

Loneliness and the Work of Robert Stephen Hawker

A sermon delivered at Pembroke College chapel, Oxford, Trinity Term, 2014



Jeremiah 15:15-20

¹⁵ LORD, you understand;
remember me and care for me.
Avenge me on my persecutors.
You are long-suffering – do not take me away;
think of how I suffer reproach for your sake.

¹⁶ When your words came, I ate them;
they were my joy and my heart's delight,
for I bear your name,
LORD God Almighty.

¹⁷ I never sat in the company of revellers,
never made merry with them;
I sat alone because your hand was on me
and you had filled me with indignation.

¹⁸ Why is my pain unending
and my wound grievous and incurable?
You are to me like a deceptive brook,
like a spring that fails.

¹⁹ Therefore this is what the LORD says:

'If you repent, I will restore you
that you may serve me;
if you utter worthy, not worthless, words,
you will be my spokesman.
Let this people turn to you,
but you must not turn to them.

²⁰ I will make you a wall to this people,
a fortified wall of bronze;

they will fight against you
but will not overcome you,
for I am with you
to rescue and save you,'
declares the LORD.

Luke 5:12-16
Jesus Heals a Man With Leprosy

¹² While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

¹³ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him.

¹⁴ Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

¹⁵ Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses.

¹⁶ But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

I want to talk about loneliness, and how people can feel lonely even when they are surrounded by other people. The Gladstone Link is probably the best example of this; I've felt lonelier down there than I have at any other time of my life, and that's when I'm surrounded by other people. People can even feel lonely in their time at Pembroke, which is so friendly, inclusive, and welcoming. In 2010 the Mental Health Foundation conducted research on how often people feel lonely, and found that only 13% of people between the ages of 18-34 said they never felt lonely. So if you feel lonely you, are, paradoxically, in crowded company.

I'm going to suggest that there are both good and bad ways to feel alone, and sometimes the best thing for loneliness is (counter-intuitively) to remove yourself from other people, and seek out solitude. Doing so can enable us to connect with other people on a fundamental level.

I will start with the example of an eccentric priest with a flamboyant style and strange dress sense, associated with Pembroke – and I don't mean Andrew Teal. Instead, I mean Robert Stephen Hawker, who was a student here between 1823 and 1825. His photograph is on the front of the service sheet, showing him in a claret coat and a blue fisherman's jersey, to indicate, he said, that he was a fisher of men. He looks like he could have been the Doctor in *Doctor Who*. When he was at Pembroke he became friends with Francis Jeune, who later become master of the college, and who later oversaw the construction of the college hall in the 1840s. The two played pranks together, once visiting Bude and letting all the pigs out during the night, so that the whole town panicked in confusion (I guess this is what people did for entertainment before television was invented).

Soon after graduation, however, Hawker moved to Morwenstow, in North Cornwall, to work as a priest in an isolated parish consisting of a few hamlets over a 7,000 acre area. Hawker talks about his isolation in some of the letters kept at Pembroke College library. In one letter to his friend William Dyer Anderson, he lamented not hearing any ‘tidings from the outside world’ because ‘no one comes in winter’.¹ He pleaded to his friend to visit, writing ‘do come over. I want to see you very much. No one knows what my life is. Ride over.’ In another letter to his friend, he wrote ‘We are as lonely as Lundy here [referring to the Island of Lundy he could see from Morwenstow]... please write for I am very much depressed of cats’.²

Hawker coped with his isolation in a surprising way: by building a hut into the cliff side, so he could be even more isolated, and undisturbed. There he would read and write poetry, sometimes with his wife and sometimes completely alone, watching the Atlantic Ocean rolling beneath him. It was in his hut that Hawker wrote his masterpiece poem, *The Quest for the Sangraal*, and in one section he writes about monks living in a similar isolation to his own:

They had their lodges in the wilderness,
Or built them cells beside the shadowy sea,
And there they dwelt with angels, like a dream:
So they unroll'd the volume of the Book,
And fill'd the fields of the Evangelist
With antique thoughts, that breath'd of Paradise.

There is something very attractive about that kind of isolation, and it’s a very different sort of loneliness from the one Hawker describes in his letters. It appealed to Tennyson, who visited Hawker in Cornwall because he heard that “there are larger waves there than on any other part of the British coast’, and he wanted to ‘go thither and be alone with God’.

Despite his isolation and loneliness, Hawker, like the monks in his poem, felt that he ‘dwelt with angels’ – that he was connected to God. In one of his sermons, Hawker said:

“Am I alone? Not so. There are horses and chariots of fire about me. There are angels round us at every side!”
You do not see them. You ask me, “Do you?”
And I answer, “Yes, I do”
“Am I weak? An angel stays me up. Do my hands falter? An angel sustains them. Am I weary to death with disappointment? My head rests on an angel’s bosom, and an angel’s arms encircle me””

Hawker is stating how God is always with him – as God promises Jeremiah in the first reading – but Hawker also reveals how alone he feels, because he assumes he’s the only one who knows that God’s angels are supporting him. He also does not say that God stops him feeling weary with disappointment, or weak; only that the angels will help support him.

¹ Pmb v/2/9/48

² Pmb v/2/9/50

Jeremiah's complaint to God suggests that to follow God is to be lonely, because it involves separating yourself from most other people – Jeremiah says 'I sat alone because your hand was on me'. There are other examples in the Old Testament, such as in Exodus and the Psalms, when God promises to be with people even (and especially) when they are apart from everyone else. Indeed, the concept of human loneliness is mentioned at the very beginning of creation, in Genesis, when God says 'it is not good for man to be alone', and creates Eve for Adam so that he has a companion.

I imagine that Jesus must also have felt very lonely, as the Son of God. In the second reading, we heard how he actively sought out isolation in 'the lonely places'. In Mark's account of the event, it is implied that Jesus stays in lonely places because he becomes too famous to visit towns without everyone wanting to be healed; Luke's, account, however, implies that Jesus would have gone to isolated places anyway, so that he could pray.

What are we to make of that? Is Jesus being selfish, avoiding people so that he doesn't have to heal them?

I don't think Jesus was being selfish at all, because I don't think he existed only to heal people, like he was a magician who could zap people into feeling better.

Instead, what I think is wonderful about Jesus healing the man of leprosy is not that he had magical powers, but that he was willing to help someone judged 'unclean' and rejected by society, and in doing so risk becoming unclean himself. He was helping someone isolated, and risked becoming isolated himself.

I suspect that going to a lonely, isolated place afterwards helped Jesus feel connected to other people.

This is the strange thing about going into a lonely, isolated place: you don't necessarily feel disconnected from other people.

If you're going to listen to anyone talk about being in an isolated place, then listen to astronauts who have been on the dark side of the moon. Not only were these astronauts a long, long way from earth – you can fit all the planets in the solar system in between Earth and the moon – but these individual astronauts were also over 2,000 miles away from the astronauts on the lunar surface.

This is what Apollo 11 pilot Mike Collins said about his experience:

Far from feeling lonely or abandoned, I feel very much a part of what is taking place on the lunar surface ... I don't mean to deny a feeling of solitude. It is there, reinforced by the fact that radio contact with the Earth abruptly cuts off at the instant I disappear behind the moon.

I am alone now, truly alone, and absolutely isolated from any known life. I am it.

Al Worden, Apollo 15 pilot, said something similar:

There's a thing about being alone and there's a thing about being lonely, and they're two different things. I was alone but I was not lonely.

Just because Jesus went to a lonely, isolated place, does not mean that he selfishly cutting himself off from thinking about everyone else.

The same is true for Hawker: just because he built a secret hut on the side of a cliff does not mean that he stopped caring or thinking about other people.

One of his frequent tasks as vicar of Morwenstow was to bury the bodies of shipwrecked sailors, many of whom washed up mangled being recognition, cut to peices by the rocks. Despite not knowing them personally – and in many cases not even being able to identify their bodies as human – Hawker gave each body part a respectful and digniied funeral. He writes of the sailors buried in the graveyard in one of his poems:

many a heart of Cornish land,
Will soften for the stranger dead.
They came in paths of storm; they found
This quiet home in Christian ground.

Hawker expresses a fundamental connection with other humans, in both his actions as vicar and his poetry. Despite his isolation and loneliness, he and his fellow Cornishmen could ‘soften’ their hearts for ‘the stranger dead’.

Like the astronauts who, even when cut off from all communication on the other side of the moon, still felt connected to what was happening on the lunar surface, Hawker still felt connected to other human beings in his isolated location,

I wanted to end by turning to a different R.S. – not R.S. Hawker, but R.S. Thomas. Thomas wrote about loneliness as an inherent characteristic of being human:

The Word

A pen appeared, and the god said:
'Write what it is to be
man.' And my hand hovered
long over the bare page

until there, like footprints
of the lost traveller, letters
took shape on the page's
blankness, and I spelled out

the word 'lonely'. And my hand moved
to erase it; but the voices
of all those waiting at life's
window cried out loud: 'It is true.'³

³ R.S. Thomas, *Laboratories of the Spirit*, 1975

It might seem depressing to accept that loneliness is part of what it is to be human, but by accepting this we don't have to feel that there is something wrong with us for feeling lonely, even when we are surrounded by friends. We also don't need to fight it.

What we can do is feel connected to humanity, and God (or nature) by seeking a bit of isolation.

I'm not suggesting we all fly off to the dark side of the moon – apart from being very expensive and dangerous, if we *all* did it, it would defeat the point.

But we can all find ourselves a version of Hawker's hut, whether that just means going off Facebook for a while, or going for a walk on our own. It is not selfish, and rather than making us feel more lonely, it might make us feel more connected, on a deep level, with other people.