

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 4th September

The Grace of Loneliness

There are many faces to loss and loneliness. One face is about the precariousness of our human condition. The heart still twists in me, for instance, when, visiting residential homes, I see the dull glaze in the lonely eyes that once shone with delight – a delight that fills the happy, faded, family photographs hanging on the wall behind them. One such person admitted to finding the sound of overheard laughter unbearably poignant.

There is an intensity of longing in those wistful faces peering out from behind the curtains of small nursing-home windows. Are they waiting for the return of a lost love, real or imaginary? Julia Copus writes about an elderly woman. There is an ache in the image in the last lines of 'Miss Havisham's Letter':

*Pray God that you will be here soon; the furniture
is weary, my darling, of the name I am forever
fingering into its dust.*

Such lovely people, often fighting against the destructive edge of neglect, loss, even bitterness, still try to keep their spirited hearts as full of love as ever – and no one visits. 'One may have a blazing hearth in one's soul,' wrote Vincent van Gogh, 'and yet no one ever comes to sit by it.'

Because the human heart is wonderfully and fearfully created with a divine compulsion to be given away and to be received, there is an existential dread in us of the keen pain of loneliness or rejection. Thomas Wolfe is convinced that 'loneliness is the central and inevitable fact of human existence'. There are many ways to break a heart. Ask those who, suddenly bereft, weep for what they had taken for granted. Is there a soul on earth that cannot identify, in one way or another, with Mary Jean Irion's cry:

*One day I shall dig my fingers into the earth,
or bury my face in the pillow,
or stretch myself taut,
or raise my hands to the sky,
and want more than all the world your return.*

In words of unforgettable pathos, Andrew Motion's poem *In the Attic* takes us into the small clothes-trunk of memories of someone very loved and very young: ...

*a green holiday; a red christening; all your unfinished lives
fading through dark summers entering my head as dust.*

Another face of loneliness emerges from the state of alienation in which people today find themselves, a strange awareness of disconnection - from other people, from their own bodies, their environment, their universe and therefore God. The psychic damage we suffer from such separation is all too clear because there is a loving unity that holds all Creation together. Whenever that is fractured, something dies within us. And the hidden loneliness deepens.

The Christian mystics have beautiful ways of describing the mystery of the intimacy of all Creation. Hildegard of Bingen wrote that 'God has built the human form into the cosmic structure; all things are arranged in consideration of everything else.'

Something intuitive within us senses this delicate dependence. The contemplative heart grieves at the greed that hacks across these fragile lifelines of universal wholeness. When this circle of life is broken the loss is great; the life-giving dance of the Blessed Trinity within us loses its rhythm. Nothing remains untouched by such deliberate destruction. An unconscious, existential loneliness is one of its deadly symptoms.

The idea is everywhere present in Jewish and Christian spirituality that the ultimate antidote to human loneliness is to contemplate the face of God, to surrender to what is greater than ourselves – to recognise the beautiful love at the heart of everything. We must learn to adore incarnate wonder. To look at the sea and feel God's beating heart. Under the moving clouds to sense the brooding presence of the Holy Ghost. To gaze at the night sky above a lonely planet and sense a secret birthing. To lose heart before the tears of things and yet to experience the sublime comfort of a divine embrace. 'Man's loneliness,' wrote Eugene O'Neill, 'is but his fear of life.'

Divine mystery has become utterly identified with the human condition. All our longing is ultimately a longing for God, and all longing is the longing of an incarnate God for us. 'God possesses the heavens,' wrote W.B. Yeats, 'but he covets the earth ... oh, he covets the earth.'

Beyond theological definitions, there is a fierce emptiness in God that only our freely given loving presence can fill. I that why our Mother God created us? In the end, when fully felt and accepted, maybe human loneliness is the divine invitation to the most intense intimacy of all.