

## 264 You're never alone with a Strand

"You're never alone with a Strand" proclaimed an old cigarette advertisement, in which a solitary figure huddled under a streetlight was far from lonely because he was smoking the right brand of cigarette. Utter nonsense of course, but it shows that even sixty years ago loneliness was seen as a problem, (exploitable by the advertisers!), which could be overcome if only everyone bought Strand cigarettes! Loneliness still exists. In Britain we are now to have a "Minister of Loneliness", in response to the fact that apparently up to 9 million people in the country are classified as "lonely".

Let us start by putting loneliness into its proper spiritual context. Almighty God our Creator set fellowship and companionship at the very heart of this amazing creation, (Genesis 1 and 2). All was indeed "very good" between Creator and creation, and within creation itself – there was no hostility, estrangement or loneliness anywhere! But soon came "the Fall" of Genesis 3 – Man knowing better than God - the many consequences of which, including loneliness, we still live with today.

As a crucial step in restoring the fellowship and companionship He desires, God the Father stepped in in "the seed of the woman". The Lord Jesus Christ on that cross underwent the ultimate loneliness of all – total estrangement from His heavenly Father with that anguished cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" – as He took upon Himself the full, awful weight of "the sins of the whole world" (Matthew 27.46 [Psalm 22.1] / Isaiah 53.4-6 / I John 2.2 & 4.9-10 / John 1.29 / Hebrews 9.28a / Romans 3.25 / ...). So the way lies open for restoration on all fronts, including the abolition of loneliness, and that Way lies in, and indeed is, Jesus Christ.

We can identify many reasons for this rise in loneliness, but when all is said and done, the solution comes down to the behaviour of people like us. Thankfully a great deal of good-neighbourliness does occur, but not enough it seems. (It is interesting to see that one of the unexpected side-effects of the "welfare state", for all its good intentions and beneficial activities, is the widespread impression that "the State" has now become the first line of caring, which of course is far from true). What is it that deters people from offering friendship and support to lonely neighbours?

A first reason for our not getting involved is the instinctive cry, "I'd love to but no time - I'm far too busy!". Are we really too busy? If so, should we be too busy? "Love your neighbour as yourself" is no less than the second of "the two great commandments" (Leviticus 19.18 / Matthew 22.39) – with the divine expectation, to coin a phrase, of "Action This Day!".

Second is the realisation that that possibly-lonely neighbour a few doors away may not be lonely at all, being well-cared for by others already including by the Social Services, and perhaps even gasping for some peace and quiet! Linked to this on the one hand is our understandable reluctance to "butt in" as some sort of nosy-parker, or on the other hand our fear of getting sucked in and trapped with one needy, lonely person who might come to depend on us far too much.

Whatever our particular circumstances, part of our calling as Christ's disciples is to "keep an eye out" for those among whom we live, which sounds very obvious but, as we all find, does not always happen as it should! Our Christian neighbourliness is about that sensitive "touch of Christ", by word and deed as appropriate, the giving of our time and hospitality. As part of our morning prayers we can ask the Lord to bring us into contact this day with those He so wishes, and to keep us open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Christ's people are not immune to loneliness themselves. The key, as with so much else in life, is to look beyond ourselves to others, and to look beyond ourselves to the Lord Himself, who has promised throughout His Word that we matter! (egs., Matthew 6.8,26, 31-34 and 10.29-32 / Galatians 2.20end / Romans 8.15 / etc). Has the Holy Spirit not promised through Paul, "((NOTHING)) shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!" (Romans 8.39)?

By God's grace those are not just fine words – they are true. Thanks be to God, the true Antidote to loneliness is not that cigarette, but Jesus Christ, who has promised and proved, "I will never fail thee nor forsake thee" (Joshua 1.5 and Hebrews 13.5).

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