in which my spirit dwells and my thoughts remain at ease. Meditation and contemplation are often considered being the same, which is understandable, but not quite accurate.

Both, however, are an activity of spiritual engagement. And there are simpler ways. Ordinary reflection, when it seeks to connect with the divine realm, is a like engagement. As is quietly talking to Jesus in my mind during a day's work. It is a good habit that can be cultivated – a mental activity that is simple and effective. Christian spiritual tradition is rich in ideas about communicating with the Lord. (See my book *Meeting Emma*) And all of it reduces loneliness for interacting with God is always personal.

The idea that we should first engage in significant prayer before a meaningful conversation with Jesus becomes possible, is incorrect. Not that such prayer is unimportant. Our spirits must be fed. But Jesus always has a listening ear to anyone reaching out in whatever way. Over time, being relational with him can become so natural, that it seems almost too easy. Its value may be overlooked. That would be a mistake.

Not that involving Jesus will make my aloneness fully disappear. Our humanity asks for more. As God said in the creation story: 'It is not good for a person to be alone.' People are meant to be with other people and in significant ways. We are relational beings, which is our need. Surely, having a pet friend when lonely is a good idea. People with green fingers may find companionship in their garden by interacting with plants, bushes and trees. For some, that is sufficient in making loneliness manageable. For most of us, interpersonal relating is needed to diminish that sense of being on our own and perhaps forgotten.

Jesus well understood this. Always when considering relationality the great commandment features strongly. Love God, and your neighbour as yourself. To love means to relate, which can range from the deepest feelings to the simplest of caring. Love in action reduces loneliness and brings a sense of belonging. That is what love is about. Acts of love and caring help towards psycho-spiritual health.

Usually, society offers good opportunities for mingling with people. Voluntary work, clubs, reading groups, you name it. Stepping out amongst them requires courage and some confidence. The mind can play its tricks in suggesting that nobody cares anyway, so why make an effort. It's an easy trap to fall into. Just remember that everyone has something to give and you are no different. Sow and you will reap, Scripture tells us. But it takes a while to score a harvest. As we offer our small

involvement and care to others, we will in time be cared for in return. We will find people to talk to and have meaningful conversations. It often happens in families that its members avoid each other for whatever reason. Often that can be overcome; if not with everyone, perhaps with a few. Family can offer a great sense of belonging.

Finally, there are the elderly and disabled who are stuck at home. Reaching out to them will enrich their lives and our own also. Even helping just one person makes a great difference. Loneliness is a big problem in society that will never be fully overcome. But we can do our bit.

To me, Jesus makes a real difference. I am not imagining it, when sensing he is near. I also know that I can step out of my isolation into the world to interact with others. The Holy Spirit will help me to project the nature of Christ simply by who I am. That will be attractive to people even though I don't tell them why this may be so. Our world is for many a lonely place. The long-term good news is that there awaits a heavenly future in which the word loneliness has become meaningless.

If you have found this interesting please consider my books in which much more is explained about God and the reality of an authentic Christian perspective on life – the benefits that offers.

Thank you,

Michael