

# Thoughts on loneliness

From Leeds Family Day 2010

I have very little experience of loneliness. I am very conscious of this and that it may not be appropriate for me to introduce this subject, so I thought it would be helpful if I took some thoughts from the talks and discussions at our recent Awareness Day on the subject of "Recognising Loneliness". It was introduced by Brother Alan Proctor a counsellor and developmental therapist with over thirty year's experience.

What do we mean by loneliness? So much depends on our own experience of being alone. We had comments like "a life of emptiness", "overwhelming sadness –no company or friendship". "I'm not special to any one".

There are other words associated with loneliness. I'm thinking of the word solitude. Does this have more positive connotations? I love that quotation from Psalms "Be still and know that I am God" What does this mean to you?

We may be thinking of a haven of peace and calm and absence of interruption; a place of prayer and meditation and fellowship with God. In solitude there can be a developing awareness of God's love for me and that I'm precious and valued. "I am a child of God; my Lord died and rose for me. My brothers and sisters care for me and value me too".

Clearly there is a difference between loneliness and solitude. Perhaps they are extremes - one a place of emptiness and darkness and the other a place of peace and fellowship.

At different times in our lives we may find ourselves somewhere between these two points. Given the choice between the two, all would want solitude rather than loneliness.

Some link loneliness with feelings of rejection. "I'm different. I don't fit in. I'm not part of a couple". "People find me challenging, difficult to talk to".

Think for a few moments of those we know who may be lonely – in this place of emotional emptiness and spiritual darkness. How can we help them?

It is marvellous that at birth, a newborn baby has a mind prepared for growth and development. He has no language or vocabulary to explain his needs, just a strong pair of

lungs. His brain is “hard wired” for survival with needs for food and comfort. There is a basic need for care: to be held; to be reacted with, spoken to and laughed with: loving caring responses. He cries out “here I am, please don’t ignore me, if I’m ignored I don’t exist”. When there is no response there is fear. “I feel lost and abandoned. I will die”. “If I’m not held I will fall apart”.

We may be reluctant to admit this, but deep down unconsciously, these feelings are still there and rejection touches these very basic feelings. Some may have emotional injuries from stressful parenting in their very early childhood. Some may carry a deep sensitivity to rejection and abandonment and they cope with an emotional “shield” of what they would like to be and which may give the appearance of being strong and capable.

But stress of life can break through our shield and touch our vulnerability and we feel overwhelmed and alone. Few can avoid the loneliness of bereavement.

We have a responsibility to be aware of the ways we can hurt others and to be sensitive to the person behind the shield. That unkind word; that lack of interest and of involvement; of ignoring or forgetting. These can touch these deep seated fears. Let us watch out for the brokenness of our brothers and sisters. It is a continuing challenge for us to seek and to meet the needs and feelings of those around us.

### **Loneliness can come through difference.**

God is a God of diversity and difference and in I Corinthians chapter 12, Paul writes that, although we are all part of the body of Christ, we are all different and we are to value those differences. In a perfect situation there would be no loneliness but there is a loneliness of difference, more so as we seem to try to change others to be copies of ourselves.

In psalm 150, praise is through a diversity of instruments and so it is in our way of life. There are various personalities and needs, and talents and skills. Loneliness can come from rejection of our talents and we can feel isolated. The challenge is for us to seek out the potential and expectations of others and to use them and to share in the transformation that can lead to unexpected places. In his talk, Alan told us of the water colour painting class of their ecclesia which came about through using the skills of a lonely sister.

Difference may feel unsafe and can be difficult. Jesus shocked his contemporaries as he met people's needs. Difference and diversity is part of God's plan. Let us use it in our fellowship. We may be surprised that those who were once thought lonely become beautiful stronger people in their service to their Lord.

### **Where do we find loneliness?**

It is often hidden in our busyness - yes even in the Lord's work. At our Awareness Day we heard four anonymous written testimonies from brothers and sisters who were living in loneliness. There was the sister in an empty marriage; another caring for a sick spouse; the sister with a disabled child; and another alone following a relationship breakdown. All shared their feelings of isolation and emptiness, and also of guilt and failure.

### **There are practical ways of managing loneliness**

I would like to share with you a sister's thoughts on managing her loneliness. She gave a very moving talk, opening her heart to us. I have brought some handouts with me from the day where she listed possible causes of loneliness; feelings and thoughts experienced by the lonely; and suggestions of the ways of preventing loneliness. Copies of these and the testimonies will be available on our website.

I will read you some of what she said (with her permission)

*How do we think God wants us to be and to feel?*

*Know this, it is possible to move from loneliness to "togetherness" on your own. The Glory of solitude can eclipse the pain of loneliness. We are always in the company of the Lord God and our Saviour Jesus Christ. They are dependable. The Lord is abounding in love and full of compassion for his children. Jesus is with us constantly. More than anything else they want us to feel their presence. I don't believe that God creates horrible uncomfortable circumstances for us but I know he uses these times for our good. In times of trouble, and that includes our times of loneliness, God is hoping that we will draw closer to him. God wants to see our faith both in the happy times and in the sad times. We can show God our faith as we go through testing times and draw closer to the Lord and his so.*

*Get with God and regain all those warm feelings we want so badly. Instead of staying in a dark place decided to venture into the light!*

*The apostle John writes in his first letter "God is light, in whom there is no darkness at all. If we claimed to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his son, purifies us from all sin." I John 1*

*So if we make the decision to move from loneliness to togetherness, we will find that togetherness is in fact fellowship.*

*Jesus had twelve disciples but he only had a few close friends. This can be our model.*

*"The way to having a true friend is to be a true friend". Instead of wishing you could find a true friend, seek to become one.*

## **Summary**

We started with aloneness and looked at the positive aspects of solitude and contrasted that with the darkness and emptiness of loneliness. In all of us there is a vulnerability to the pain of rejection, some more than others.

Loneliness can come through difference and the challenge is for all of us to see each other as part of the body of Christ and to seek out each other's expectations and potential.

To those who are in that dark and empty place of loneliness, you are not alone. There are practical ways to help yourself and there are brothers and sisters willing to be there for you.

And God loves you. You are precious in His sight. The writer to the Hebrews in chapter 13, in the context of what we rely on, quotes from the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua these words "I will never fail you nor forsake you". The word "never" is emphatic in the original - "never, never, never, never, never will I fail you" and literally there is the meaning "I will never drop you". For Joshua leading his people into the promised land, leadership could be a very lonely place.

Moses writes that "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms: and he shall thrust out the enemy from before you....." (Deut 33:27)

Isaiah encourages God's people that "The Lord will go before you and the God of Israel will be your rear guard", again with the idea of "gather you up" (Isaiah 52:12)

And in his letter to the Colossians 3:3 Paul writes "our lives are hid with Christ, in God."

Lonely? Feeling rejected and unwanted? The Lord God offers a special safe place surrounded and hidden in His love.

Let's do the best we can to minimise loneliness in our brothers and sisters as we travel together this wilderness journey until we come to the promised land.

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