

God, our refuge and hope in a lonely world

Psalm 71 (NIV)

- ¹ In you, LORD, I have taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame.
- ² In your righteousness, rescue me and deliver me;
turn your ear to me and save me.
- ³ Be my rock of refuge,
to which I can always go;
give the command to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.
- ⁴ Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of those who are evil and cruel.
- ⁵ For you have been my hope, Sovereign LORD,
my confidence since my youth.
- ⁶ From birth I have relied on you;
you brought me forth from my mother's womb.
I will ever praise you.
- ⁷ I have become a sign to many;
you are my strong refuge.
- ⁸ My mouth is filled with your praise,
declaring your splendour all day long.
- ⁹ Do not cast me away when I am old;
do not forsake me when my strength is gone.
- ¹⁰ For my enemies speak against me;
those who wait to kill me conspire together.
- ¹¹ They say, "God has forsaken him;
pursue him and seize him,
for no one will rescue him."
- ¹² Do not be far from me, my God;
come quickly, God, to help me.

- 13 May my accusers perish in shame;
may those who want to harm me
be covered with scorn and disgrace.
- 14 As for me, I will always have hope;
I will praise you more and more.
- 15 My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds,
of your saving acts all day long—
though I know not how to relate them all.
- 16 I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, Sovereign LORD;
I will proclaim your righteous deeds, yours alone.
- 17 Since my youth, God, you have taught me,
and to this day I declare your marvellous deeds.
- 18 Even when I am old and grey,
do not forsake me, my God,
till I declare your power to the next generation,
your mighty acts to all who are to come.
- 19 Your righteousness, God, reaches to the heavens,
you who have done great things.
Who is like you, God?
- 20 Though you have made me see troubles,
many and bitter,
you will restore my life again;
from the depths of the earth
you will again bring me up.
- 21 You will increase my honor
and comfort me once more.
- 22 I will praise you with the harp
for your faithfulness, my God;
I will sing praise to you with the lyre,
Holy One of Israel.
- 23 My lips will shout for joy
when I sing praise to you—
I whom you have delivered.
- 24 My tongue will tell of your righteous acts
all day long,
for those who wanted to harm me
have been put to shame and confusion.

Our theme for this conference is loneliness and isolation. Collins dictionary defines loneliness as the unhappiness that is felt by someone because they do not have any friends or do not have anyone to talk to, and isolation as the state of feeling alone and without friends or help. Paul Tournier wrote in 1948, over 70 years ago; *'How many men and women around about us there are, with whom we rub shoulders daily, living in the same kind of secret loneliness. The doctor, a sort of confessor, knows it better than anyone else.'* (Escape from loneliness (EL) page 14)

It makes me think of the elderly female patient living alone, estranged from her brother and sister-in-law who only stay 10 minutes when they do come to visit and who unburdens herself to me, her cardiologist, during her outpatient visits every 6 months. She is not the only lonely and isolated patient amongst my elderly patients with heart disease who I see regularly in clinic or the older patients with medical problems who I look after on my ward. Many have retired to Worthing on the south coast of England from busy working lives spent elsewhere, often the North of England, many are single or widowed, with no children or with children living a long way away (Dubai, Australia) or children who have busy lives of their own with careers and families and little time to visit an elderly relative. Being lonely has a measurable effect on their life expectancy and their health. I spotted an article in the British cardiac journal 'Heart' entitled 'Significantly increased risk of all-cause mortality among cardiac patients feeling lonely,' where the authors concluded there was a strong association between loneliness and poor patient-reported outcomes and 1-year mortality in both men and women across cardiac diagnoses. The authors commented in their introduction that loneliness is a result of perceived deficiencies in a person's social relationship, it is a subjective experience and is not the same as social isolation and it is unpleasant and distressing. What is the standard advice we give to our lonely patients? 'Join a club, find a hobby that you can do with a group of like-minded enthusiasts, perhaps find a church or other faith community to join.' I often feel that offering such advice is rather futile – I doubt that the patient will be able to escape from their crippling loneliness and expect to hear them talk about it again when they return to see me in clinic in a year's time.

It is not just our patients who experience loneliness. One of my Pakistani juniors admitted to a colleague that he was terribly lonely working in England a long way away from friends and family. The irregular working hours of a junior doctor and his non-British cultural background made it difficult for him to make new friends. As Paul Tournier wrote in 'Escape from Loneliness', all of us, at one time or another *'struggle alone with our inextricable family problems, with our temptations, with the guilt of our secret faults, never daring to unburden ourselves to our colleagues... because we are afraid of being condemned...'* (EL page 23).

Tournier wrote in the preface to the English edition of 'Escape from Loneliness' that he had written it because the emotional isolation of modern men had deeply impressed him. Once we had chosen the theme for this year's meeting, I started to notice how much is written about loneliness and isolation. I picked up a book called 'The lonely city. Adventures in the art of being alone' by Olivia Laing. She writes of her experience of loneliness when she moved to New York after a relationship break-up and how she dealt with it by researching the loneliness experienced by many of the artists who created their work there including Edward Hopper, Andy Warhol and Klaus Nomi. She wrote of the emerging scourge of AIDS which initially affected the gay community and how it caused isolation and loneliness as people avoided those individuals known to be infected. I finished the book with a feeling of desolation – focusing on others' experience of loneliness seemed to deepen her unhappiness at being alone.

As I finished writing the first version of this talk in Spring 2020, we in the UK and many across the world were being asked to isolate at home, not see family or friends and only go out when absolutely necessary because of the coronavirus pandemic. For many this was a difficult, lonely time confined to a flat, or living in a nursing home where visitors were forbidden, other residents and staff were falling ill and dying with the virus. For those of us who were working in healthcare

there was also the ever-present threat of coming down with the virus and possibly dying of it or bringing home the virus and infecting our family. I remember sleeping separate to the rest of the family on our top floor, not using our family bathroom, coming home and immediately changing out of my clothes to put them in the washing machine, anxious not to endanger my family, with a constant feeling of uncertainty and fear of the unknown. At a memorial service held recently in March at the British Medical Association the names of the 52 doctors who had died of coronavirus were read out. Thousands of others died in lonely and difficult circumstances with relatives unable to say goodbye or attend their funeral services.

Having described the context of a world where there is widespread loneliness and isolation, let us look at Psalm 71. It is an outpouring of emotion to God with which we can identify and perhaps in our emotional honesty before God, find the courage to share our deepest selves including our hopes and fears with those closest to us. The psalm speaks to me and to others who have been or are lonely. There is one place we can always go to for refuge and deliverance from our troubles and loneliness, for help in making sense of what we are experiencing. That place is God's presence. Psalm 71 offers a radically different approach to dealing with loneliness.

We can take refuge in God, our Lord (v1), find in Him our rock of refuge, to which we can always go, ask Him to save us, to be our rock and fortress (v3), find our hope in Him (v5), find in Him our strong refuge (v7). What does this look like in practice, and what are the barriers to escaping from loneliness?

Tournier identifies various factors which contribute to loneliness. One of them is the spirit of competition which pervades our culture. He traces its origins to Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest which leads to the conclusion that life can be only competition, never cooperation. In the UK we have seen this in the NHS since the reforms introduced by Margaret Thatcher, based on the premise that the welfare of all will benefit from universal competition, with different providers competing to provide services to our patients. I can tell you from personal experience that this has often led to poorer (yet more expensive) care for our patients. What about relationships within families and in the wider society? How often do we really make contact with the other person deep down inside, rather than only with their outward role, their system of thought, their demands? Each hides their most personal concerns behind the false front of title, position, reputation or doctrine which needs to be maintained at all costs. The psalmist calls out to God for help 'for my enemies speak against me, my strength is gone.' (vv9-10) With God, he can be real, he can acknowledge that, like many of us, he has seen 'troubles many and bitter'. (v20) He can acknowledge that he has needed to rely on God's saving acts and marvelous deeds since his youth, those who wanted to harm him (perhaps who were competing against him) having been put to shame and confusion (v24). When he is going through hard times, he reminds himself that God has been his hope and his confidence since his youth (v5). God is his strong refuge (v7) (I love that phrase) and in the midst of his troubles, his mouth is filled with praise, declaring God's splendor all day long. God has done great things and will restore his life again (vv8,17,20).

Another factor contributing to loneliness is the idea that we have a right to live and behave independently of others and even of God. 'Each man for himself.' But just as we are rediscovering in our patients the absolute interdependence of body, mind, and spirit for healthy functioning (the

'Médecine de la Personne' that we meet to uphold) so we need to remind ourselves and our patients of the ways in which we rely on relationships with others and with God. In the famous words of the 17th century author John Donne from his Meditation 17:

No man is an island,
entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent,
a part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were.
as well as if a manor of thy friend's
or of thine own were.
Any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind;
and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.

Tournier also writes of the many people who seem ashamed to ask for help, who would like to solve their problems themselves and then offer to God the services of a victor. He writes in complete honesty '*As if I had ever been able to solve a really personal problem without passing through the narrow gate of confession and the humiliating admission of my inability to straighten myself out alone!*' (EL page 56) We should remember for ourselves and then remind our patients that we need other people in our lives on whom to rely. It is not a virtue to struggle on alone. It is not weakness to ask relatives or friends for help. When the ward is busy or certain patients are being particularly difficult, my team of junior doctors, consultant nurse and physician associate get through it together, encouraging each other and at the end of a tough day messaging their thank-you's on our WhatsApp group. I try and get everyone together for Sunday lunch every few months so we can relax together and get to know each other away from work and enjoy the feeling of being part of a supportive team. The old team structure of the consultant and his 'firm' of juniors who worked together for up to 6 months has been swept away and junior doctors can end up only working a few days at a time on a particular ward, never really getting to know the patients they are looking after or the doctors they are working with.

The psalmist turns to his Lord for help. He tells his God 'I will praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O my God, I will sing praise to you with the lyre. My lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you – I, whom you have redeemed. (vv22-23)' Tournier asserts that '*Every independent attitude, every exaggerated individualism, is in the last analysis a revolt against God.*' '*We can discuss faith endlessly, but in practice, no-one receives faith without an act of surrender to God.*' '*The only way to be really independent of the opinions, criticisms and demands of others is to put oneself into dependence upon God.*'

Another contributing factor to people feeling lonely mentioned by Tournier is their tendency to complain, to have a sense of grievance, to want exactly the same as the next person. He writes: '*I see lives literally saturated with grievances that, even when they gain their point in one matter, have*

so many more that they want righted that they tire the best-willed people, deepen their own sense of isolation, and receive even more unfair treatment.' (EL page 125). It is only too easy to gather at work and talk about the things that are difficult, the lack of facilities, the difficult behavior of management or colleagues, insufficient juniors... nurses... secretaries (as I was writing this in 2020 my secretary had just started her maternity leave and hadn't yet been replaced). It's not that the psalmist stays silent about his difficulties; 'For my enemies speak against me, those who want to kill me conspire together' (v10), but his response is to fly to God for help and comfort, to praise Him, to tell of His righteousness, of all God has taught him since his youth and to declare His marvelous deeds until he is old and gray. Are we willing to declare all that God has done for us in times of difficulty, to sing praise to Him for His faithfulness? The psalmist pleads with God 'Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go.' I encourage you to find in God your rock of refuge (hang on to that phrase) and to praise Him and hope in Him.

Tony Horsfall, in bible reading notes which I read one morning while preparing this talk, writes,

'God knows the plans he has for us. We may feel confused by life events, and wonder what is happening, but God hasn't lost the plot. Even if it takes a long time, his perfect will for us is being worked out.

God has good plans for us. When we realize this, we can be confident in the present and optimistic for the future, and we can dare to trust him with our lives. He wants to do what is best for us, not harm us.

What God desires more than anything is that we should live in relationship with him. He longs for us to connect with him through prayer and to get to know him more deeply and intimately. When we choose to seek him sincerely, we can be sure that we shall find the reality of his presence.'

The Psalms continue to speak in a present and relevant way into the most difficult of situations. On what was to turn out to be my last ever day running the bookshop at my children's old school at the start of the pandemic, one of the maintenance men, a Christian, suggested to me as he passed by that I read Psalm 91. Not long afterwards someone else also mentioned the psalm's appropriate words for the time. 'He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.' 'Surely, he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.' 'You will not fear the terror of night.....nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.' The bible is full of such promises and in times of loneliness and uncertainty it is worth seeking out God's promises and trying to start the day reading and absorbing His word.

As part of preparing to write about loneliness, I picked up a book I bought many years ago when I wondered if I would ever marry (Gareth and I married when I was 34), called 'Complete as one. Living a fulfilled life as a single person' thinking it might have something to say about dealing with loneliness. Towards the end of the book in a chapter entitled 'There's always someone to turn to' the author writes:

'Meditation draws our hearts, our minds and our whole beings to the Lord in such a way that He can speak and minister to us. It helps us to develop that inner quietness which we need – for mental

and physical health as well as for spiritual renewal... there can be no real loneliness when the Lord's companionship is enjoyed. Knowing that we have been made in the image of God and given a part to play in His plans for the world bestows meaning and worth on our lives; abiding in Christ and drawing on the power of His Holy Spirit results in fruitfulness and increasing Christ-likeness.'

Whatever our circumstances, whether we thrive in groups and social situations or prefer to retreat to our rooms to enjoy a good book or be creative on our own, we need to be, in the words of Paul Tournier '*renewed every day in the presence of Christ*' (EL page 164). In the words of our psalmist, 'Though we have seen troubles, many and bitter, God will restore our life again, He will increase our honor and comfort us once again.' (vv20-21) Taking refuge in the presence of God will '*lead to the discovery of our true self and to self-confidence. It gives us a clear vision of what we have that we can share with others and heals our fear, so our own worth is affirmed*' (EL page 172).

I would like to finish with verse 14 of the psalm which has formed the basis for my talk today:

'But as for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more.'

References

- Psalm 71. New International Version.
- Escape from Loneliness. Paul Tournier. Translated by John S. Gilmour from the French *De la Solitude à la Communauté*. Delachaux & Niestle, Neuchatel, Switzerland, 1948. (His words quoted in italics in the text).
- Christensen AV, Juel K, Ekholm O, et al/Significantly increased risk of all-cause mortality among cardiac patients feeling lonely *Heart* 2020;**106**:140-146.
- The lonely city; adventures in the art of being alone. Olivia Laing. Picador, 2016.
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