

# Loneliness and Isolation ...

*... are not in God's plan*

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*A sermon given on the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity, 6th October 2024 – by the Curate, the Revd Charlie Shefford, in Beverley Minster.*

*Genesis 2:18-24; Mark 10:2-16*

*"It is not good that the man should be alone."*

I'm sure many here will have their own experience and stories of loneliness, not least from the various lockdowns and restrictions during COVID a few years ago, which reminded all of us, if we ever needed reminding, of the importance of community and human contact. We've all had in times of our lives, past or present, times when we have known and felt deeply those words from Genesis, *"It is not good to be alone."*

Up to the point where our reading from Genesis this morning begins, everything has emphatically been designated as *'very good'*. At the end of the last chapter, we are told *'God saw everything he had made, and indeed, it was very good.'* But now for the first time we get an emphatic negative, *"It is not good that man should be alone."* It is revealing that this is one of the earliest descriptions of human beings in scripture - it points us to the fact that we are above all social beings, ones who long for community and for connection. The creation of Eve symbolises not just the creation of woman, but the creation of society, of community, of the whole idea that human beings can share and give life to one another. This is the moment humanity is delivered from the pain and helplessness of solitude and isolation into the joy of community. This is what God calls us to as the church - to deliver all people from the pain of loneliness, to make disciples of all nations and to welcome all into a community of grace, love, and forgiveness. But as we all know, community can go wrong and when the church community goes wrong, it tends to go cataclysmically wrong.

In our gospel this morning, Jesus tells us why and how this can happen. But before we look at the gospel it's worth giving a bit of context for the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees. In Jesus's time it was common practice for men to divorce their wives, oftentimes for trivial and cruel reasons, or just because they were bored with their current wife and wanted a new one. This was at a time when women were wholly reliant on their husbands, so the divorce would mean total and absolute destitution. The Pharisees believed God had given men the right, through the words of Moses, to divorce their wife for any reason they saw fit. So in order to test Jesus, to try and catch him out, they ask him whether this practice is lawful. Jesus answers

them by quoting from Genesis 2 saying, "God made them male and female. For this reason, 'a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' They are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate." Here, Jesus is saying that marriage is a gift of God, a microcosm of community at its most loving and intimate - or at least that's what God has, from the beginning, designed it to be. Whereas the Pharisees' desire to divorce their wives comes not from their desire to fulfil the love of God, nor from God himself, but from their own hard-heartedness; from their own human sin, weakness, and desire. In our own day we might look to the weakness and sin of domestic abuse or violence, or the weakness and sin of infidelity - those who, by their actions, go against the love God originally intended for marriage, and by doing so, break their marriage vows and drive away their spouse.

So Jesus's point here is not to chastise men and women who escape marriages of abuse and infidelity who are abandoned by their spouse through no fault of their own, but to chastise those who seek to use the name of God to justify their own human sin, whatever form that sin and cruelty takes. And this is when the church community is at its worst - when we spiritualise and glorify our own human sin, our own human weakness and desire, and in doing so justify the wrong we commit. These can be small acts of sin: casual cruelty; mean comments; exclusion of others. Or, can be acts of sin which tear lives apart, as we saw in the abuse committed within the Church of England by the Soul Survivor Movement, Peter Ball and others, who used God, spirituality, as well as their position of trust within their community to destroy lives.

All this is to say, 'church going wrong' - the failure to reflect the love of Christ - isn't inconsequential: it does real-world harm. But when church goes right - when we live up to what God has called us to be, community is formed, people are delivered from loneliness and isolation, lives are transformed for the better, and those who were once far off who may never have experienced love of any kind, experience the love of God through his people.

We live in a time of widespread and pervasive loneliness. The World Health Organisation has declared loneliness to be a pressing global health threat. In our own country nearly 4 million people feel chronically alone or isolated.

In a world where so many are crying out for a sense of home and belonging, may we live up to the call of God, the call he has placed on our lives. May we welcome all those who are hurt and marginalised into our community and show them the same love and grace that we ourselves have already received.

# Reading Texts

## Genesis 2:18-24

<sup>18</sup> Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'<sup>19</sup> So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.<sup>20</sup> The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.<sup>21</sup> So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.<sup>22</sup> And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.<sup>23</sup> Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.'

<sup>24</sup> Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

## Mark 10:2-16

<sup>2</sup> Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'<sup>3</sup> He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?'<sup>4</sup> They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.'<sup>5</sup> But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.<sup>6</sup> But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female."<sup>7</sup> "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,<sup>8</sup> and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh.<sup>9</sup> Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'<sup>10</sup> Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.<sup>11</sup> He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her;<sup>12</sup> and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

<sup>13</sup> People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.<sup>14</sup> But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.<sup>15</sup> Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'<sup>16</sup> And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.