

Along the track

Alone

All of us like our privacy, we like to feel in control, to decide things for ourselves, if we can. We also like to have our own space and to be able to have some control over what is happening around us and to us. That's all natural enough.

"It is not good for man to be alone," we are told in Genesis and then we hear the story of Adam and Eve. But it is much more than a story about the origins or importance of marriage. It is not good to be alone. Everyone needs a helpmate, everyone needs others around them, not just to 'not be lonely' but also grow in maturity, understanding and that most essential quality, compassion.

We are all more alike than we are different, and we're better when we look out for each other, when we reach out to others, when we are open to those with who we share a common thread but also to those who may be different. It is not good to be alone – we need others to help us grow and mature, and that is a lifetime journey.

Loneliness is dreadful, and sometimes that can even happen when we are surrounded by others. We can feel neglected or abandoned, and many do. It is easy to forget that many members of our community have been suffering social isolation for years: people living with mental illness, those with special needs and their carers too at times, some single parents, the long-term unemployed, the cognitively impaired, refugees, the homeless, students living far from home, the frail elderly living alone. In most cases, this situation is one that has been thrust upon them, rather than one they chose.

But when we make ourselves alone, that's a deeper issue, when we see ourselves as different or somehow special, when we come to believe that everyone else is getting a better deal than me, or that what others believe is a threat to what I believe, when anger begins to fuel our mistrust, then that's a real problem. This kind of loneliness isn't about a lack of people, but a lack of connection.

Spiritual writer, Fr Ronald Rolheiser puts it this way when writing about making ourselves alone (and I am summarising here): *It is dangerous because, when we are alone, we do not have to adjust ourselves to another's rhythm, another's needs, and another's demands. It is then a lot easier to grow selfish. The danger is not so much that one will be lonelier than somebody but we are dangerously free to have things too much our own way.*

We are social beings who need strong connections with each other. We may not always agree with each other but when we start to believe that we are missing out, that we are being singled out and everyone else is getting a better deal, it is time to ask ourselves why we feel that way. Making ourselves alone starts in small steps. It doesn't happen overnight but thoughts fester and grow and sometimes they can take hold. We see the consequences of that almost daily in the media.

That doesn't mean we simply conform to what is going on around us, rather it challenges us to think about others. Not making ourselves alone asks us to reach out to those who are, to create connections, to be "good news" in the middle of such negative tidings. We need communities to belong to, to nurture, support and protect us, and that is a two-way street. We build these communities together, shifting the focus from our own concerns to the needs of others. Nothing helps us to 'get out of ourselves' as it were more quickly than the knowledge that 'someone else needs me'. If we have things too much our own way, it is easy to forget the many members of our community who are in need, even just a bit of company.

Jesus' command: *Love one another as I have loved you* is about how we live every day, how we respond to the ordinary circumstances of our lives, how we reach out to those we meet each day. It is easy enough to reach out to those people who are loving, warm, respectful, and gracious towards us, being among like-minded friends.

But what about with the people who we don't like, those we avoid and who avoid us. Or those people we disagree with or who cause us to feel angry, those who are making themselves alone?

Sometimes that is easy, sometimes it can be a challenge but often in the challenge lies the greatest growth.

Regards
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