

April 6

Reflections – Alone VS Lonely

2020

I explore the difference between being alone and lonely, those most affected and the power of faith as a combative measure

Reflections –
St Margaret's
Church

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I'm writing this from my home in May Bank since I am – like you – alone and under curfew until we hear to the contrary.

Interestingly, even prior to our present lockdown, figures published by the Office for National Statistics revealed a sharp rise in the number of single-person occupancies in the UK. The number of those living on their own increased by 16% between 1997 and 2017.

People living on their own spend an average of 92% of their disposable income, compared with two-adult households who spend only 83% of theirs, according to analysis of the expenditure of 25- to 64-year-olds.

People living alone are more likely to be renting, and feel less financially secure than couples without children, with fewer reporting they have money left over at the end of the week or month.

And the costs are not just financial: when it comes to well-being, persons actually on their own report lower levels of happiness and higher levels of anxiety as opposed to individuals currently in a partnership.

Isolation comes in many guises. Yet, it doesn't altogether mean "single occupancy." There is living "alone" and then there is "being lonely."

You may enjoy living by yourself, desire your own company from time to time, but doing that when you have no other choice because of the absence of real friends and family around you, is a totally different ball game altogether.

It is particularly difficult for those of different backgrounds: ethnic, cultural, social and disabled. Endeavouring one's best to fit in when you yourself are knowingly different, often presents humiliating – and sometimes debilitating - issues.

Therefore, as you can see the idea of living alone and actually feeling lonely, are complete opposites - an interesting subject, one on which I thought we could pause and reflect closely today.

To help us, I thought we would start by examining the fundamental definitions:

“Alone”: having no one else present.

“Lonely”: sad because one has no friends or company. Also includes: isolated, alone, all alone, without friends/companions, with no one to turn to, outcast, forsaken, abandoned, rejected, unloved, unwanted, unpopular, sad, unhappy and forlorn.

Quite a long list for “Lonely.” Why? Because it is multi on so many levels.

While we may accept the basic idea of “Being without company, friends”, as a clear sign of ostracism, a form of rejection leading to an enhanced feeling of isolation, the same can equally be said for the other – more intricate aspects of the definition: unwanted, unpopular, sad, unhappy and forlorn.

To illustrate: how many of us have ever found ourselves in a room full of people and still feel lonely?

You may perhaps speak differently, look and dress differently, be a totally different colour, have a facial or some other physical difference that sets you apart from the rest. How does that make you feel? Devastated I shouldn't wonder.

I've lost count the number of times I have attended meetings for exactly the same reasons as everyone else where I have been shunned or side-lined all because of my blindness.

I'm sure we've nearly all been in that situation on occasions. Unfortunately, for some – particularly those in residential care homes and similar institutions where one is minus autonomy – such a feeling may even be a daily occurrence.

You've doubtless seen videos and similar scenes on the topic of care homes on Panorama and across various online platforms in which the elderly are shunted about as though they were cattle. Woken in the morning, dressed, medicated and left in the day room half comatose in some dingy armchair surrounded by similarly partially compos mentis residents with individuals calling out inanelly, some

hoping for a reply, others just for something to say to break the silence and cut through the devastating isolation. Definitely not a “happy place to be” Mr Micawber.

Yet, we can all take comfort from our saviour, Jesus Christ. He truly understood what it meant to be “Lonely.”

In what way? He was completely “without sin,” (Hebrews 4:15), for one thing; Perfect in other words.

Perfection is not something we can fully grasp, seeing how none of us know what being “perfect” actually feels like.

Something resembling a “goody two shoes, perhaps? we neither of us like a “goody-goody” in our midst, someone whom we see as seemingly incapable of wrongdoing or putting so much as a foot out of line.

Yet, you often find that these so-called “goody-goodies” are minus several vital characteristics: “humility and empathy.” Almost bordering on “ostentatious.”

Jesus was neither of the above: not a “goody-goody”, nor was he without humility. He was most certainly not a megalomaniac.

Quite the opposite, in fact. “He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” (Isaiah 53:3)

Just reflect for a moment on what being “without sin” really must have been like for our saviour.

Everybody around him: his parents, extended family – even his disciples were all sinful, making Jesus something of more than a little different.

No one on earth could identify with him. No human being could put an arm around him as he sat in tears and say, "I know exactly what you're going through." His sorrow and grief (Isaiah 53:3) began way before Gethsemane.

However, Jesus' loneliness reached its apex the moment he became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21) when he was finally arrested and nailed to the tree and was "forsaken" by his Father (Matthew 27:46).

Admitted, never has the need for togetherness and the feeling of being wanted been so important than now when self-isolation has morphed into almost total lockdown, to the point where we feel our lives have completely been turned up-side-down.

The absence of regular associations with family and friends, familiar faces and genuine smiles, the touch of a hand, a warm embrace, a loving kiss, have suddenly vanished, leaving some staring into one huge empty void.

James 4:8 "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you ..."

Invisible and unseen, our heavenly father is only but a prayer away. Just like the wind and gravity which the eye cannot see, their strength and presence can clearly be felt. So too with God.

Our spiritual growth is similar to the patterns of our physical growth—it happens slowly over time so that we sometimes hardly notice it. Many times it's not until someone brings it up that we realize how much we've grown. To grow spiritually doesn't happen without some effort on our part in seeking God in prayer, Bible study, and fellowship. As our relationship with God grows, so too does our faith. Overtime you will notice that:

- Self-control is far easier to manage and you are less likely to become "incensed" when problems occur against your best endeavours.

"Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools" (Ecclesiastes 7:9)

- God is your number-one priority, the first to whom you turn in all things before all others.

“But I pray to you, Lord, in the time of your favour; in your great love, O God, answer me with your sure salvation” (Psalm 69:13).

- You feel inner contentment, less anxious and spiritually confident.

“Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes” (Psalm 37:7).

- You are inclined to make your intentions and loyalty your prime concern, instead of preoccupying yourself with the motives of others.

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” (2 Corinthians 13:5).

- You are less doubtful about God’s control over your life.

“Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things planned long ago” (Isaiah 25:1).

- You are a keen student of God’s word.

“I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have preserved my life” (Psalm 119:93).

- You prefer spiritual gifts than the material things of the world.

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2).

If you make prayer a regular – rather than irregular – occurrence, your friendship with God will grow. Social distancing doesn’t apply in this instance. You can experience His warm embrace and yet not be infected; speak to Him face-to-face without the aid of a mask; shake hands without washing them for 20 seconds afterward.

I truly believe God is all around, just waiting for you to let Him in.

Once in, you will never feel alone or lonely again.

Finally, I'd like to say a huge thank you to all those who are on the front line in the nation's battle against the coronavirus – whether that's as part of the NHS or emergency services, other kinds of essential work, or caring for relatives and friends. Please know that my thoughts are with you all.