

# LONELINESS AND SOLITUDE

By MICHAEL SIMPSON

EVERY HUMAN person stands alone. He has this in common with every creature. He is himself and can never be another. But man not only stands alone; he is also aware of himself as standing alone, and from this self-awareness arise all the experiences, both agonizing and fulfilling, that are associated with the words loneliness and solitude. To be alone can be man's most bitter experience. But it can also be his most creative. He is constituted as a person and finds fulfilment through his relationships with the world, with other human persons and with God. When these relationships are authentic, when they fulfil his needs and hopes, man experiences a sense of joy, harmony and creative life. But when they are distorted, when they fail to satisfy his capacities and desires, he becomes aware of himself as empty, frustrated, cut off from all that can offer hope and life. Then his isolation becomes something bitter and can lead to despair.

Loneliness, with all the suffering and anguish it brings, is perhaps more widespread today than ever before. It can take a great many different forms; but we all know something of what it means. We live together in large cities, but so often we hardly know each other at all. It is an age of rapid change, when much in which we felt secure has been uprooted and so little put in its place. We move fast and yet hardly know where we are going. We have lost our sense of being at home. We are perhaps more deeply sensitive to the need for personal relations which can fulfil, and yet these so often fall cruelly short of our hopes and needs. We desire urgently to communicate ourselves to others, yet so often find ourselves unable to do so. We come together to appease our loneliness, and find that loneliness in the midst of others is the most bitter of all. The deepest sufferings come to each person alone; the loss of those we love, debilitating illness, old age, depression. Others can offer sympathy and comfort; and this is so often a source of help and strength. They may in some degree be able to enter the experience of the one in sorrow by genuine compassion, but they can

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never truly relieve that sorrow by taking it upon themselves. The one in sorrow stands alone. Worse still is the loneliness that comes through guilt. We all know what we have done. We are responsible alone. Others may forgive, but they cannot enable us to escape from ourselves and from the responsibility for our actions. And it is alone that each person finally faces death and the shadow which this casts throughout his life. No one is able truly to enter this final experience with us. We die alone.

Finally there can arise the most bitter loneliness of all, the sense of being forsaken even by God. This has been likened to death.

This affliction and sorrow for the absence of God is wont to be so great in those that are approaching ever nearer to perfection, at the time of these divine wounds, that, if the Lord provided not for them, they would die.<sup>1</sup>

We may not all have experienced the anguish of the mystic; yet a sense of emptiness and lack of meaning, the mark of the absence of God, is a feature of our age and can at times affect us all.

On the other hand, much that is most genuine and profound in human nature does require a certain degree of isolation. We would not be without it. All forms of creative work demand a certain 'aloneness'. The poet, the artist, the composer, the novelist, all need a degree of solitude to 'contemplate reality', so that it may come to creative expression in their work. Even true communion with others requires the solitude to be one's true self. Always to live in the crowd can lead to superficiality, impersonality, the inability to know and accept oneself as one truly is and thereby to be oneself with others. True love and solitude go together.

Prayer too demands solitude, a withdrawal in which one can become sensitive to the true source of one's life and being. God cannot come to one in the crowd. It is only if we have the courage to come out from hiding in the impersonal group that God can speak to us and fill our life with his presence. His word comes to each one in solitude, and it is in solitude that we make our response.

To be alone belongs to man's destiny. In itself it is ambiguous. It can lead to emptiness and death; it can lead to all that is most true and creative in life. But we cannot escape it. Loneliness is not overcome by immersing oneself in the crowd. It is in the midst of others that one can feel most intensely alone. Whereas in the

<sup>1</sup> St John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle* I, exposition of Stanza 1, 13.

isolation of the desert one may be most close to others in the truest sense. True life in communion with other persons and with God can only come if one has the courage to be oneself – alone.

A distinction of terms may help us to enter more deeply into the mystery of our experience, to see not only what is in need of healing, of radical transformation, but also what is genuine and true to our human nature and which must be preserved. A distinction which has some basis in traditional ascetical writings can well serve this purpose, although modern usage does not retain its full force, and may make it appear somewhat arbitrary. Let us describe our state of being alone, insofar as it is something embittering, self-enclosing, destructive, by the term 'loneliness'. Loneliness is the condition of being alone without love. It is the immediate social consequence of sin. Let us, by contrast, describe that state of being alone in which human nature is at its most profound, a state which opens man to a true creative life and to true communion of love with other persons and with God, by the term 'solitude'. Solitude remains proper to our human nature as it is redeemed by love. It is our distinctness as persons created by God.

In our human condition we all experience a mixture of loneliness and solitude. It is loneliness that causes us pain and bitterness. But what we need is not that this should be overcome by the loss of our true individuality, our distinctness as persons, but rather that it should be transformed and healed into a life-giving solitude in which true love can arise. Our sinful state is one of self-centred isolation – loneliness. Our redeemed state is one in which, remaining distinct persons, we may go out to others in love and self-giving solitude, and so find true communion. As long as we remain in a sinful and lonely world, solitude will not remove all suffering; but it will open us to the love that can transform and heal. And this is the love which Christ revealed and lived in communion with men.

In the light of this distinction between loneliness and solitude, it may help us to enter more fully into our christian experience if we ask in what sense, if any, Jesus experienced the loneliness and solitude of our human life. We cannot say that Jesus experienced loneliness in the sense that we have defined it – as self-centred isolation: for that would be to attribute to him too simply a human condition which is sinful in itself. Yet equally we cannot say that Jesus did not experience the anguish of being alone: for that would be to take away all the tension of the agony in Gethsemane, and of Calvary, which drew from the very depths of his being the cry 'My

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Jesus experienced solitude, the state of being alone; but in it he always remained open to his Father and to his fellow-men in love. In our sinful world, the experience of solitude can still bring deep anguish and suffering. But the suffering of solitude is centred upon others and upon God and can lead to a renewal of life; whereas the suffering of loneliness is centred upon self and leads to death.

Jesus experienced human solitude in all its varied forms. He lacked a place where he could feel at home and secure: 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'. This we too experience when we are uprooted from family and country, from the company of those we love and with whom we feel at home. Jesus knew the anguish of being rejected by his own people. 'He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not'. And this we too can experience when we live with those who are close to us and yet who reject the values upon which our life is based.

Jesus felt the bitterness of being forsaken by his friends. 'Will you also go away?' 'Could you not watch one hour with me?' He suffered from their misunderstandings, from their mistakes. He was betrayed by one of his own friends and denied by the one he had placed at their head. We too experience this bitterness when disappointed by our friends or rejected by those in whom we had placed our trust and love.

Jesus took the burdens of others upon himself and suffered with the frustrations, anxieties and emptiness brought upon themselves by their loneliness. Jesus himself was not lonely, for his life was centred not upon himself but wholly upon his Father. 'I am not alone, for the Father is always with me'. But he could truly experience the effects of loneliness in others. He made himself vulnerable to the conflicts of lonely men; and it was in deep sorrow that he knew himself to be a cause of division and a sign of contradiction to so many.

Jesus knew the anguish of being alone in the face of death. 'Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour'. The mystery of death is one we all face alone. And Jesus was no exception. Even those few friends who remained by him to the end could not share his final experience, expressed in his cry of utter darkness, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

The mystery of this cry, so far removed from our normal comprehension, may yet provide our deepest insight into Christ's life-giving solitude, and show how this may heal the wounds of our loneliness. It has commonly been taken by the Fathers of the Church and late writers that the cry of Jesus meant that all the sensible awareness of his Father's presence had been removed. But this, if it be true, is no light matter. We have already seen that the anguish of the mystic in the 'dark night' has been likened to death. Our experience is a sensible experience. Take this away and there is nothing left to give support. Other writers suggest that Jesus's cry, the opening words of Psalm 22, only express the beginning of his prayer, a prayer that moves in the psalm through the depths of bitterness and despair to a final joy and consolation. Was Jesus, in his agony, unable to complete his prayer and express the other dimension of his experience? If this be the answer we may accept it, for human life is a life in which the joy of victory is inseparable from the anguish through which it is attained. The solitude from which true love is born does not remove all the sorrow that comes from being alone.

For to be alone is proper to man. As a person he is distinct and can never be totally identified with another. True love and communion between persons does not abolish that distinctness. Even at moments of deepest love between persons, and of deepest mystical union with God, when no reflective self-awareness may remain, one yet remains a distinct self: as is all too clear once the moment of union has passed and when the bitterest sense of isolation may be felt.

Man is made in the image of God; and if we are to enter more deeply into the mystery of our human life, we need to consider for a moment the mystery of the life of the blessed Trinity. For we cannot resolve the tensions of our human life unless we know something of what that life should be. And the life of the blessed Trinity, mystery though it be and little as we can grasp it in our intellectual thought, may reveal to us the truth that all life, the very life of God himself in which we are called to share, is a life of solitude-in-communion.

The use of the word 'person' for the three members of the Trinity is fraught with theological difficulties. Yet we must surely affirm that all that is best and most genuine in human individuality and personhood belongs to the members of the blessed Trinity, even though the reality so far exceeds the power of our limited concepts

and expression. The Father expresses himself in the Son; the Son is the expression of the Father. They remain distinct. The Council of Florence condemned the sabellian view which removed the distinctness of persons within the Trinity, and declared that in God everything is one except where there is a distinction by 'opposition of relations'. Yet the Father's being consists in his relation to the Son; the Son's being consists in his being related to his Father as his eternal expression; and the being of the divine Spirit is the relation of love between Father and Son, a relation in which their distinctness of persons is brought to perfect communion.

What we can learn from these all too feeble gropings of our language into the mystery of the blessed Trinity is that this is not a life in which all solitude is abolished. It is a life of the most perfect individuality, distinctness of persons; and yet it is also a life of perfect communion, of unimpeded love between Father and Son expressed in the Spirit.

This is the image in which we are made. What we need to learn is that to be alone is not a regrettable result of our wounded nature: it is proper to man, it forms part of his genuine experience. Loneliness cannot be overcome by a sheer escape from the fact of our 'aleness': it can be overcome only by being healed and transformed into the creative life of solitude-in-communion which is proper to the life of the blessed Trinity itself. Solitude and communion are not conflicting elements within our human condition. Each presupposes the other. We do not seek communion by a loss of self, as is the apparent aim of certain eastern ascetical doctrines. The christian life is one of solitude-in-communion, in which it is the finite expression of the mystery of the blessed Trinity itself, where perfect individuality and perfect communion become one.

The human person is distinct from others, distinct from God. This can never be lost. But our being too is a being for others and, fundamentally, a being for God. Just as each member of the Trinity exists only in relation to the other members of the Trinity, so the true human person exists only in relation to other persons and in relation to God. These relations are no accidental addition to our essential self-constitution: *they are* what constitute us as human persons. Where love for other persons and love for God has died, or has never been allowed to grow, there is an *essential* loss to the human person. And this inevitably results in the bitter and empty loneliness of our wounded condition. What is bitter is not the sheer fact of being alone, but being alone without love.

In the light of this mystery of the blessed Trinity, we may again approach in reverence the mystery of Christ's solitude and his cry of anguish on the Cross. His very being was constituted by his relation to the Father, but he could no longer experience his Father's presence. What could be more bitter? And the same is true of our partial entry into his experience. Our very being is constituted by our relation to others and to the Father. The loss of love is no mere loss of some accidental enrichment of life alongside, for example, the loss of some creative talent or opportunity. It is the loss of what is essential to our very life as *human persons*. What could be more bitter?

We need the experience both of loving and of being loved. But to receive love from another person depends upon the other's freedom which cannot be compelled. And in our lonely world very often it may happen that one's love for others may be rejected and receive no response of love. This is a source of suffering and anguish even in solitude. And this suffering Jesus experienced to the full. For many of us this experience of being hurt by others leads to our becoming closed in upon ourselves: our loving solitude falls into an embittered loneliness. We still suffer, but our suffering becomes destructive and leads to death. But this was not Jesus's answer. In his solitude he never ceased to love, even when men hurt and rejected him. Had he done so, there would have been no healing for man's self-centred loneliness. For he would himself have been afflicted by the same wound. It was by continuing to love lonely men, even when hurt by them, that he could heal their wound and transform their loneliness by the power of that love.

This call to a loving solitude is the call made to every christian today. Christian solitude will at times experience the anguish of having one's love rejected by others. But the answer then is not to cease to love, to fall back into self-centred loneliness. It is by our continuing love, despite what hurt we suffer, that Christ can continue to heal and redeem men's loneliness. If we never experienced any hurt, the world would already be fully redeemed. The suffering of loneliness is self-destroying and is a foretaste of eternal death. The suffering of solitude-in-love is creative and leads to eternal life. For true christian solitude is already a sharing in the life of the blessed Trinity. It is in solitude that the divine Spirit unites our own life in Christ to the eternal life of the Father. And no matter what we suffer from rejection by man, we know that in Christ we are never alone, for the Father is always with us. We have

only to open ourselves to his healing love to find all the strength we need to live our own life of christian solitude.

The call to solitude is not made only to the hermit. Every christian is called to some form of solitude-in-communion. The forms may differ. Married life, no less than the life of religious celibacy, is a call to share in the solitude and in the love of Christ. For it is in the communion which each one of us has in the depths of our own being with the Father that we become our true self. And it is in this communion that we can come to know and love others as they truly are. We can never fully identify ourselves with the innermost being of another human person even in moments of deepest love. We never cease to remain distinct persons. But in communion with God we come to true communion with one another, in married life, in religious community, in the community of all our fellow men. In this community there is no loss of personality as there can be in the impersonal crowd. But there is a perfect unimpeded giving of oneself which respects others as they are and respects oneself as one is. And in this communion of love all selfishness, the root of loneliness, may finally be removed.

True solitude opens us to the presence of God within our finite human life, the presence of the eternal within the temporal. We remain alone but not lonely, for in the presence of God we find communion with all those from whom we had been separated by the wound of selfishness. We need the courage of the Spirit to come out from hiding and to open ourselves as we are to God and to one another. Then the mystery of the blessed Trinity, which is the mystery of our own life, will draw us into that perfect solitude of Christ in communion with his Father through the love which is the divine Spirit.