

How do I cope with this sense of being alone?

Preacher

Jo Stoker

Bible Readings

Genesis 3:8-13,
Philippians 1:1-11,
John 6:35-40

Sermon

Some people here will greet this question with immediate recognition: maybe feeling painfully alone because of a real and particular experience – a recent (or distant) bereavement; an experience of being rejected, disappointed, or betrayed; or the loss you feel after a child has left home, or a good friend moved away.

Or, there may be an affinity with this question because of an abiding sense of loneliness, of inner disconnection or alienation – bewilderingly not linked to any clear explanation in your circumstances or relationships, but rather, that sense of being mysteriously, ultimately, “on your own” in the world.

Other people here today (I wonder what percentage of each?) will react to today’s question with one of their own – “*What* sense of being alone??”

You might be saying: “I don’t feel alone – never have!”, or even “I wish I did! There are far too many people around me...”

I suspect that many people feel perfectly content, fulfilled, and comfortable with their place in the world and their relationships with other people.

Some might even feel crowded, intruded upon by others, smothered by the demands of relationship and involvement, and find themselves asking, “sense of being alone?” I feel just the opposite! – how do I cope with the pressures from other people in my life!?”

This Lent question is one which takes us into many issues of personality and psychology...

**But the question at heart is asking:
“Do I matter?” “Am I loved?”
“Does anyone care?”**

How wonderful to feel confident and assured of positive answers to all those questions!

Whether today’s topic is our own personal question, or whether we might need to find an answer to offer to someone else, we need to know that:

“A sense of being alone” can be terrifying, desperate, disturbingly (and physically) *painful* – and can lead to panic, depression or even suicide.

These experiences and emotions don’t always respond to logic or the facts...

Freddie Mercury, lead singer of the group Queen, just before his death said: “You can have everything in life and still feel lonely, and that is the worst sort of loneliness.”

- It may be that we know plenty of people care about us, but not that *particular* person we yearn for...
- We have many opportunities for company, but they don’t replace the presence of one special person...
- The facts may tell us that we are not horrible, boring, unattractive, pathetic or unpleasant... yet, we can feel convinced that no one wants to be with us or get to know us – or that if they do, they will not like us at all!

When I was a little girl, my big sister Lois used to tell me regularly, “No one wants to be your friend. You’re useless at sport – no one will ever want you on their team. You’re boring - no wonder you haven’t got any friends!” and so on. We’re quite close to each other now, but these things leave their mark.

It may be that we feel alone because we’re afraid to let anyone get close to us. Unwilling to share our deeper thoughts, dreams and fear, or to reveal our vulnerability. We protect ourselves so well that it both comforts and conceals us.

We are not meant to be alone.

“No man is an island” – wrote John Donne in the 16th century.

The Creation story from Genesis shows human beings in relationship – created as a pair for mutual help. God said **“It is not good for man to be alone”**. (Genesis 2:18).

And we are created to be in relationship with God...

Our Old Testament reading shows how a broken relationship with God, and with other people, fuels the sense of aloneness & alienation. The short passage from Genesis, set in the Garden of Eden, finds Adam and Eve hiding from the God who created and loves them: Adam admits to God, **“I heard the sound of you walking in the garden, and I was afraid”**. (Genesis 3:10) It’s a heartbreaking description of the human condition – cut off from God by our own guilt and fear.

The Gospel reading offers a way back into relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, who says: **“anyone who comes to me I will never drive away”**. (John 6:37)

And, if we have faith, we know and trust this promise, and rediscover it over & over again through our repentance and God’s forgiveness. We can put the past behind us.

So, we can be friends with God, we do not need to hide from his love – will this mean that we never feel alone? (Thankfully, for some people, I think it does.)

But our answer cannot be “Jesus loves you, so you don’t need anyone else!” God’s love is not a substitute for human relationships.

In our New Testament reading, Paul is writing to his friends in the church in Philippi, from his prison cell. He has a deep and passionate faith in God, but he needs his fellow Christians. He relies on their prayers and love, and on their common bond in Christ.

Because of God’s love given to us through Jesus, we grow to experience a deep security that allows us to love and trust other people: to rely on them, need them.

We know that no other single human being can fulfill all our needs – we are all fragile, weak, and *mortal*. Yet the world offers us the ideals of romantic “everlasting love” with a perfect soulmate, or the ideal of self-sacrificing parental devotion. Yet the promise of utter faithfulness – “I’ll always be there for you” – is impossible to achieve.

Only God is dependable, showing us:
Inexhaustible love. Untiring faithfulness. Overflowing mercy.

So, the question today is not whether we are, or are not, alone – but how we might cope with a “sense of being alone”...

There are a number of solutions – perhaps the more obvious one is to turn to the bottle, or drugs, or other addictive and destructive behaviour to blot out the problem.

Then again, we could retreat, withdraw into ourselves. Never get too attached to anyone else, never give away too much of ourselves. Don't get close, so don't get hurt. It's tempting! At times it can seem wise, and mature, admirably adult and restrained – stiff upper lip, etc. It's an approach which might claim that love and passion and intimacy are all for the young and foolish, and that you should aim to grow out of it, get on with it, *manage* by yourself.

Or, we could model our life on Jesus.

Jesus was always engaging with other people, meeting them beyond the superficial. He would touch their lives at a deep level, encountering their hidden depths. When he met Zaccheus, for example, or the paralysed man brought to him through the roof, Jesus *cared* about who they were and what they needed most to find fullness of life. He consistently befriended the outcasts, the broken and damaged people. And yet Jesus himself was ready for rejection and misunderstanding. He was prepared for the inevitable ways of human nature to hurt him deeply (Peter who let him down, despite himself, and Judas who deliberately betrayed him).

This way of life asks us to rely upon God, not *instead of* other people, but for our ultimate hope & security, and so to risk the whole experience of loss, pain, failure or loneliness that will be part of real living in relationship. When we know that we are precious, and loved eternally, we can find freedom and courage to love other people.

"This sense of being alone", from our question today, (if you know that sense), doesn't go away just because you're a Christian. Christians too feel lonely, get depressed, know loss, and experience hurt and alienation. But, we don't let it overwhelm or destroy us (if we're lucky!)

"How do I cope with this sense of being alone?"

Put simply:-

Love God, with all your heart.

Love other people.

And let yourself be loved in return.