

Being alone as the way to community

Genesis 2.18 — John 6.37-38

[Preliminary remark : reference to our Bible study beginning with a text from the Old Testament and leading to the New Testament was left out of the programme already sent out.]

And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helpmeet for him. (Gen. 2.18, AV)

How mysterious, how unfathomable is our great, sovereign God! Having already established in Genesis 1.31 that everything He had made was very good (1. Creation account), He now sees in Genesis 2.18 that something was indeed not good : *‘It is not good that the man should be alone’*. (2. Creation account).

The fact that He regards man’s loneliness as not good demonstrates one of God’s most important characteristics: He is a God of community. If He has created us human beings in his image, does this mean that our omnipotent creator also does not want to be alone? - What is God’s way out of this condition of incompleteness? – *I will make him a helpmeet “answering to him”* (AV alternative reading), *who is his counterpart* (= opposite) (Buber), *a suitable companion* (Good News), *a helper suitable for him* (Thompson Study Bible).

- How does God lead man away from being alone? – There are two ways :

- 1) He creates the whole world of animals and gives mankind the task of naming them. Already before this (in verse 15), He had given him the task of cultivating and maintaining the Garden of Eden. Work, an occupation, an activity are meant, therefore, as the way out of being alone. Is that enough? No, evidently far from it (verse 20 b : *But for man no suitable helper was found*). This means that work and activity are not enough on their own to help man not be alone.
- 2) Therefore God has a second idea, a spectacular one. He carries out the first general anaesthetic in the history of humankind and the first organ transplant. With the passage of time, we humans can also do both. We have indeed made progress in our task of exploring God’s creation and making it serve us! But God undertakes something that is exclusive to Him alone: a creation of new life! He *builds* [*baut*] (Luther/Buber) a woman. A fantastic creation, fascinating, very similar to the man, but yet so different, so mysterious! – What is the man’s reaction to this gift? *This time it is she* (Buber), *this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh* (AV). Man is no longer alone!

What can we take from this text ? – Mankind can follow the first path leading out of their state of being alone, using their strength and imagination. Also, they **should** do this; it is a task, an instruction from God. – Only God can provide the second path. This solution must be granted as a gift to man.

In God's concept of creation is contained the principle, most deeply anchored in man, that, alone, he is not whole, not complete. This is ingrained in every one of us. Put it the other way round : if man is alone, he is lacking something, he is uneasy within, he yearns for community.

It's true he can help himself over this for a while and seek to console himself by pursuing an activity or completing a task. According to the Bible, above all, with an activity which involves an act of creation. There are many possible options: experiencing and being in awe of nature; being active (dance, sport); listening to or making music; enjoying good food and drink; reading; solving puzzles; working in the garden; engaging in handicrafts and creative activities (i.e., creating something new yourself). And yet despite this he remains incomplete. Only a human counterpart makes him whole.

But being whole still does not mean being perfect. This is the reason Adam and Eve hide themselves from God. It's true that neither Adam nor Eve are now alone; they are in communion with a counterpart. But they are lonely, i.e., separated from God, isolated by themselves. Man only becomes perfect through a divine counterpart. We'll return to this later.

So, we realise this fact : there is a difference between being alone and being lonely. Being alone can certainly also have advantages. We know this: Jesus often tried to be alone. He needed this distance from his disciples, from the people of Israel, so that he could be only with his Father, to fast, to pray, to restore his strength for all his tasks among the people.

For us human beings too, being alone can often be meaningful. It offers the chance to recover spiritually, to order our thoughts, to develop our creativity, to work without being interrupted, or simply to enjoy peace and quiet. We all know this feeling of inner peace after a demanding working week, or those of us who are retired, after a fully charged weekend with the grandchildren, which, though profoundly satisfying, is also exhausting. From time to time a temporary separation from your beloved other half can even prove its worth, following which you look forward so much the more to seeing each other again. Many of us have a quiet time or plan regular days or even weeks to be on our own. The daily flood of information from the various media, often accompanied by music which is much too loud, leaves us yearning for the calm of the evening: sitting still for a moment, doing nothing, resting, being on our own.

Loneliness, on the other hand, is with rare exceptions, oppressive for us as human beings; it weighs heavily on our soul, can make us ill, makes us seem useless or worthless. It is a state of deprivation and it is painful. Warmth and love are lacking. And what is crucial : the lonely person has no mirror to hold up to themselves. Their horizon remains narrow and very limited.

There are numerous examples of loneliness in the Bible: from King Saul to Elijah, from Jeremiah to Job. Many Psalms lament loneliness (Ps. 25.16, Ps. 35.12, Ps. 102.8, Ps. 142.5). In Jer. 15.17 Jeremiah complains : *'I sat not in the assembly of those that made merry nor rejoiced; I sat alone because of thy hand.'* - John. 5.1ff gives a powerful demonstration of how the lame man at the pool of Bethesda expresses his loneliness : *'Sir, I have no man'*.

Medicine is clear that loneliness can have massive negative effects on health : lonely people die on average earlier. Loneliness is as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day; it does more damage than being overweight; it weakens the immune system so that infections occur more frequently; it often leads to headaches and increased heart and circulation issues.

Did you know that there has been a ministry for loneliness in Great Britain since 2018? So, politics has also recognised the importance of this phenomenon.

Of great importance and extremely common in the context of rapidly rising life expectancy is loneliness among the elderly, made particularly current and acute by isolation during the Coronavirus pandemic. But loneliness is already widespread among young people. Every adolescent feels at times that they are not understood and experiences loneliness. More common

than we might think is loneliness within marriage. Even a young, essentially happy mother can feel lonely because her baby takes up so much of her that she hardly has time for other contacts, for friends and neighbours. Possibly she is too tired for her own husband and is somehow estranged. Think of the loneliness experienced by the ever-increasing numbers of single people, those on the margins of society, foreigners.

For us as doctors and carers, also those offering psychological or pastoral support, loneliness is a constant and stubborn companion. From two points of view: on the one hand, we see it in many different guises in our patients, on the other hand, we often feel it ourselves.

As regards the **patients** entrusted to us, coping with loneliness, observing and addressing it, giving advice as to possible ways of dealing with it, are among our most important tasks alongside our medicinal treatment of the body.

At the same time, it is one of the most difficult. For this reason, we are often tempted to not even begin to tackle it. Paul Tournier writes about this in *A Doctor's casebook in the light of the bible* : *'What a temptation it is to visit the patient less often, to avoid those painful moments of being alone with them or to fob them off with evasions: putting on a humorous front, pretending to be busy, talking about peripheral matters so as to ward away matters of a serious nature.'* – At another point in the same book he gives guidance as to how we might confront this difficulty : *'And it may well happen, if we are the doctors we should be, if we are not simply absorbed by the technical problems of our case, if we really are concerned about the person of our patient, if we penetrate with love into the depth of their soul to the place where those questions of the meaning of illness and death accumulate – it may well happen that – often with great reservation – a dialogue emerges which delves ever deeper, the more serious the illness'*.

How can this look in practical terms ? To find an answer, let us return to the Creation and God's task for humankind : We are required to **name** the phenomena of Creation. In our work with patients this can mean giving a diagnosis based on our acquired knowledge and our healthcare options and addressing their problem together with the patient. We are required to **cultivate**. This can mean listening to them, possibly touching them (*laying on of hands*), helping them to work out solutions (psychological) or offering them a way forward (somatic). This is our task from God for our patients.

A second problem is the loneliness of the **doctor**. All of us who work or have worked in individual practice know this feeling: I'm responsible for everything; I've got to get by with my *professional baggage*, I'm so very often left to my own devices.

Have I thought of everything? Have I not made a mistake? Am I not doing harm to my patient with what I'm recommending? - There are many possible ways out of this professional loneliness: reading the relevant holistic medical literature. Exchanges with colleagues (peer consulting, Balint groups, local or national working groups of Christian doctors, Médecine de la Personne). Exchanges with your spouse (under condition of anonymity, of course). This was for me an extremely important element throughout my professional career! And finally – or rather at the beginning of all our efforts: exchange with God. In stillness, in prayer, alone or with others, in Christian reading, including the Bible itself.

The prescription is therefore : *'Out of loneliness into community'*.

Let us now seek together in the New Testament how this **path** offered by God leads **from being alone to community** :

'All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.' (John 6. 37-38)

This saying of Jesus is found in the context of the *Bread of Life*. It is nourishment for us. If we have the task of cultivating, our food and our daily bread will grow for us in our fields. Jesus repeatedly withdrew to be alone with God the Father. Here, in loneliness, he listened to God's word to learn

His will. Then he returned to the community of people to fulfil his task there, to the individual, to his people.

When we withdraw into loneliness to listen to the word of God and Jesus, two things happen: first, we can realise that we are unique persons with our own history, our character, our talents. This is exactly how God planned us to be. This is exactly what the Holy Spirit directs us towards. He never compares us with other people! We alone remain unique for the whole of our lives. When someone becomes lonely because they are frustrated or feel unjustly treated, annoyed by others who don't behave as they would like, but in that loneliness does not seek God, then their thoughts will enter a negative spiral, affecting their view of the world and what is important to people. They remain isolated, in a void; they receive no life-bringing nourishment but at most, poison which kills. Or they simply starve. They have no way to re-integrate back into the community. They are also alone within the community and are afraid that others will notice that they are *naked*. Now God created us as communal beings : *„It is not good that man should be alone!“* In communion with God through Jesus I can learn to understand how to use my uniqueness and my gifts for others. I must practise this my whole life. Again and again, I need to withdraw into loneliness where I practise communion with Jesus, receive the seed to scatter so that the *Bread of Life* can grow. God is my creator, Jesus my saviour, and the Holy Spirit leads me back into community so that I may serve my fellow man with my uniqueness.

Whoever comes to Jesus will not be driven away. Often, we come to God with our ideas, our view of other people, of experiences, of the world. We often present God with our solutions and feel He has to confirm them. We want to hold the reins in our hands and in doing so forget that although we are precious in our uniqueness, we have only the vision of a grain of sand which will never have God's overarching view of his plans nor his particular way of reacting to things. We would like to be the power that causes the seedcorn to grow, and not just to sow the seed.

In withdrawal into communion with God, the Holy Spirit shows me who I am, where my place is. He knows all other unique people and their histories and knows what they need. Therefore, I can trust that He has the solution and will reveal it to me in a way I will understand and help me to use my gifts. I notice in this how I am *nourished*, how I can serve others with joy with my talents and scatter the nourishment I have received. This nourishment is never exhausted. I also realise that others also scatter their nourishment with me and serve me with their gifts. This should not give me the feeling that I am of less value or lacking in talent; no, I am to accept this enrichment with joy and be grateful that God's will occurs in me through others. This serving of one another happens both in our private everyday lives as well as in our profession. Doctors and pastoral workers are often particularly required to take their direction from communion with Jesus; for they meet suffering people who come with the hope of help and relief and expect that they will receive solutions from them as experts. These people also have their story, of which the experts often only have scant, if any knowledge. There are treatments, medicines that can help. But the expert does not know the will of the Father for this person, which helps more profoundly than any treatment.

Do we hear God's call, calling us to communion with Jesus? Jesus will hear us, not drive us away, and so lead us, strengthened, back into daily life, to the community, to our professional situation as experts, where the Holy Spirit will guide us so that the will of God may happen. We can get the nourishment Jesus gives us for nothing. It's a gift to us. We can spread it ever further afield; this food is never exhausted. Our part is that we hear the call of God and **want** to go alone to Jesus, and we do it. Then the will of God can happen in our fellow men – and also through them in me.

To conclude here is a quotation from Paul Tournier (from *Learn to grow old*) :

„The concept of the person has two sides which belong together like the two sides of a coin. On the one side, the affirmation of the essential characteristic of a personal individuality infused with awe; on the other side, the affirmation that man in isolation is not man, he is only fully man when in relationship to others, to the world and to God.“