

Along the track

Being Hopeful

Loneliness is a dreadful thing. It has sometimes been described as a living death. That's not being over dramatic. There is a reluctance to even talk about it, to share the feelings that drag us away from others, to talk about those things which make us turn inwards. Loneliness is very isolating when we are by nature, made for community; it is self absorbing when we are designed to find happiness by reaching out to others, when we are made to be of service to others, it saps us of hope when we are born with imagination, which makes us capable of exploring options. Hope gives us the capacity to vision and to dream, to imagine other ways.

Loneliness is not limited to the destitute, the poor, the homeless, the addict. We might like to think it is, that it is self-inflicted, a product of bad choices or particular circumstances not necessarily of our own making. But survey after survey in recent years indicate that loneliness is on the rise, especially in affluent, technically connected societies like our own. Loneliness in homes, in marriages, in families is alarmingly prevalent. For many, much of life is spent at a screen or communicating with friends via electronic media but meaningful social contact is decreasing as is community commitment or hands on shared projects or dialogue with others, outside texts or posts that is. Loneliness inside a crowd can be even more crushing.

For Jesus, 'life to the full' was at the heart of his teaching, at the heart of his ministry. This vision was not just about 'life after death', but the here and now. Nor was it just about liberation from the stifling rules and regulations of the society and faith that he lived in. It was not just about emancipation from the Romans, about freedom. Rather, Jesus reached out to those imprisoned in isolation, those rejected by society, those ostracised by their community, by their faith, by their sense of unworthiness or inadequacy (Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof...). He reached out to them, he sought them out, he sat down and ate with them, talked with them, put his arms around them (imagine what that must have felt like to those imprisoned in their loneliness), spent time with them, healed them. He worked hard at creating a renewed awareness of their dignity and that of every person, even those who are in prison, starving, the outcaste. There is such good in people, Jesus said in word and by his actions. He showed them the possibilities within a new understanding of community, a richer awareness of each other, no matter our circumstances.

Jesus offered a vision of hope, not a utopian dream but a very practical vision. It focussed on people and their needs. You fed me, you clothed me, you visited me when I was lonely and sick or imprisoned (Mtt 25 36-40). It was very down to earth, looking after the most basic needs of every person. But it also offered a way out of the imprisonment of isolation, of focussing on self. He helped us to understand the importance of reaching out to others and the freedom that brings, the healing it offers.

Just as importantly he taught us that freedom, genuine liberation is born out of hope, a hope by which people have a sense of their ability to create a future. His stories of hope, the mustard seed, the smallest of seeds that grows to one of the biggest of trees, and the hidden leaven in the bread, remind us that God's reign, God's vision is silently at work and unstoppable. The Spirit keeps working within, inspiring us to imagine, to see possibilities. Loneliness and isolation stifle that. We see this most clearly at those times when Jesus heals people who are blind. He is restoring more than just physical sight; he is opening their eyes so that they can see much more deeply (Jn 9 1-12) and to have the confidence, the security to dream and imagine what might be.

The mission of Jesus reminds us of the beauty and dignity of every human being and their capacity to make a difference. Our belief in the Spirit whom Jesus left with us reminds us of our capacity to imagine, to vision, to inspire and to work for justice and fairness, to give back to others the capacity to dream of what might be, the dreams that make them uniquely themselves. To give them hope.

Regards
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