

Living with Loneliness – “Stop hiding behind the sandwiches!”

In 2004 I was living in Sydney and working in a Soup Kitchen in Kings Cross. I had entered into an agreement with the Parish Priest to work in the kitchen one day per week in exchange for accommodation. I was a young man who thought he knew best (as young men tend to think!). After a few weeks of working in the kitchen I decided that I wasn't getting much out of the experience, so I went to the priest and asked him for a new job. In his wisdom he said that if I wasn't getting much out of the job one day a week I should commit to at least two days a week! This, as they say, 'cooled my heels!' He then said something that has remained with me ever since, and has become a touchstone in my ministry and in my life - "Stop hiding behind the sandwiches. People do not come to a soup kitchen for soup; they come to be seen; to be heard; to be known". And indeed three years later I was sad to leave this broken, beautiful community of people, many of whom became part of my story, and I part of theirs.

Mother Teresa famously said 'the greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for . . . the poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty'.¹ You might say the poverty of loneliness is one of the most insidious forms of poverty: wealth, education, worldly power and popularity cannot protect us against it; no insurance company will go near it; it is, so to speak, a 'bad risk'. Perhaps this is because loneliness is not a place or situation but rather a spiritual condition. It is possible to be alone and yet not be lonely. Equally, we can be in the busiest, most active and crowded place on earth, we can be at the centre of the dance floor, and yet feel abject loneliness. Celebrity culture testifies to this.

'Loneliness' is the umbrella under which sits feeling unloved and uncared for; losing a sense of self-worth and the meaningfulness of life; a precursor to depression and a prelude to despair. While these feelings are simply part of life, when we become captive to them we are ripe for making bad decisions. Gambling, substance abuse, affairs, materialism, unhealthy relationships, workaholism are all enthusiastic bedfellows of loneliness. And although these will succeed in distracting us from our pain, when we wake from these dreams we find ourselves more alone than ever.

What is needed is a circuit-breaker: something that detects an overload in the system and shuts it down before all the appliances are destroyed. What is needed is an action, or thought, or act of commitment, or way of life that prevents loneliness growing like compound interest; a way of stepping out from behind the sandwiches to give and receive a love that is transforming.

In a chapter titled 'Knowing how to Rest' Jean Vanier offer this practical framework:

'We can try new ways to find peace of heart and a little tranquility by doing simple, practical things: cooking, cleaning the house, visiting a friend, writing a letter, talking a

¹ Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path: Mother Teresa*.

walk, listening to gentle music, visiting a church, praying in silence, or playing with children. In the midst of our weakness and pain, we can experience moments of peace and joy. We need to learn how to savor these moments of well-being: to breathe quietly, to let the warmth of the sun to enter our bodies, to enjoy the company of a good friend, to let a hint of joy rise in our hearts. In the evening, before going to bed, to have a good bath and to relax and rest in the warm water. Little by little, you will learn to distinguish between the ways of peace and light and the ways of darkness'.²

James

² Jean Vanier, *Seeing Beyond Depression*, pp. 59-61.