

The Second Sunday in Advent
Fr Jonathan Jong

Baruch 5

Philippians 1.3-11

Luke 3.1-6

*Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height
and look toward the east,
and see your children gathered from west and east,
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.* — The Book
of Baruch, the fifth chapter, the fifth verse.

Over seven-and-a-half million people now live alone in the UK¹, accounting for over a quarter of households. Living alone does not seem like an altogether unappealing proposition to an introvert who has never been able to afford a one bedroom flat: Oxford is the UK's most expensive city, in income-adjusted terms².

¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2017>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/feb/25/oxford-once-again-tops-list-of-uks-least-affordable-places-to-live>

The problem, however, is that people who live alone are twice as likely as those of us who live with others to experience chronic loneliness³, though it would be a mistake to equate the two. Some people are perfectly happy living alone; some people are desperately lonely even when surrounded by people.

Over nine million people in the UK report feeling often or always lonely. Many of them are older—the widowed, in particular—but loneliness actually afflicts young adults much more commonly than it does older people, and social scientists are not sure why. A recent study found that loneliness was a greater source of mental distress for university students than academic and financial adversities⁴.

It turns out that all sorts of people feel lonely: widows; university students; young parents; immigrants and refugees; infirm and disabled people, those who care for them. And it turns out that people feel lonely at all sorts of times of the year, though the holiday season is

³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10>

⁴ See <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09638237.2018.1437608>

as good a time as any to focus on the phenomenon. Even this long past Christendom, it seems an especial travesty to have to spend Christmas alone.

And lest we think that loneliness is benign, there is increasing evidence that it is a risk factor for a litany of negative physical and mental health outcomes, a fact now recognised even by our government, in no small part thanks to the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, whose research and advocacy has continued after her death in 2016. A recent review of 70 longitudinal studies, totalling nearly three-and-a-half million participants, found that lonely individuals were 30% more likely to be dead by the end of the study, on average 7 years later⁵.

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The science of human being proceeds by diverse means; and one venerable source of insight about human nature is to consider pathology. To cite the bluntest example, the effects of brain damage tell us a lot about normal brain functioning.

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25910392>

That loneliness is both so damaging and so prevalent in our times may well say something about the world as we have been constructing it for centuries, together with our cherished ideologies of self-sufficiency and inalienable rights of self-assertion whose ironic by-product is alienation.

But more importantly, the epidemic of loneliness reminds us what we really long for, beneath those confidently individualistic stories we have been telling ourselves. Dare I say, it reveals to us what we were made for, which is—it should surprise no one to hear a Christian say—love.

We can see this not only by an analysis of our psychological maladies, but also of our societal ones. Our insistent and rampant individualism, and the concomitant distrust in and disaffiliation from diverse bodies politic are, I hypothesise, not unrelated to the stochastic uprisings of various fundamentalisms we have experienced, whether religious, secularist, or ethno-nationalist. Our natural desires to belong, to be loved, will not be thwarted by our cynical attempts to protect ourselves from the risks that love brings: unfulfilled, they manifest themselves in partisanship and prejudice, the perversions of pride.

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My allergy to pious platitudes does not extend to the familiar Christian conviction that we are not—we are never—alone. This is particularly important to remember during Advent, which is the time of the Church's year when we are waiting for God to arrive, which would usually imply that God is not currently here.

The Church's emphasis on the biblical literature of exile also heightens this sense of divine absence: the sense that God once incarnate has left us in the wilderness, in territory occupied by corrupt and corrupting powers. We, the remnant left behind, are told to be vigilant, lest the Master's return catches us unawares. We must, furthermore, *prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*; fill every valley and bring every hill low, so that all flesh may see the promised and coming salvation of God.

But, of course, even though the calling is true enough, the premise is false: we prepare for our celebration of the nativity in full knowledge that Christ has already been born to us, and—in his ascension to God's right

hand—has taken us with him, this world he loves, into his Father's bosom. The world is not, through Christian eyes, a hostile place to be escaped, but a gift, both to itself and to God who ever loves it into being.

And so, the exhortations invariably made from pulpits around the world during this time of year, to remember the lonely, to be generous in the giving, to be Christ's hands and feet, must not be heard as claims about the necessity of human action in lieu of divine providence: the good works to which we are called are not replacements of Christ's work, but fulfilments thereof, who both began the good work in us and brings it to completion. To be Christ's hands and feet is to be attached to him, to be incorporated into the body of the one who was crucified, raised, and ascended. And for Christ to be at the right hand of God the Father almighty is precisely to be everywhere and always with us, just as the whole world is shot through, charged with God in grandeur and grace.

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All of which is to say that we are not alone.

What made me think of all this is this almost throwaway line in our first reading, from Baruch, that mixed bag of a book, a derivative homage to (or pastiche of) the old Hebrew prophets.

As we know well, memory is inherent to Christian faith. The language of remembering is used every time mass is offered. And, like our Jewish cousins, we are a people with long memories, with habits of recollecting and retelling old stories, and reinterpreting old prophecies.

That Christians remember is obvious. But what stands out from that first reading is that thing about God remembering, remembering the children of Israel, scattered afar and asunder. God remembers us. God gives us a new name. God gifts us with new robes and crowns us: it is Christmas everyday.

This idea that we are the objects of remembrance and the recipients of gifts must govern how we respond to these annual appeals to give charitably, to remember and embrace the lonely, the hundreds of thousands of people who will spend Christmas alone this year, and not by choice.

By this, I do not mean that we are passing on the gifts given unto us, in a sort of Christian version of trickle-down economics. But, to risk another pious platitude, I mean to insist on the reality of that common intuition that in giving we ourselves richly receive. Or, to put it in biblical terms, Christ is in those whom society considers “the least”, which is to say that Christ is in our remembering them, himself remembering us. If it is Christ’s face that we behold in those we are called to serve, then through them, he beholds our face too.

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Some people get married as an antidote to loneliness, which is probably not the best reason to get married. But it is true—the research says—that married people are less likely to suffer from chronic loneliness. And to the extent that Christian marriage is a sign of the love of God, then it is also true that God’s remembrance of us is reflected in the couple’s remembrance of each other, their holding each other in their hearts, in their partaking of the same grace.

And to the extent that Christian marriage is a sign of the love of God, then the call on the married among you—whose ranks Mel and Mark have now joyously

joined—is to face the world together, having faced each other in the making of vows and having faced God together in prayer: the call to prepare the way of the Lord, to remember the lonely, to be Christ’s hands and feet is now a joint call upon your family life, as partners in the gospel.

Therefore, Mel and Mark, *it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*