

Loneliness

A Sermon by Rev. Grant H. Odhner

Hear my prayer, O Lord,
And let my cry come to You.
Do not hide Your face from me
in the day of trouble...
I am like a pelican of the wilderness;
I am like an owl of the desert.
I lie awake,
And am like a sparrow alone
on the housetop. Ps 102.1,2,6-7

What striking pictures of loneliness we have here! "A pelican of the wilderness," "an owl of the desert," "a sparrow alone on the housetop." A pelican is a large bird, but it shrinks to insignificance when we picture it surrounded by wilderness. An owl is a solitary bird, but what could be more solitary than "an owl of the desert?" Yet of these three images, the "sparrow alone on the housetop" is the most lonely. A sparrow is a drab, little bird that is usually seen in a flock, chattering socially with its associates: flying when they fly, turning when they turn (even in mid air!), landing when they land. A flock like this responds to all things as a One! They constantly take their queue from one another. So "a sparrow alone on the housetop," without its friends, facing the wind by itself, is truly a lonely sight.

Like that sparrow, all of us were created to live with others. We were created to live in community. As we read in the work True Christian Religion: "A human being is not born for the sake of himself alone, but for others; otherwise there could be no cohesive society, nor any good in it" (TCR 406). We were created by the Lord "to love others outside of [ourselves], to want to be one with them, and to make them happy from [ourselves]" (TCR 43). This is the nature of love. And an essential element in this love is "to be loved by others, for in this way conjunction is brought about" (DLW 47). The Lord made us to need each other (not just to satisfy our worldly wants and needs, but to satisfy our spiritual wants and needs.

This fact is the root-cause of all loneliness. We want and therefore need people to love; we want and need to be conjoined with them in meaningful ways; we want and need response from them. And when we

do not have people to love, with whom we feel some bond of affection and united thought, or when we do not feel response from them, we feel a certain quiet grief or emptiness which we call "loneliness."

Having people to love, getting response from them, and feeling a bond with them, are not merely a matter of having people around us. Loneliness is essentially a state of mind, not a set of physical conditions. We can feel lonely, even when, to all appearance, we are blessed with all sorts of relationships and all kinds of associations with others in human society. Real response to our love on the part of others is a matter of the quality of their appreciation for us, for what we have to give, and are trying to give; it is a matter of how much, and how accurately, we feel known and understood, accepted and valued, by those whom we love and serve. Feeling a bond or "conjunction" with others is a matter of feeling a positive and meaningful "response" from them. Unless we sense that the response of others is true and genuine, we may feel lonely, even when they are going through all the motions of friendly interactions with us.

The cause of loneliness is a lack of meaningful relationships with others. But the feeling itself has two distinctly different origins. It can spring from selfish love or unselfish love.

We have been speaking of unselfish love and its desire to love others outside of itself, to be one with them, to make them happy from itself, to be loved in return. Loneliness is never in itself a heavenly emotion. It arises, like anger and zeal, when our love is frustrated in some way. If we had perfect trust in the Lord, we would not let frustrations get us down. But the fact is, being limited in our ability to see ahead and trust, even the best of us can experience "our love frustrated."

Sometimes we can find our love for another blocked by circumstances, which are too complex and longstanding to be quickly remedied. In the meantime, as we work for change, we feel a gnawing void. We must sometimes endure states of temptation and cold. And while the hells are holding us captive in the affections and perspective of our "natural person," our feelings of love for others are deadened, even while our "spiritual person" yearns for renewed warmth. Or sometimes we must endure states of cold in our loved ones, which prevent them from being responsive to our love. Sometimes we simply lack meaningful relationships, and though we work for them, the Lord in His wisdom has not yet led us to them. In all these sorts of circumstances, even though

we are doing the best we can, we feel lonely. And this loneliness is not wholly selfish. It is a good love, a good yearning, that is frustrated.

Even the Lord, when He was in the world, must have felt loneliness. Several times we are given the picture of Him alone: in the wilderness for forty days (Mk 1); praying "up on a mountain by Himself" (Mt 14.23; Lk 9.18); in Gethsemene when His disciples slumbered, and later when they forsook Him and fled; and especially, hanging on the cross.

The Lord's deepest love was to be joined with the human race, so that He could impart to us His love, and be received and loved in return. This conjunction was His end in view, and the promise of it was His inmost joy (AC 2034.2-3, 2077). Generally, the Lord was sustained by a strong sense of His Divinity, in which this end could not be placed in doubt. The people around Him could leave Him alone and forsaken, but His Divine confidence remained with Him; as He said to His disciples:

Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because My Father is with Me. Jn 16.32

But at times the Lord's love and hope were attacked by the hells. He allowed this so that He could draw out their venom and neutralize it. The Lord's means of drawing out the hells' malice was to take on a human mind which had all our frailties, which was vulnerable to the hell's attacks. Into this human mind, His Divine mind could gradually be inserted. From within, the Divine could reorder the human, gradually enlightening it, meeting the challenges of evil emotions and false thinking, casting out its spiritual sicknesses, purifying it, making it whole. All this could only happen through temptations, in which the Lord lowered Himself into the frail human perspective, so that the hells could approach. When He did this, He seemed to Himself to lose the Divine perspective. He was left alone in the human, left to Himself. His Divine "appeared to be absent" (AC 7058.3; cf 1745, 1999.2,5; HD 302). He was then struggling from Divine power, but struggling in the human, from its perspective, using the natural tools then available to Him. (This was part of the power of His advent: that His work for us left us natural tools, natural ideas, filled with Divine life, by which we could later fight for heaven!)

When He was in temptation the Lord felt alone and forsaken both by man and by God; He felt "without the aid of anyone" (AC 5005). This is

an aspect of all temptation (TCR 126). When we read in the Psalms about the psalmist's feeling alone, we are reading about both the Lord's temptations and our own.

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?
Why are You far from helping me,
And from the words of my groaning? ...
For dogs have surrounded me;
The assembly of the wicked has enclosed me..
But You, O Lord, do not be far from me;
O my strength, hasten to help me! Ps 22.1,16,19

The loneliness of temptation is partly that we lose all sense of our "inner person," the spiritual part of us. Like Elisha's servant, our spiritual eyes are not open to see our heavenly connection with others (the "mountains" surrounding us with "horses and chariots of fire" (II Kgs 6). It is our inner person that is in communion with the Lord and with the hosts of heaven. It is this inner part of us that genuinely loves others, and is able to have connection with them. As a result, in temptation we feel removed from others, isolated. The psalmist (unawares) sings of this:

You have put my acquaintances far from me;
You have made me an abomination to them;
I am shut up, and I cannot get out..
Loved one and friend
You have put far from me,
And my acquaintances into darkness. Ps 88
My loved ones and my friends stand aloof
from my plague,
And kinsmen stand afar off. Ps 38.11

I am a reproach among all my enemies,
But especially among my neighbors,
And am repulsive to my acquaintances;
Those who see me outside flee from me. Ps 31

We see pictured here the isolation that temptation brings. The isolation is a direct result of evil spirits around us, who hold us in selfish affections. It is selfishness that destroys all sense of communion with others.

From our inner person, if we do not yield to the feelings injected into our outer person by evil spirits, we continue to long for loving communion with others, however frustrated our love becomes. But when under attack, we do feel lonely. And this loneliness is not selfish.

But what about selfish loneliness? Like unselfish love, selfish love also wants to love others, to be one with them, to make them happy, and to be loved in return. In loving and serving others, and in bringing delight to them, the Self feels wanted, needed, worthwhile. Selfish people will sometimes do the vilest acts, they will sometimes submit to the the basest treatment at the hands of others, because it makes them feel validated. Even bad people want to love and be loved. They also want to be bonded with others. But in the love they give and in the response they receive they are looking to Self. They wish to be in communion with others and to make them happy only so that others may satisfy them and complete them. Selfish loneliness arises when our Self's desire for being fed and coddled is thwarted.

How can we tell, when we feel lonely, whether our loneliness is selfish or unselfish? And how should we respond? The answer to the first question is: it is often difficult to know whether our loneliness is selfish or unselfish. It takes a lot of self-examination. Often a good kind of loneliness can appear selfish. The hells would have us believe that it is. And often a selfish kind of loneliness can appear legitimate.

Some things to look at are: Do I desire to love others outside of myself, or as part of myself? Do I want to love them and be One with them as beings in their own right? Do I want to love them for what they are (or can become)? Or am I just using them as a prop, a stage-piece in the "Play About Me?" One way of determining whether we are using another as a prop or loving them in their own right is to ask, Do I respond to their love and their thoughts and their services in a living, sensitive way? Do I take the care to know them? to know "where they are?" This takes continual communication. Have I become too self-absorbed? Am I looking at the world from my own narrow perspective? Are others unresponsive to me because I am not responsive to them? We can blame our loneliness on other's inattention, when part of the trouble may be our own inattention. When we feel lonely and unfulfilled in our relationships with others, there are many inner issues to look at. The surface-issues, and our instinctive judgments, are probably not the whole story.

How do we respond to loneliness? Obviously, we must examine ourselves, as I have suggested. Our response is only as good as is our understanding of the problem. But in general we must continue to desire communion with others through shared "uses." We must seek to interact with them in mutual services, and in the exchange of ideas. Part of being in communion with others is sharing similar joys, interests, ideals. But these things cannot be discovered unless we engage in the "uses" of society.

And we must acknowledge the Lord's leading here! People who trust in providence are content with their lot. They trust that the Lord is leading them into meaningful and useful relationships with others, when they do their part. So when they are lonely, they accept the reality of their situation, even as they do what they can to change it. They do not grovel in discouragement. They do not look for "quick fix" solutions to their loneliness. They are unwilling to restore happiness through unlawful means, such as unbridled fantasy. Their trust in the Lord strengthens them with patience and a sense of being content with the many delights that the Lord does give them!

Loneliness can be such a grievous thing! So ardently we long to be understood and to understand others, to share and to being responded to with love and appreciation. But no matter how lonely we feel, we must always remind ourselves that we are not alone. We are never really alone. The Lord is with us. His angels are with us. Every sparrow seemingly alone on the housetop is dear to Him. As He observed to His disciples:

Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. Mt 10.29-31

Let us trust that He is leading all who are willing to follow Him into eternal relationships, ones that will be worth the struggle and worth the wait!

Amen.

Lessons: II Kgs 6.8-23; Mt 26.31-46; TCR 126 & AC 2025.2,5 (parts).