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The Conversion of Loneliness

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ABSTRACT
This paper considers ways in which churches and individual Christians can respond to the affliction of loneliness. The authors observe that loneliness is not a hopeless state. Rather, there are causes for it which can be addressed. For the individual Christian, there are theological and spiritual resources that can help to move a fact of aloneness from being an experience of loneliness toward an experience of solitude. For both the individual Christian and for others that Christians encounter, the theological concept of Emmanuel is offered as an assurance of God's presence and understanding of the human condition and as an imperative to form community, a key tool in combatting loneliness. A highly practical, often time-consuming, attitude of love is noted as being essential for pastoral encounters with lonely people, but this can be focused and efficient rather than all-consuming on the part of the pastor.

KEYWORDS
Community; Divine Presence; Emmanuel; loneliness; solitude; relationship

Introduction

This paper is offered at a moment when Western society is going through what can be described as a 'loneliness epidemic,' with the *New York Times* recently running an article entitled 'How Loneliness is Damaging our Health.'[1] This is far from the only story about loneliness, and this paper more specifically comes out of the pastoral experience of its authors. In our various pastoral ministries, we have both seen the deep pain caused by loneliness. As the *New York Times* says, it does damage our health, and in all sorts of ways. Pastoral theologians are well aware of this. Jaco Hamman writes of the loneliness experienced by students, especially as a result of questions around their identity, or of traumatic experiences that they cannot share with others.[2] Pamela Couture suggests that the epidemic of loneliness is intimately related to the individualization of society, a fact that is often no less prevalent in pastoral care in a Christian context than it is in a secular context. However, she reminds her readers that the baptismal rite includes the notion of a community. The truth of baptism is that humans are not at their best when stridently autonomous, but that there is a need for one another.[3] The experience of loneliness can be such an acutely negative experience that William Collins connects it with the image of hell. 'In many ways, the lonely isolation of hell is a projective metaphor of human existence. To some degree, we have all experienced

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the hell of loneliness.'[4] It is striking that in Collins's assessment, hell is imagined as hell not because of any elaborate torture, but because of loneliness. This particular existential horror is often considered to be worse than any other, even in our wildest imaginations.

There is no magic cure for loneliness, but most pastors will have some practical experience of how the Church can work toward alleviating some of the suffering caused by loneliness. This paper seeks to offer a theological reflection on loneliness and will suggest that there is much hope to be found in the core Christian experience of Emmanuel, God-with-us, as well as offering a challenge to all churches to be creative in the care of the lonely. We will be suggesting that there is a continuum on the way out of loneliness, from the abjectly lonely through to those for whom loneliness has been transformed, converted, into solitude. This is one of a number of ways of addressing loneliness that is mentioned briefly by Simon Gibbes in his recent research on loneliness within Church communities.[5] The present paper chooses to focus on solitude, and on ways in which people can walk toward this from within the spiritual framework of Christianity. True and abiding solitude is rare and is usually part of a particular calling, but all can be helped along the continuum toward it, experiencing some of its fruits even without a complete conversion to it.

We will begin this paper with an exploration of something that to many people would appear paradoxical—that some who are alone feel no loneliness at all, whereas others who are in company are overwhelmed by loneliness. This apparent paradox is solved in consideration of the weight with which one lives and the depth of relationship achieved, with God or with another. Second, we give three examples from the Bible, demonstrating that loneliness is throughout the scriptures and offering some thought about how this connects with relationships and depth of living. Third, we explore the theological concept of Emmanuel, offering three key ways in which this Christological mystery speaks of the alleviation and conversion of loneliness. Fourth, we offer some ways in which these ideas play out in pastoral contexts. We conclude by suggesting that there is much that the Church can do for those afflicted by loneliness, and much within Chrisitan spirituality upon which Christians can draw in times of their loneliness.

On Saints and the Lightness of Being

In order to begin to consider the subject of loneliness, we begin with a contrast between two ways of being, one of which might be assumed to be lonely, and the other not. The first is the aloneness that has been and is part of the existence of various monastics, and the second is the life of the literary character Tomas from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, who is rarely physically alone. Here, we will observe that although physical isolation often leads to loneliness, this does not necessarily follow, and that the reverse is also true, that physical proximity to others does not mean one is not lonely. This will provide the impetus to explore the concept of solitude later in the paper.

Of the many saints that Christians recall, a certain number of them have opted to be alone, choosing what for many might seem like a lonely existence. Think of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, or the Stylites of Syria, or Saint Cuthbert in his retreat to the Farne Islands, or Mother Julian in her cell in Norwich. In each of these cases, and many more besides, a Christian has chosen to retreat from the world. But this is not a retreat into loneliness. Rather, in removing themselves from the world, the saints in

question found a deeper connection to the Divine. In fact, humanity usually became a distraction for them in this quest, for many others sought the advice of such holy people. Julian is known to have been visited by many people, including the notorious Margery Kempe.[6] The pillar on which Simeon Stylites lived was often surrounded by an encampment.[7] Some of the Desert Fathers and Mothers managed better in terms of retreating from the world, but even there the occasional seeker would find them.[8] But none of these saints can be described as lonely and none of them sought after loneliness. What they found in their ascetic solitude was anything but loneliness, for they found a deep connection with the source of all being. In fleeing the world, they found presence and connection rather than losing these things. The silence of Abba Arsenius that a visitor could read as unwelcoming was in fact due to something else altogether. A brother wondering about Arsenius's silence had a vision in which he saw Arsenius in a boat in complete silence with the Holy Spirit.[9] This tells us a lot about what loneliness is and is not. Connection, relationship, is the opposite of loneliness. In fleeing the world, such saints still found a connection with the Divine, in such depth that there was no room for loneliness. What was potentially loneliness has been transformed into solitude.

This is all very well, but few of us are saints and most of us need relationships at depth with other humans, as well as with the Divine Other, throughout our lives. However, the obverse of the experience of the saints is that it is quite possible to be entirely lonely in a room full of people, simply because a person is not in a real relationship with any of them. Relationships can be at a depth or a surface level, and where depth is never or only rarely achieved, then loneliness can quickly follow, even when surrounded by people. This is the key theme of Milan Kundera's great work of fiction and philosophy, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Living 'lightly' in Kundera's novel implies a viewpoint on the world whereby this life is all that there is and where actions have no lasting consequence, no weight. Kundera expresses this using Nietzsche's myth of eternal recurrence. Nietzsche's myth was (probably) intended to suggest that everything, including time, recurred, not that life recurred again within an ongoing stream of time.[10] Thus, everything one does now, even if one realizes eternal recurrence as a fact, cannot change what happens 'next time' because there is no temporal continuation for an effect to work within. Kundera's novel suggests that such a myth enforces the point of view that what we do, how we behave, morally, is of great and eternal significance, because the myth 'states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance.'[11] Nietzsche's myth can be replaced by other ideas that give some sort of eternal picture of life for Kundera's suggestion to hold true. If we live without something like Nietzsche's myth and affirm that this current existence is all that there is, we can fall into the trap of living as if there are no responsibilities; nothing matters, we may think, because in a hundred years I will be dead and no lasting consequences can come from my actions. If such a view is adopted, then relationships have no lasting consequence, and surface-level relationships, rather than relationships at depth, are to be expected.

Tomas, the principal character in the book, attempts to live in a weighty way, and in his work as a journalist takes great personal risk to bring to light the lightness of the way that the Czechoslovakian Communists were living. However, Tomas lives with both lightness as well as weight. Tomas cannot contain his philandering, and the sexual infidelity he commits on numerous occasions represents a light treatment of sex on

the part of Tomas. Within one character we see both ways of being human, living lightly and living with weight. Even though the lightness is unbearable, Tomas cannot quite conform his whole life to eschew it, at least for most of the book. Right at the end, Tomas seems to have discovered his true purpose in life, which is to live in relation to another.

The meaninglessness Tomas experiences goes hand in hand with his lack of deep relationships. In the early twentieth century, sociologist Émile Durkheim linked these things in a study of suicide. In essence, Durkheim suggests that for some people, their confusion over their 'fit' and their experience of 'lostness' in the system in which they live can be so overwhelming that they feel there is no alternative to ending their own lives.[12] In the 1970s, Robert Weiss called loneliness 'a gnawing … chronic distress without redeeming features.'[13] The loneliness Weiss describes is captured by the title of his book, which emphasizes that loneliness comprises both emotional and social isolation. The lack of deep relationships and the inability to discover meaning in one's social setting are linked. On the other hand, writing in the *British Medical Journal*, Anne Forbes notes that 'a situation leading to loneliness for one person can be a source of contented aloneness for someone else,' as was observed about certain ascetics.[14] Her short article ends with some practical suggestions for doctors confronted with elderly people who are lonely. None of these suggestions are especially radical, but all are eminently sensible and include the creation of opportunities such as, for some, the joining of groups such as the University of the Third Age.[15] Such joint and purposeful activity naturally includes the discovery of meaning, for oneself and as part of the group, in turn leading to the likelihood of deeper relationships.

The experience of loneliness and meaninglessness are intimately linked. Those few people we remember as saints in the tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers discovered all the meaning and relationship they needed in their connection with the Divine. They were, as often as they could be, alone from the rest of humanity, but they were never alone *per se*. In that connection with the Divine, they also found the deepest meaning for their lives that was available to them. With such connection, relationship, and meaning, they were not lonely. The tragic figure of Tomas in Kundera's novel is quite a contrast. He always feels lonely, even when having a sexual encounter. He overcomes some of his sense of meaninglessness by standing up to the Communists, but this is not enough. It is part of the solution, but until he gets into a position of depth in his relationship, he remains lonely.

Biblical Narratives of Loneliness

There are many places in the Bible where loneliness comes to the fore of the text. The following three examples have been selected for their variety of genres to give an overview of loneliness in the Bible.

Adam and Eve

Thomas Wolfe suggests that loneliness is 'the central and inevitable fact of human existence.'[16] This is demonstrated in Genesis with the birth of Adam who was created in isolation, with God then stating 'It is not good for the man to be alone' (Gen. 2:18). This

loneliness becomes evident when Adam is presented with the birds and beasts of the earth to name. Adam acknowledged them as 'living creatures' (Gen. 2:19) but this does not diminish his loneliness. Adam had a desire for a connection that the animals and plants could not meet, as while they were 'alive' there was still a difference between them. Joseph Stokes determined that individual differences correlate with loneliness, as it is not physical isolation alone that creates loneliness but a lack of social connection.[17] Adam was delighted when presented with Eve as he would no longer be alone. He was with someone similar, discovering his identity within that relationship (Gen. 2:22–23).

However, in Genesis 3:10 we are introduced to an internal loneliness alongside a separation of relationship with God. After eating from the fruit, we are told that Adam heard God's voice and hid. Adam chooses to separate himself from God as he realizes he is naked and becomes vulnerable. Adam, with his new knowledge, recognizes his weaknesses and imperfections on a spiritual and physical level and becomes afraid of being seen. Donald Nathanson's work emphasizes that this shame of oneself can result in withdrawal, attack, and avoidance.[18]

Brené Brown has advocated that vulnerability can be the birthplace of connection, compassion, and courage if we 'dare to show up and let ourselves be seen.'[19] Adam, in his shame, did the opposite and withdrew as an act of self-protection: 'I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself' (Gen. 3.10). However, in withdrawing from his connection with God, he isolated himself in his vulnerableness.

Jeremiah

Abraham Heschel described prophets, such as Jeremiah, as lonely men, stating that due to the responsibilities given to prophets, they tend to live on the highest peak and have 'no company except God.'[20] This appears to encapsulate the majority of Jeremiah's life. It is poignant to note that the Hebrew phrase for sitting alone (דָּד יֵשֵׁב, *dad yesev*) is used in reference to the prophet Jeremiah several times. We are told that he is set apart by God before he was born (Jer. 1:5) and starkly told that he shall dwell alone, literally in isolation from others (Jer. 15:7).

Jeremiah had no family and few friends. He was known as a prophet of doom and bemoaned this as the reason for his isolation:

> O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughing-stock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!' (Jer. 20:7–8)

This context of no family and few friends is, according to Heschel, the main fact in any prophet's life. Heschel states that 'God's turning to [the prophet]' ensures 'man's turning away from him. This is often his lot: to be chosen by God and to be rejected by the people.'[21]

Jeremiah was prone to self-criticism and self-analysis (e.g., Jer. 10:24) and in his 'confessions' (e.g., Jer. 11:18–23; 15:10–21) wrestled with the deep struggles of his inmost being not in 'the public amphitheatre but in the profoundest secrecy,' as William Alger put it in the mid-nineteenth century.[22] Jeremiah experienced deep anguish with the loss of his community, experiencing a yearning for connection as

his identity was rooted within his culture. This awareness of loneliness and spiritual distress can be seen in other literature even if the word is conspicuous by its absence. A prime example is depicted in *Frankenstein* (first published in 1818) where the revenge of the monster was partly motivated by a powerful desire for companionship: 'I am an unfortunate and deserted creature; I look around and I have no relation or friend on earth.'[23]

Susan O. Weisser suggests that this experience of loneliness 'is a kind of alienation from humanity and the world, an inability to enter into it fully.'[24] Jeremiah had lost his culture, people, and identity as he was no longer able to experience his world in the ruins of Jerusalem. Adrian Franklin and Bruce Tranter illustrate that such an experience changes our perception of the world, as belonging is linked to 'place, temporality, memory, mobilities, generation, culture, labor processes, kinship systems, [and] residential arrangements.' When this is severed, loneliness increases.[25] The only things that keep Jeremiah going are the relationship he has with God and the deep importance of his message, his living deeply, rather than lightly, with the message with which he has been entrusted.

Garden of Gethsemane

The Online Etymology Dictionary tells us that in 1811 the word 'loneliness' was used in relation to a 'lonely heart' and loneliness the perception of loneliness being an emotion—a painful separation from others.[26] The truth of this statement can be seen in a recent visit to a hospice, where I [or we] visited a man dying of cancer. In our conversation, he shared that he felt a deep loneliness, even when surrounded by people who loved him deeply. He articulated it this way:

> I have a wonderful family and lots of friends. My hand is held almost every minute, but … I am a stone's throw away from everyone. I am experiencing something which they cannot reach. I am dying and they are not. It is awfully lonely, dying.

Luke's Gospel (22:41) describes the scene of the Garden of Gethsemane, in which Jesus withdrew a stone's throw away. The distance of a stone's throw is far enough to be beyond touch. Jesus, like the man above, came into that space knowing he was loved by his family, friends, and disciples but also knowing he was about to enter a place where he was utterly and deeply alone.

It was the poet John Milton who famously pointed out, 'Loneliness was the first thing that God's eye named not good.'[27] Jesus in his humanness and in that feeling of abandonment cried out to his Father and was exhausted with sorrow (Luke 22:42–45). This emphasis on Jesus's aloneness is prevalent in the Passion narratives and comes to a crux when Jesus on the cross cries out, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:46). This cry indicates a painful 'severance of a vertical relationship with God.'[28] In his book *Created for Community*, Stanley Grenz observes that 'God's triune nature means that God is social or relational—God is the "social Trinity." And for this reason, we can say that God is community.'[29] Therefore, on the cross, Jesus is experiencing the human loneliness articulated by the man dying from cancer above as he is a stone's throw away from all his relationships and at that moment outside of the Triune community as he was dying and they were not.

Commonalities

Commonalities between the three aforementioned narratives include. These range from isolation, yearning for connection, and a need for identity. Adam, Jeremiah, and Jesus all experienced physical isolation from others as there were few around them with whom they could share emotional and social experiences in their moments of anguish. Adam chose to hide himself, Jeremiah was alone in the ruins of Jerusalem, and Jesus was a stone's throw away from others. The loneliness of Adam, Jeremiah, and Jesus was a result of a lack of social connection and interaction combined with physical isolation. Adam, Jeremiah, and Jesus all desired company and relationships; Adam wanted Eve's company, Jeremiah bemoaned his responsibility for costing him friendships, and Jesus wanted his disciples to remain awake to be with him. All three narratives involve a loss of community or place. Loss of community relationships and structure caused a fragmentation and eroding of identity, resulting in loneliness.[30]

Emmanuel

One of the most profound titles given to Jesus is 'Emmanuel'—'God with us.' It only occurs once in the New Testament, in Matthew 1:23, calling on imagery used in Isaiah. And yet, this name is of fundamental importance for theology because it expresses the mystery in a single word. Here is something which cannot be, and yet which is. God, the creator of all, is present in the person of Jesus. He, very personally and individually, is 'God with us.' And this God—who places relationship and relationality on at least the same level as the majesty and distance that is also God's—also expresses that with-ness for creation in the story of Pentecost in the book of Acts. Here too, God is with the disciples, both then and forever. 'Emmanuel' refers in an obvious and immediate sense to Jesus, but it is a description of how God is shown to operate.

In a homily published in *The Furrow*, Thomas O'Connor notes that the cross looks like a failure, but that out of it comes new relationality. Jesus is killed, and only his mother and the disciple John remain at his cross as he is dying. Jesus's other male followers, as O'Connor says, had run away and 'shut themselves of from Christ's suffering.'[31] But at the heart of this, Mary and John, along with Jesus's aunt and Mary Magdalene, remained. And because they remained at the heart of things, Jesus had the opportunity to speak to them, and they had the opportunity to listen and to respond. Jesus tells Mary, 'Here is your son' and tells John, 'Here is your mother,' bringing them into a new relationship, founded on and coming out of grief, but deeper than merely the grief they share. In Dorothy L. Sayers's retelling of these events for radio in the 1940s, the bringing into a new relationship of Mary and John is prefaced by Mary Magdelene saying, 'The whole world is dying. He is going out into the night and has taken the sunlight with him … O love, O love—will you not come again?'[32] This brings out the tearing apart of relationships and the loneliness that the characters are feeling before Jesus speaks. The grief is not solved by what Jesus says, but the loneliness is eased, which itself eases grief. In all of this, Aquinas reminds us that God always remains a mystery, beyond our comprehension, but that there are, nevertheless, ways in which God has chosen to reveal God's self to the world.[33] Here on the cross, there is a revelation. Revelation does not entirely wait until Easter day, for the new world is beginning to be made already.

In thinking about the concept of God that many people carry around with them, J.B. Phillips wrote *Your God is Too Small*.[34] He conjures up models of God that are obvious, but which need stating, such as 'Resident Policeman' (chapter 1), 'Absolute Perfection' (chapter 5), or 'Projected Image' (chapter 12). The point of all of Phillips's categories is that in each case we humans have made up something with which to judge others and have taken this to equate to God, bowing to our own idols whilst oppressing ourselves and others. God is always beyond any such categorization. This is a *sine qua non* for Aquinas, but these categories are generally easy to spot without any philosophical training for their oppressive tendencies. They do not ask 'How can God and the concept of God free?' but rather 'How can this concept constrict such-and-such a person to my viewpoint/experience?' Instead of such categories, under the concept of Emmanuel, God is with the world in all of its suffering and imperfections. Any other God is, in Phillips's words, 'too small,' for God is big enough to cope with being with the world as it is, and this is shown by Jesus being with the world even in great suffering. Of course, such talk of a 'big God' is only figurative, as God in fact surpasses all such attempts at description, not being a 'thing' in the world as other created things are.[35] However, as a counterpoint to a God that is 'too small,' thinking of a God that is more than 'big enough to take it,' as well as 'bigger than we can imagine,' is a helpful image. More than this, the story of Pentecost tells Christians that God did not leave the world alone after the Resurrection of Jesus, but that this indescribably 'big' God is still actively present. Emmanuel was not only in the past, but is still in the present, and will be in the future. There are always many ways of describing how any concept might operate, but with regard to Emmanuel, we suggest three principal practical results: Divine Presence, Divine Understanding, and Embodied Community. These three are unpacked below, but what they all do is offer aspects of freedom, rather than any oppressive constriction, so they seem to be not 'too small,' for all that they can never capture everything that could be said about God.

The idea of Divine Presence is the heart of the concept of Emmanuel. But as a practical fact for those who experience it, it brings with it the knowledge that one is never alone. In writing about the usefulness of hope in clinical settings, Frank Lake observed that the Incarnation is at the core of the Christian expression of that hope. He wrote:

> To be alongside us, Christ allowed the grinding agony of Gethsemane to close in on Him, bore the confusion of the trials, the anguish of crucifixion and the final forsakeness. His Spirit is, and gives, the courage to be with all men in all places of imperilled being and non-being. We remember, with bursting praise, that God's presence in Christ's despair is our eternal, historical ground for hope when we and our neighbours visit these hells.[36]

Even in a moment of deep despair or pain, even in the moment of death itself, when separation from all familiarity seems inevitable, and maybe even separation from self seems a psychological reality, God is still present. This does not mean that no Christian will ever feel lonely. However, one who practices the art of prayer in a regular and sustained way is likely to be able to reach deeply into their prayer tradition and find an abiding knowledge of Emmanuel, lessening and for the adept maybe even removing loneliness altogether. Such a move is from loneliness to solitude—solitude with God, as experienced by the

Desert Fathers and Mothers. But this comes at a price, and that is the time and effort put into learning to pray.

Divine Understanding is related to presence, but whereas presence is simply God being God with a person or situation, Divine Understanding says that God actually understands what it is like to be in that person's skin. This is the point of how Matthew uses the title 'Emmanuel'—in Jesus, God has lived humanity from the inside. It is distinctive of Christianity that however majestic God is and however removed from our experience, God has also come to our experience and understood it by living (and dying in) it. This even extends to the one point at which Jesus might be said to have moved back from solitude to loneliness when he cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This utter depth of loneliness is the moment that Hans urs von Balthasar describes as the 'ultimate alienation,' even of God from God.[37] The assurance given is that whatever we are going through, even to death itself, even to a horrific and lonely death, God has been there too. An experience or realization of Divine Understanding is predicated on the experience of Divine Presence but goes beyond this in terms of content. Divine Understanding gives a quality to solitude that means a return to loneliness is very unlikely, for how can one be lonely once not only accompanied but also understood?

Lastly, Embodied Community is not about what God as Emmanuel may do for us, but rather what we can do for others in response to this. Christians are called to embody God's presence by being present for one another, offering support, compassion, and friendship, especially to those who are lonely. The experience of God as Emmanuel can be a great motivating factor in reaching out to others who may be experiencing similar feelings of isolation, fostering a sense of belonging and shared journeying.

'Emmanuel'—'God with us'—encompasses all that Jesus was and is, taking in the whole of the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection. It is a mystery into which the Christian is invited, and as a 'mystery,' there is always more to discover. It leads to many results, but among them, the Christian can find Divine Presence, Divine Understanding, and Embodied Community. The first two assist in experiencing solitude rather than loneliness, and the third points a Christian away from self and toward others, itself a remedy for loneliness, but also a way of practicing being at one with Christ by being Emmanuel in the world.

Pastoral Care of the Lonely

Stanley Hauerwas states that for the church the 'most important social task is nothing less than to be a community capable of hearing the story of God we find in the scripture and living in a manner that is faithful to that story.'[38] In the biblical narratives, we see a desire for relationship and connection that is mirrored in the journey of Tomas in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Tomas experiences a lack of deep relationships which leads to disconnection and a need for belonging and acceptance. Within the Christian community this lack of deep relationships was seen clearly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when it became impossible to worship together in person and sustain the relationships we had created in our church communities in the same manner. In forced isolation, we created connection and community through online services and reached out to others through phone calls, emails, and letters to continue our shared values and relationships.

The experience of the pandemic highlighted the importance of Embodied Community when considering the pastoral care of the lonely. It is essential that we are present for each other and build community as loneliness causes others to feel disconnected from others, the church, and the world. Indeed, Dorothy Day says 'we have all known loneliness, and we have learned that the only solution is love that comes with community.'[39] Within my [or our] local context in Newport, one parishioner spoke powerfully of how she was feeling isolated and disconnected from her church family, and then she received a letter with a liturgy booklet inside. The booklet invited her into worship and created a community for her that she experienced tangibly every time she sat down to pray with it. In the same vein, a house-bound parishioner stated that knowing she is on the prayer list at church and receiving the list to pray for others on it allows her to feel accepted and part of a community as she is embodying Christ's presence for others in the depth of her solitude.

Adam, Jeremiah, and Jesus yearned for connection and relationships with others. This is a consistent narrative, as the psalmists also cry out for social connection: 'You have caused my companions to shun me' (Psalm 88:8). There is a deep yearning for company and friendship in biblical narratives that we can extrapolate in the relationships around us. A local school has a friendship bench which is a different color than the other benches, and if a child is feeling lonely, they can sit on it and someone will ask them to play. This is a mutual interdependence that we need to seek as a church; the willingness to be vulnerable enough to say 'I am hurting,' and a desire to keep watch and say 'I am here' when hurt is noticed.

Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson argue that we begin life connected in the mother's womb and then are quickly separated at birth, and that this illustrates that 'there is no life without either attachment or loss.'[40] The journeys of our life involve attachment and connection with people and groups such as school, church, and work communities, and with that attachment comes belonging and acceptance. Once these connections diminish or are lost, which is a natural effect of growth and change, there comes grief, and loneliness. Karen MacKinlay emphasized this in a recent article when she reported that a person with dementia had felt cut off and isolated from others due to the change taking place within her. The solution was to build a new connection and relationship, as Mackinlay stated that 'after time was spent with a person who has dementia, she said "Thank you, I feel more human."'[41]

Community is built upon shared values, acceptance, and trust. The breakdown of relationships as portrayed by Jeremiah in the biblical narratives and Tomas in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was a result of being different from the societal norm. As Aldous Huxley summed up in *Brave New World*, 'If one's different, one's bound to be lonely.'[42] We are living in a consumer society that embraces difference with a greater emphasis on technological relationships. This societal change leads to a greater level of loneliness as evidenced by a recent report from the Campaign to End Loneliness. The campaign reported that 'in 2022, 49.63% of adults (25.99 million people) in the UK reported feeling lonely.'[43] The challenge for the Church is to embrace difference by embodying the commandment that Jesus gave: 'Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another' (John 13:34). In this way we will combat loneliness with presence, empathy, and companionship because, as Saint Teresa of Calcutta said, 'the only cure for loneliness, despair and hopelessness is love.'[44]

However, as we briefly explored in the first section of this paper, there are those who choose to be alone, such as the Desert Fathers and Mothers. This emphasizes that we can be alone without being lonely, which is a necessity as human connections alter over the course of a lifetime. A hymn ably sums this up with these words:

> Alone with none but thee, my God.
> I journey on my way:
> What need I fear when thou art near.
> O King of night and day?[45]

The hymn writer has recognized that we are never alone because we have the presence of God with us and exist in relationship with Him as well as our human relationships. Through the hope found in the presence of God, the hymn writer has thus converted loneliness into solitude. Henri Nouwen profoundly recognizes that solitude is the place where we create space to connect with ourselves: 'By slowly converting our loneliness into a deep solitude, we create the precious space where we can discover the voice telling us about our inner necessity—that is our vocation.'[46]

This search for inner fulfillment can take place in retreats and quiet days where individuals and groups take space apart to search for their most inmost being. In the Bible, the psalmist in the depth of loneliness asks, 'why are you cast down, O my Soul' and then in his search for what will help states 'hope in God' (Psalm 42:5). This hope in God can be found in prayer, scripture, worship, and community as we find our identity in Christ that remains rooted even when experiencing life changes.

This conversion from loneliness to solitude was highlighted when taking part in Lectio Divina, a contemplative method of reading the Bible, with a group of parishioners. One parishioner stated it helped her to identify her feelings as she journeyed alongside Jesus when he heard about John the Baptist's death and his need to withdraw from people (Matthew 14:1–13). She stated that a deeper understanding of her feelings of grief helped her to realize that despite the pressure from Facebook and Instagram to be with crowds of people, she was not unhappy being alone. The key to moving from loneliness to solitude appeared to lie in a greater awareness of her feelings; she moved from feeling negative about being alone, due to the pressure of the world to be social, to understanding that strategic withdrawing could be a positive step. She came to speak to the clergy team a week later to show a painting she had made when taking her time alone. Time alone had sparked her creativity and she was able to speak positively about her need for solitude. The awareness of her feelings allowed her to realize when she was feeling lonely and to reach out to others, and, conversely, to realize when she was content to spend time in solitude to refresh and re-balance. Ada Limón references this in her poem 'The Quiet Machine':

> I'm learning so many different ways to be quiet. There's how I stand
> in the lawn, that's one way. There's also how I stand in the field
> across from the street, that's another way because I'm farther from
> people and therefore more likely to be alone.[47]

To truly embrace pastoral care for the lonely requires the church to be present, open hearted, willing to build relationships, and a place where shared values and differences co-exist. It requires us to be the embodied community of Christ, reaching out with

love to those experiencing loneliness and being unafraid to enter the brokenness, for Christ has gone ahead of us. Lori Bohm explains that 'love is a mirror image of loneliness,' so the challenge is for the mirrors of the church to reflect the love of God to those experiencing loneliness.[48]

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the concept of loneliness, considering some examples and looking for causes. It is fair to say that there is no 'silver bullet' that can be fired to expel loneliness from a person. However, some practical steps can be taken by the Church for those in her pastoral care, and for the Christian, there are also practicalities of spirituality that can help alleviate, lessen, or even prevent, loneliness.

We began by looking at two contrasting ways of living, one that was alone but not lonely, and one that was intimate and yet lonely. The differences were twofold. Those who were not lonely (the monastics) were living at depth and had such a relationship with the Divine that they experienced solitude rather than loneliness. Tomas, in contrast, lived lightly and had no depth of relationship with anyone. We then explored three biblical stories where loneliness is part of the narrative. Adam and Eve are given to one another, to find a relationship and, in that, to find an identity. Jeremiah has societal and human relationships removed and is deeply lonely. He keeps going because of his relationship with God, but maybe never gets to the calm point of solitude, as the monastics did. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is perhaps the zenith of loneliness-transformed-into-solitude. He is abandoned by his friends and knows in advance that he will be, and yet his relationship with God is such that he has the strength to continue.

We then explored the idea of Jesus as Emmanuel, as God-with-us. Loneliness has always been a feature of the human condition, and although Jesus was usually in a state of solitude, he did experience loneliness for our sake in his death, even though prior to that on the cross he was able to alleviate the suffering of others in forming community. Emmanuel gives us three important facets of the mystery of Christ to assist with loneliness: God is present, God understands, and, in joining ourselves to God in Christ, in seeking to be Emmanuel, we are called to act toward the creation of embodied communities. This is vital when thinking about how to offer pastoral care. It will not ever be possible to take away loneliness from all people—think of the young man dying of cancer in the example above—but it is possible to do much, even for those who ultimately continue to experience some level of loneliness. In showing love in care, compassion, thoughtful action, attentive silence, and so on, the Church can move even those who are very lonely a few steps along the path to solitude. This sometimes requires creative thinking, such as how to assist those unable to leave their houses to join in the prayer and activities of the local Church. But if being the body of Christ means anything, then it means being Emmanuel, and if this is a mission priority, then churches are called to be creative about it.

To finish with poetry: Wordsworth's famous poem about daffodils is well-known and helpful to keep in mind. The poem begins in loneliness, observing the daffodils from afar. The poet sees hope even within the waves of attachment and loss, and finally comes to a

place of solitude, where the observation of the daffodils is no longer experienced as lonely, but in terms of a dance.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Notes

1. Leland, "How Loneliness Is Damaging Our Health."
2. Hamman, "Remembering the Dismembered," 45ff.
3. Couture, "The Context of Congregations."
4. Collins, "A Sermon from Hell," 70.
5. Gibbes, "A Crisis of Community," 266f.
6. Stokes, "Margery Kempe: Her Life and the Early History of Her Book," 27.
7. Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, 52–56.
8. Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes*, 42f.
9. Ibid., 43.
10. Stern, "Back to the Future: Eternal Recurrence and the Death of Socrates," 77ff.
11. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1.
12. Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*.
13. Weiss, *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*, 11.
14. Forbes, "Caring for Older People: Loneliness," 352.
15. Ibid., 253f.
16. Singh, "Loneliness: Dynamics, Dimensions and Many Faces," 109.
17. Stokes, "The Relation of Social Network and Individual Difference Variables to Loneliness."
18. Nathanson, *Shame and Pride*.
19. Brown, *Daring Greatly*.
20. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 100.
21. Ibid., 188.

22. Alger, *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man*, 35.
23. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 148.
24. Weisser, "Loneliness, Emptiness, and Wordsworth's Bliss of Solitude," 118.
25. Franklin and Tranter, "Loneliness and the Cultural, Spatial, Temporal and Generational Bases of Belonging," 57.
26. "Loneliness (n.)," Online Etymology Dictionary. https://www.etymonline.com/word/loneliness.
27. Milton, *Tetrachordon,* 254.
28. Le Roux, "The Relationship between Loneliness and Christian Faith," 174.
29. Grenz, *Created for Community*, chap. 2.
30. Frey, "Professional Loneliness and the Loss of the Doctors' Dining Room."
31. O'Connor, "God with Us."
32. Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King*, 308.
33. Miller, "The Heart of Light."
34. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small.*
35. Shortt, *God Is No Thing.*
36. Lake, "Hope in the Clinical Setting," 26.
37. Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 4, 411.
38. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 1.
39. Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 286.
40. Mitchell and Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Griefs*, 21.
41. MacKinlay, "Listening to People with Dementia," 91.
42. Huxley, *Brave New World*, chap. 8.
43. "Facts and Statistics about Loneliness," Campaign to End Loneliness. https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/facts-and-statistics/.
44. Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path*, 83.
45. *Alone with none but thee, my God* The hymn is attributed to the Irish monk Saint Columba (c. 521–97).
46. Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 27.
47. Limón, *Bright Dead Things*, 13.
48. Bohm, "Introduction," 8.

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