

The challenge of loneliness

When Roger and I are choosing where to go on holiday, we are often looking for very remote places where there aren't many people. As vicars, we are surrounded by people every day and we love this, but for those few precious weeks of holiday we seek out lonely, isolated places. For us, they are like heaven!



But for an increasing number of people in our country, loneliness and isolation is a serious problem and is now being seen by government as a significant challenge that needs addressing. It is estimated that nearly a million people feel lonely and isolated. We often think about housebound older people being in this category, but it affects people of all ages. In our local community there will be many people who feel that they are on their own, that they are isolated and no one is looking after them. Some will be elderly, perhaps who have been widowed and no longer have the confidence to go out their own. They may also be a young single parent, struggling to bring up young children on their own without the support of family members. Maybe they are unemployed, unable to get a job, stuck at home unable to afford to go out and meet others. Maybe they are struggling with ill health – physical or mental – and find it difficult to leave the house.

Loneliness can impact on both physical and mental health – I was shocked to read some research that a lack of social interaction is as damaging as smoking 15 cigarettes a day; loneliness is worse for you than obesity; lonely people are more likely to suffer from dementia, heart disease and depression and it is likely to increase your risk of death by 29%.

As people who belong to a church community, we have a ready-made family that we are part of. We also have a faith that can comfort us with the knowledge that we are never alone. So how can we share the benefits that our faith gives us with others? How can we help God to transform the lives of those around us but who have no faith themselves? When I'm asking myself these problems, a poem by the 16th century nun, Teresa of Avila comes to mind;

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

This makes it absolutely clear that we each have a role to play in our parish, to be the hands, feet, eyes and body of God. The God who embodies community in his very being, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit co-existing together, calls us to be the people who extend his love to the lonely and isolated in our parish. At St Martin's we are going to be doing just this through a project called 'Place of

Welcome' and you can read all about this elsewhere in the magazine. We hope that many people in our congregation will support this initiative through prayer and volunteering so that it transforms the lives of people in our parish. This is one very practical way that we can be the hands, feet, eyes and body of God, sharing God's love with all in our community so that the lonely and isolated can find friendship and neighbourliness in this place.