



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Does anyone actually care?

Part 6: Learning to live alone

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John 16:16

“Jesus went on to say, ‘In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.’”

Someone who regularly took an early morning run was congratulated by a friend on his achievements. Whatever the weather, he never failed to take to the road. The jogger said to his friend, “Look, I don’t want you to get the wrong impression. We have five children at our house, a cat, a dog, and a noisy central heating system. This is the only time I get to myself. It is not just a matter of health ... it’s self-preservation!

Whilst this may be a luxury for some ... for others, living alone is so far from jogging—where there is a firm road, a familiar path, and a well-defined goal. Living alone, for them, is a much more challenging experience.

In this series of pastoral issues, I have been looking at difficult experiences people face. It would be a mistake if we avoided the question of ‘aleness’. For many people, this is not a pathway of choice. I am primarily talking about the kind of aleness that comes from divorce or bereavement. In saying that, I recognise the wonderful lives of many who have chosen singleness as their way of life.

Learning to live alone can be frustrating and depressing. For the person who has lost a partner, there is no longer a mirror to reflect back who you are and what you want in life. Now you can only provide the answers by getting to know yourself. This is invariably painful. It involves total honesty ... and also requires a sense of humour! It involves accepting all that you are, good and bad, strong and weak.

I recall being in a Spanish market, where they were selling pullovers. I was handling one and trying surreptitiously to measure it against myself, then said to the man, in poor Spanish, “What size?” His reply was, “One size fits all.” Well, I ask you! There is no ‘one size fits all’ answer to this problem.

Let us explore the issue together in the presence of God.

Text: John 16:16

“Jesus went on to say, ‘In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.’”

Our text comes in John’s final discourse of Jesus’ ministry (in Chapters 13 to 17) regarding God’s promise to send the Holy Spirit to the disciples—who were to receive him as One who stands with them and by them.

In the final analysis, the proof of discipleship does not rest in what we do—but upon the realisation that we are never totally alone. Because of the Holy Spirit, we are able to live our life of faith.

When Jesus says “in a little while” the disciples will not see him ... and then “in a little while” they will see him—there is understandable confusion amongst the disciples. Whatever does Jesus mean by this “little while”?

Jesus is not talking of linear time—a measure of days or weeks—but crisis time—kairos—time that is heavy with decision, judgement and opportunity.

As a pastor, I always enjoyed sharing with families on the birth of a child ... offering children to God is very special! The anticipation of a birth can be a testing time for all concerned.

When people become parents for the first time, they announce the news to their friends, and it's not unusual for them to get telephone calls in the middle of the night! I recall one of my members writing in the snow outside my home “Boy—7 lbs”. With excitement, the father had dug his way through the snow to write that message ... because it had been a kairos time in his life!

The ‘little while’—the time from birth pangs to the coming of life—is like the departure and return of Jesus Christ. His death will give birth to the joy of his coming in the morning of resurrection. But we don't deal with aloneness by theological explanation, for it can be a profoundly difficult experience.

It could be said that being alone, despite the sadness it may bring, presents another opportunity for growth. This is why I talk about ‘learning’ to live alone.

When confronted with unwelcome loss in bereavement, it is possible to be very angry, even towards the one who has died. Many speak of their disappointment that they are the partner who is left and their loved one is the one who has died, even talking about the desire to change places. The reason may be so that suffering could be shared. However, it can also be they didn't want to be left alone.

There is something about the very concept of aloneness. The film Home Alone won many awards for its then young star. The little boy was left by accident when his family flew to Europe. Through a mixture of humour and crisis, the film exposes some of the real dangers and fears of ‘aloneness’. We ought to say is that aloneness is nothing like as glamorous as this Hollywood film makes out.

In keeping with the broader series, I want to offer practical help—and so here are some suggestions of how to deal with the challenge as a Christian:

Choose to live with hope

A child was setting the sail of a small boat on a lake. The parent observed an earlier lesson of life, “Remember, it is not the direction of the wind that decides where you are going; it is how you set your sail.” How true that is!

The small sailing lesson has a wider application to life. We may have no power to change events, but our attitude to those events will clearly make a difference to the way we live.

We can choose to live with fear or faith, with helplessness or hope—and I invite you to consider your choices. We may choose to live with the assurance of that promise of Jesus

with us and by us—or live as though he stands outside of the situation. The former is the only positive and sustainable Christian response.

It takes a conscious decision on our part to be hopeful people.

I remember many hostages in the Middle East in the 1990s—Terry Waite, Tom Sutherland, Jackie Mann, Brian Keenan, John McCarthy ... could they have survived without hope? It was the one quality that even solitary confinement could not take from them. They had to live with hope, even in the back streets of Beirut with shells exploding all around them.

I listened to an interview with a freed hostage who was asked about the one thing he wanted when he came home after being released. His somewhat surprising reply was “Time alone”. The difference was between an aloneness that was chosen and one which was imposed. How do you view your aloneness ... as forced upon you, or can you turn it around and use it for good?

We make decisions in life to be either negative or positive, and Jesus Christ offers to us an alternative of living with hope. Visits to Jerusalem inevitably mean a walk on the Via Dolorosa. You trace the journey of Jesus, who bears the scourging, to accept the cross. It is hard to believe that a journey down that road could have been illumined by hope—but the hope of Jesus lay beyond mere human comfort.

He possessed hope for the world he was dying to redeem; hope concerning the victorious defeat he was accepting; hope was even breathed in a final prayer! This hope is then translated from an empty tomb into a message for all time.

You don't stumble across this kind of hope—you decide to live with it and, if you do, you will find that there is no part of life when God cannot be found.

Include people in your plans

What I am talking about embraces our needs, situation and personality. Our lives are very different ... but, whatever happens to us, we are wise to include other people.

There are times when loneliness is made worse by the attitude of others. Therefore, it is sound advice to include people into our lives. Equally, there are times when a lonely one builds a castle around themselves and the walls are so high that nobody may enter. A way forward lies in choosing to include people in our plans.

We are designed to share with others. Life's conversations are woven, for the most part, not with significant subjects, but with comment that serves little purpose but to communicate and exchange information. Conversation keeps the dust from settling on our minds. It is a social exercise that serves to vent our small frustrations and fears before they assume dangerous proportions.

Dr Michael Broder wrote: “There are many ways to conquer loneliness. You can be alone without ever being lonely but, ultimately, how you experience aloneness—as loneliness or solitude—is influenced and directed by the way you see yourself.”

Part of the task and mission of the church is to genuinely count people in, not to exclude them—and allowing them to experience real inclusivity in our fellowship and life.

In a book called *Are You Happy?* Vaughan Quinn wrote, “Preoccupation with self is perhaps the single greatest cause of unhappiness.” A Christian writer has put it this way: “Keep your face to the sun and the shadows will fall behind. Turn your heart towards the warmth of God's love and doubts, fears and unhappiness will disappear.”

Avoid monotony

Anyone who lives alone soon discovers that boredom is fertile ground for depression and self-pity. The antidote, therefore, is to make plans for activities—and television is no substitute for activity. Perhaps it might be necessary for the lonely person to invite someone for a simple meal or to suggest an outing ... and not simply to wait for it to happen.

Adults bringing up children know that stage of life when a child retorts, “I’m bored!” ... and it doesn’t matter what you try to do, they are still just as bored. When I talk about monotony, I am not simply speaking about ‘boredom’. I am referring to the emptiness of life and, fortunately, over the last few years people who are alone have been encouraged to use their minds and begin to explore new avenues.

I recall a senior member of a previous congregation who, when facing life alone, took up golf in her 70s—and went on to win many championships. There were also those who began painting—and became competent artists. Again, it seems to me, there is a conscious decision involved in all of this. We can sit and wait for the world to happen around us, or we can choose the way that we will enable things to happen.

Our text in John confirms Easter faith. At the Lord’s Table, Christ comes. We may be anxious or discouraged, but when we come to God’s Table, anticipating a renewal of his abiding presence, we discover him afresh in the breaking of bread and the blessing of the cup. The miracle happens within us. We find ourselves forgiven, included and we sense communion with God and with each other. We know we are not alone, but in the great company of all the saints.

In a moment of lostness which can lead to monotony, suddenly feeling we must face life alone and with only our own resources to draw upon, remember that you’re in good company ... your experience is shared by so many.

When preaching in Honolulu as a guest of the American Navy, I led a conference for the Pearl Harbour base. We were taken into a submarine and it felt substantially larger than I had imagined, but a colleague retorted, “It may feel large here in dock, but it’s like a pinprick when out there under the enormous ocean!”

It was Samuel Taylor Coleridge who wrote *The Ancient Mariner*:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide, wide sea!
Not a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.

The disciples would soon know this experience. One minute Jesus Christ is with them in the breaking of bread; soon he has withdrawn from them. So baffling is this experience to the disciples that he explains in the words of our text. Christians in every generation can testify to the same pain.

In *The Eternal Now*, Paul Tillich wrote, “The Spirit has shown to our time and to innumerable people in our time the absent God and the empty space that cries in us to be filled by him. And then the absent one may return and take the space that belongs to him, and the Spiritual Presence may break again into our consciousness, awakening us to recognise what we are, shaking and transforming us.”

Monotony is a difficult experience, but to live with monotony and not to want to break free must be one of the saddest of conditions.

Take control of your life

With the realisation that Jesus Christ is by us, whatever happens in life, we can begin to take control of our lives.

Do you hoard things? We may need to be honest about this! Every so often you have to have a clear out ... and it's better than somebody else deciding to have one for you! Living alone allows us the opportunity to choose what we will keep and what we will discard.

Taking control of our lives and deciding our priorities is an important personal responsibility—but of course, for the Christian, this is done with an acknowledgement of the Lordship of Christ, as we invite him to overrule our lives and we make choices within the parameters of his love.

Elsie McLay wrote about her family trying to organise her life: “My children are coming today. They mean well, but they worry. They think I should have railings in the hall, a telephone in the kitchen; they want someone to come in when I take a bath. They don't really like me living alone. Help me to be grateful for their concern, and help them to understand that I have to do what I can as long as I can.

“They are right when they say there are risks I might fall; I might leave the stove on; but there is no challenge, no possibility of triumph, no real aliveness, without risk.

“When they were young and rode bicycles and climbed trees and went away to camp, I was terrified, but I let them go. Because to hold them would have been to hurt them. Now roles are reversed. Help them to see. Keep me from being grim and stubborn about it, but don't let them smother me.”

Christian living is about trusting God and allowing him oversight of our lives, but my own understanding of the New Testament is that he gives us the power to take up our life and use it for his glory—and living alone need not prevent us from doing that.

William Temple commented: “The spiritually-minded person differs from the materially-minded person not in that he deals with different things, but in that he deals with the same things differently.”

There is an old children's poem that tells of loneliness:

I had a little tea party
This afternoon at three.
'Twas very small
Three guests in all
Just I, myself and me.
Myself ate all the sandwiches,
While I drank all the tea;
'Twas also I that ate the pie
And passed the cake to me.

The presence of Christ can transform the way we see ourselves and helps us face the challenges that living alone can bring, creating the time to:

- Cultivate a personal walk with God
- Create meaningful friendships of our own choice
- Transform emptiness into God-filled opportunities.

Our concern for each other is enhanced when we include people in. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is always with us in the crowd and in our isolation, he shatters the pain of our loneliness!