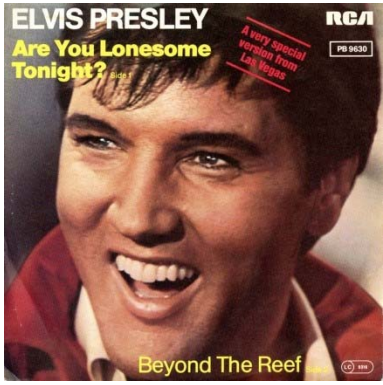


Dear Brothers and Sisters



"Are you lonesome tonight...?" So sang the great Elvis Presley, as some of us may remember! The answer to his question is yes –all of us have experienced loneliness.

This is especially true for all who are isolated from family and loved ones in this lockdown during the pandemic. The terrible pains of loneliness afflict everyone from time to time. No one escapes. Rich or poor, educated or simple, healthy or sick, believer or atheist, Saint or sinner. We don't need a pandemic to feel lonely!

Loneliness is part of our anthropology, our human make up. Adam felt alone in the Garden of Eden, and it was not a mistake, he experienced it before the fall, before he sinned. God created him, us, with what John Paul II called 'Original Loneliness.' The experience of being alone was a preparation, a disposition, which Adam had, so that he could find the answer to his loneliness in God himself.

As a boy, Tom Jones, that great Welsh singer, was diagnosed with tuberculosis. He spent two years in his bedroom in complete rest. Completely alone, he used to watch the other kids playing outside. He vowed that if he ever recovered, he would never complain about anything.

This was also the experience of many of the saints, including Catherine of Siena, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola. For some people, the experience of loneliness has somehow pushed them to new heights: new heights of holiness and creativity, or self-expression in art, music, literature and study.

It drives others to gambling, drink, gluttony and self-harm.

Loneliness moves some people to seek and find loving encounters in deep friendship and service; or true sexual fulfilment in marriage and family life.

It drives others to prostitution, pornography and sexual perversions.

For some, loneliness has been the path that led them to a deeper relationship with God, and to contemplative, and even mystical prayer. Such was the experience of St. Elizabeth of the Trinity.

It has brought others to mind-numbing hours of TV, Netflix and social media; or to drown their sorrows in the bottle, or to over-dose on drugs.

Loneliness has been the experience that has brought some people to real maturity and their true identity; it has led them to become a real man, or real woman, fully alive.

But it has broken or destroyed others, leading to depression, physical pain or mental breakdown.

Even people who are happily married, or have an exciting social life, or who live in a community, can still be afflicted by loneliness. It is possible to be alone in the midst of a crowd. There are some who, even surrounded by loving family and caring friends, feel lonely.

Many who are lonely will never admit it. They regard it as a personal failure. They think loneliness is a weakness, something to be hidden.

These people may put on a brave face, a wide smile. Yet they suffer behind closed doors. They cry alone. Sometimes they cry all night.

Our experience, in fact, is rooted in the lonely make-up of the human heart. Your heart and mine. It is a loneliness that can never be taken away completely by any human love.

To those whose lives are blighted by loneliness, or those who live in the fear of some future loneliness - through bereavement, or sickness, or old age, the Church today celebrates a Word of immense hope.

Today is the Feast of the Ascension of Jesus Christ into Heaven. But this feast does not commemorate a departure. No! It celebrates a presence and a promise: I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, EVEN TO THE END OF TIME.

Most of us need to hear this promise personally and often. It is a promise that can inject a massive dose of optimism and courage into our veins!

This promise can help us to live at peace with our loneliness and restlessness. It is a light and security in the face of panic and fear. Hear the promise. Believe the word. Receive new hope. Have peace. Be Grateful.

*Happy Easter, Fr. Sean*