

Sunday 27 Year B

6th/7th October, 2018

You Are Not Alone

The actress, or I think it's more acceptable to say 'actor' these days, anyway, Greta Garbo became famous for saying "I just want to be alone". It became her catchphrase because she says it in a large number of her films always with a melancholy wistfulness that made it so striking and memorable.

There are times when all of us just want to be alone, perhaps because of some tragedy or bereavement that has struck us particularly hard when we need to let reality sink in and to process our feelings. At these times other people can be a distraction from the deep inward reflection we need so that we have no extra space for others. Sometimes we need to be alone if we are introverts who, though we like being with people also need to withdraw from time to time to be in our own space to give our own spirit time to regroup.

In the reading from Genesis today, God says "It is not good for man to be alone". In the context, God is not saying there is something wrong with being alone in the ways I've mentioned, and perhaps a better translation would be "It is not good for man to be lonely" because loneliness denotes a negative state in which a person feels sad or dejected or unwanted and wants that state to end. What will bring it to an end is a relationship with another person who cares for and values the one who is lonely, perhaps a family member, a friend, a priest, or even a stranger who takes a passing interest at a moment when we most need a friendly ear or a shoulder to cry on.

Radio Four commissioned a survey on loneliness recently. It was the largest study of its kind ever undertaken with 55,000 people surveyed in 237 places across the globe. Only a third of those involved in the study believe that loneliness is about being on your own. That is not the issue. Loneliness is about feeling the loss or absence of another human being who completes you or brings you more fully into being, or enables you to understand and accept yourself as being of worth. I think this is what Genesis means when it says that it is not good for us to be alone.

We are made for one another and perhaps this is the most important lesson to be drawn from the story today about Eve being formed from the side of Adam. Looking at the description of the creation of Eve through our own eyes and from a contemporary perspective can raise all sorts of problems about male superiority and female subservience, but those issues are almost certainly not in the mind of the writer.

The simple message here is that God has made human beings in his own image and likeness. Now, God is love, so, in order to be like God, we are made out of love and we are created for love and in order to be fulfilled we must have others like us to love and complete us. The image of Eve being born from the side of Adam is simply to make the point that the only ones who can fully satisfy us and fulfil us are those who are 'bone from our bone, flesh from our flesh' - in other words, another human being like us. We are made to be completed and fulfilled by another person, a significant other.

But does that significant other have to be a person of the opposite gender as the Genesis reading implies? What about love between two people of the same gender? How does the Church regard that? Genuine love between two people can never be bad because all love finds its root and meaning in God, who is love. "To love another person is to see the face of God", wrote Victor Hugo. All love is a participation in the living and active presence of God's Spirit in the lives of human beings.

In 1995 Cardinal Hume spoke eloquently on this very subject. He said:

Love between two persons, whether of the same sex or of a different sex, is to be treasured and respected...When two persons love, they experience in a limited manner in this world what will be their unending delight when one with God in the next...To love another, whether of the same sex or of a different sex, is to have entered the area of the richest human experience.

Of course, this must be understood in the context of the Church's teaching. The Church does not accept the moral equivalence of heterosexual marriage and homosexual relationships. The intimate relations between people, whether of the same or different sex, has to be governed by God's laws. The "experience of love is spoiled", said the Cardinal,

whether it is in marriage or in friendship, when we do not think and act as God wills us to act. Nevertheless, nothing in the Church's teaching can be said to support or sanction, even implicitly, the victimisation of homosexual men and women. Furthermore, 'homophobia' should have no place among Catholics.

In a further clarification, the Cardinal issued a document two years later in which he expanded his teaching. He wrote:

The sexual expression of love is intended by God's plan of creation to find its place exclusively within marriage between a man and a woman, and that this expression of love must be open to the possible transmission of new life. This, of course, is a great challenge. It means that many types of sexual activity, including same-sex sexual activity, are not consistent with the teaching of the Church. No individual, bishop, priest or lay person is in a position to change this teaching of the Church which we hold to be God-given.

Yet...[s]exual orientation does not dictate the whole personality and character of an individual. Furthermore, a person's sexual orientation can be unclear, even complex. Also, it may vary over the years. Most importantly, an orientation is not a moral failing.

So, in summary, while sexual activity between people of the same sex may not conform to the traditional teaching of the Church, genuine love between them cannot be wrong. One's sexual orientation is not a moral failing but intrinsic to one's whole personality and character and is capable of inspiring virtuous acts of the highest moral quality. It is never right to ostracise, victimise or harbour animosity or hatred towards anyone on account of their sexual orientation.

I am aware that the Gospel also contains some difficult teaching about divorce, but I think that's enough controversy for today. Remind me to tackle divorce when these readings come round again in three years' time! (I hope you forget!)