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ALONE

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I'm one of those people who, unless I've experienced something myself, fail to grasp the impact of other people's experiences. Sure, I can recognize some of what goes on for other people but I don't always pick up on the profound or significant effects that those experiences might have. So I have to say that I find it hard to know how people feel when they are all alone.

I recently met a person who was relatively new to the city where I live. She had followed her partner to our city where, sadly, their relationship ended. Her partner was well connected with friends and family, but she realised that without his connections there was barely a person in our city who realised that she existed. Without him, she did not have one single friend. She was all alone.

It had never occurred to me that something like that could really happen. I realised that many people are lonely or sometimes alone but never totally so. To be in a place and not be known by anyone: That, for me, was unimaginable. All of us, after all, are constantly surrounded by people. We all have contact with other people, in one way or another, on a daily basis. How could anyone be all alone?

I was to realise, in the course of my contact with this person, that the issue was not one of being surrounded by other people. The issue was: "To be unknown, or at least barely known, by another living soul."

It was in reflecting on this experience that I began to realise what the term, "All alone," might actually mean. It doesn't just mean being by ourselves. More than that, it actually describes the devastating convergence of total emptiness. To be unknown is, in many ways, to fail to exist. That stings.

Now God was way ahead of me in all of this. When God first created a human being he made the observation: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (Genesis 2:18). The term good in this passage is more than a moral or pragmatic observation. It means that something is the opposite of the way that God's wants it. It is something that is contrary to God's will and purpose. So, according to God's own judgement, he doesn't want any of us to be alone.

And so God provides another human being to remedy the problem. God knew what we also know to be true – we are social creatures. We need to be in the company of other people, and while in that company we are able to share life affirming intimacy.

As I delved deeper into why my new friend might be finding it difficult to find connections with other people I became aware of an imbalance that has crept into our society. This imbalance has to do with our growing values around lifestyle.

Lifestyle seems to have become such a prominent social value for us that it can actually isolate us from each other. Maintaining and feeding our externally scripted lifestyles saps our energy and draws our loyalties to the source of that scripting, which is usually some commercial enterprise. A new lounge suite can occupy more of our thoughts than those who we might invite to sit in it, or a new car might arouse

greater passion in us than the people it could take us to. And so we become more and more isolated from each other. As social creatures we are so rigorously herded that we fail to enjoy the simple benefits of being with each other. Then building out from this we might even begin to believe that it's our lifestyle and not ourselves that draws other people into relationships. Then we are truly all alone. Mark Twain recognised this when he said: "The worst loneliness is not to be comfortable with yourself."

Jesus had a sense of this when he said: "What does it profit [people] if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?" Luke 9.25

We suffer when we value things and the pathways to greater things more highly than basic and simple human relationships. What if we were to begin to measure our individual and collective wealth against the quantity and quality of our relationships instead of our current economic indicators. Surely that would lead us to prize the relationships that we have and to search out new relationships. Surely this would lead us to regard another person's aloneness as intolerable. Surely this would compel us to constantly act towards people in friendship.

This is reflective of God's own experience. After God completed his creation of the world, the people whom God created for each other and for himself actually ended that relationship. God found himself all alone. The two people, Adam and Eve, hid from God and isolated themselves from each other. We read in the Bible that God went searching and called out, "Where are you?" The God of the unlimited universe couldn't bear being alone and searched for those whom he had lost. He found them and in love restabilised a relationship with them. He ultimately did not hold their rejection against them but welcomed them back to himself. The relationship was renewed. Together they again knew each other.

I think that all of us move into and out of loneliness. I now also know that some people tragically find themselves all alone. None of us were meant for that. In love and an unconditional acceptance Jesus moves us back into community, and a life affirming, respectful and healthy intimacy. He welcomes us into a family that is bound together beyond blood ties. It's a household without borders, marked by open and loving acceptance and life affirming generosity. It's a community whose wealth is measured by the health of its relationships.

In the New Testament of the Bible we read "As you come to Jesus, the living stone – rejected by people but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual household."
1 Peter 2:4-5

Never to be alone!

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