

Well it is Mothering Sunday and a day like to day naturally makes us think of our Mother's. Perhaps like me you think of some of the things that your mother taught you. I remember that

My Mother taught me about anticipation... "Just wait until your father gets home." She also taught me about receiving.... "You are going to get it when Dad gets home!" But that's not all, my Mother taught me medical science... "If you don't eat your crusts your hair won't curl." When I look at my brother I reckon he must have had all the crusts!

You can learn a lot from Mothers but they do have a slightly different take on language. So to a Mother 'bottle feeding' means an opportunity for Dad to get up at 2 am too! For a Mother a full name is what you call your child when you're mad at him and Grandparents are -the people who think your children are wonderful even though they're sure you're not raising them right.

But today we do today thank God for our Mother's and recall all they mean of have meant to us.

Mother's Day also reminds us a. That Family life is important, b. That this is the pattern of life God has created for us humans and c. That this is the pattern of life that God endorsed when Jesus was born of his mother Mary.

In all this we have

•1. A principle.

Family life is set by God as part of his creation. It is a foundation pillar of creation. We see this in Genesis. If we look at Gen 2:18 we that while God has made everything good here is something that is not good, "The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." So we see here a principle of life established by God right at the beginning of creation that being on our own is not good. It is not what God wants for us. The passage goes on to explain the origin and creation of marriage.

Now marriage is not the only kind of companionship that the Bible speaks of and it is not my task to look at marriage today as we continue our series in Ecclesiastes but I want us to note this principle in creation that "it is not good for man (or woman) to be alone."

With that in mind let's turn to today's passage from Ecclesiastes and see

2. The Teacher's observation

In these verses there are two basic observations that the Teacher notes as he continues to consider life "under the sun" and its meaninglessness. The first is the problem of loneliness and the second is the value of companionship.

a. The problem of loneliness. I think in these verses it is possible to be aware of three ways in which loneliness manifests itself.

V1-3 we are made aware of **the loneliness of the oppressed** - v1 they have no comforter. Do we not see this over and again.

Some words from Monday's Times on the situation in Zimbabwe:

"As night falls they slowly emerge from the shadows - dozens of children, clothed in rags with desperate eyes sunk deep into haunted faces, suddenly crowd the streets of Musina, a ramshackle town on the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Boys and girls as young as 8 crawl out of rubbish-strewn pipes and filthy flood drains. Some come from human "nests", carefully built within the thick foliage of wild hedges. Others appear from the bottom of dank alleyways, and still more from the crevices of abandoned buildings.

Night brings some respite for Zimbabwe's "lost generation", thousands of children who escaped hunger, poverty and disease in their homeland in search of a better life in South Africa, Instead they find themselves unwanted and hunted. For a few hours they can beg and scavenge for food largely out of sight of the police who arrest and deport them during the day. They rummage through overflowing bins, licking the inside of cans and plastic yoghurt pots and gnawing on jettisoned takeaways."

This is the reality in our world as it was a reality in the world "under the sun" that the Teacher observed. No wonder he saw life as meaningless.

V4-6 he observed also that envy and **competitiveness can cause a kind of loneliness**. If we look at v4 we see that the Teacher has observed that so much work and gain springs from the wrong motive of envy. As such he sees it is meaningless empty wind. We might say more than that such envy can come between us and our neighbours and cut us off from each other. You see it in school children who are friends today and not tomorrow. You see it in adults. Going back to the special speech of Mothers, a show off is a child who is more talented than yours. But there the envy between adults over children can create disputes and isolation and what, the Teacher asks does it gain?

But it is when we come to v8 that we come to the heart of his observations on loneliness. The teacher pictures a man who wants a companion but none is available. Here is the loneliness of isolation of being on your own!

It is not clear who this is addressed to but perhaps the Teacher has in mind the man or woman who may not have married or may have suffered divorce or bereavement. Whatever the reason he is alone. As a result he buries himself in work but that only sharpens his loneliness. Even his wealth doesn't solve the problem. He is lonely and, as we go back to the initial principal - this is not good.

The words here remind me of a man I knew sometime back. I would see him round the village sometimes chat to him in the pub. He was always ready with a joke. He had never married but he knew everyone in the village where he had grown up and lived all his life.

All seemed OK with him until one day he drove his car into a bridge support and killed himself. Two things came from that. The first was that almost no one appreciated just how lonely he must have been but the second was clear as I took the funeral in the Crematorium, which was packed to overflowing, was that more people cared for him than he had realised.

Friends I don't need to tell you loneliness is not good - I'm sure some of us here know it and experience it often.

The Teacher understood it and in the face of loneliness spoke of

b. the value of companionship, vs 9-12.

The teacher gives four benefits of a companion or friend.

V9 - they can **help** each other in their work.

V10 - they can **support** each other in times of trouble

V11 - they can provide **comfort** at times of need

V12 - they can provide **security** at times of anxiety

Of course, as the end of v12 suggests, if one is bad and two is good how much better is three!

Now all of this sounds very good and indeed as we look at these four things on this Mothering Sunday we may we reflect upon how our Mothers have fulfilled those functions for us and been our friend. But also we will no doubt be thinking of friends who do these things. It was good to have Matthew Sleeman with us a couple of weeks ago and I know for myself how he has been that companion to me. I remember back in 2000 we rowed the Thames together, sharing the work and he even pulled me out when I fell in!

I hope as we reflect upon this that we each do have at least one friend who does these things for us.

But even with all this, let's not be in any doubt that good as what the Teacher has observed he still sees it as meaningless, a chasing after the wind and we must recognise the limitations of what we see here.

Good as this friendship is that the Teacher has observed, we are still focussed on the here and now, on life under the sun and what we see here is strength gained through human relationships.

But now we need to bring in

3. The wider picture

For the rest of the Bible gives us a bigger picture of friendship and one that is not just about human relationships but our relationship with Jesus and not just about the here and now but about eternity.

As we saw when we did a series on friendship David and Jonathan in the OT are synonymous with friendship and at different times Jonathan provided help, support, comfort and security for David but we come back to one verse we looked at in that series and gives a new dimension and that is 1 Sam 23:16, "And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God" or as we saw it then Jonathan put David's hand in the hand of God. Here we see a spiritual dimension in the friendship which the Teacher seems to know little about.

As we come into the NT we see the same with Jesus as he called his 12 disciples. Clearly Jesus taught them all about himself and we might sum it up from John 15:15, "I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." We see it with Paul and his friendship with Timothy in 2 Tim 1:3&4, "I constantly remember you in my prayers. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy." And of course we see it as Paul wrote to various churches, such as in Colossae where Paul encouraged them, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace" (Col 3:15). A unity of many based upon their relationship to Jesus.

Friendship in the NT is not just about help, support, comfort and security but about a relationship with Jesus. That of course brings in the eternal dimension which we see in Rev 7:9, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."

Scripture gives us a picture of friendship which is much bigger and deeper than that provided by the Teacher for it has God at the heart and eternity as the goal.

4. The application

Friends can I in summary say four things?

a. It is not good for any of us to be isolated or without friends. If that is how we see ourselves then we need to do something about it. I realise it is easier said than done. Some of us either naturally or perhaps to protect ourselves do keep people at arm's length. If that is the case we need to hear what God says and begin to allow others into our lives. However the problem for many is that they would welcome people into their lives as friends but cannot find such a friend which point leads me on to

b. Those of us who do have friends should be looking round to broaden our friendship groups to include those who don't have friends. For us to say people need a friend and then not to do anything about it is like what James said in his letter, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" (2:15-16) It is easy to draw our friendship group round us like a security blanket but I want to

encourage us to be looking out for others. That might be at the end of a service, it might be at work, or in our leisure activities or in our neighbourhoods.

c. Friendship should have the spiritual dimension we have just noted. I'm not saying that offering help, support, comfort and security is not good it is but there has to be more to it than that. Friendship needs to have this spiritual dimension. If it is a friendship between two people who are both followers of Christ then it is Jesus who is the common bond in that friendship and so should play a part. Are you a friend to someone like that? Do you do what Jonathan did for David and "strengthen him in God"? In other words are you encouraging your friend in the faith? Are you praying for them? I'm pleased to say that in recent months there has been a growth in the numbers of prayer partnerships, prayer triplets and also one or two people doing one to one study. It strikes me this is what friendship as we see it in the Bible is all about.

But then if your friend is not a follower of Jesus are you adding the spiritual dimension as you point them to Jesus? Surely our desire is for our friend to come to know Jesus for, as we have been seeing in this series from Ecclesiastes, life without Jesus is meaningless a chasing after the wind.

d. Thank God. Thank God for Mothers who have been our friends, especially if through them we have learned our faith. But also thank God for our friends, for those who do provide for us help, support, comfort and security but especially for those who by God's grace are friends who "put our hands in the hands of God".

"There was a man all alone....this too is meaningless - a miserable business." (Ecc 4:8) Loneliness is miserable but simply having someone around ultimately is not the answer God's desire is for us to have a friend with whom we can share not just the things under the sun but the things of heaven.