

This is one of the sermons in the current series on relationships.

This one is about singleness.

Here are words from one of the books I'm going to mention later on:

Walking into the church alone was hard, especially when everyone seemed to be with someone in particular. During the notices the vicar mentioned the need for Sunday School teachers, delighted in the birth of 'the latest addition to the church family', read some banns of marriage and then commended a man to our prayers after the sad loss of his wife.

I recalled St Paul's desire that all Christians should be single and wondered about their place in this church.

Today I'm going to explore aspects of singleness in the church.

Firstly by seeing what's in the Old Testament.

Then by asking what's helpful in the New Testament.

Finally by looking at what it means for us in today's society and especially in today's church.

Firstly in the Old Testament.

In Judaism there are many genealogies, lists of who begat whom. Being someone's child and having children yourself was important. Your heritage

gave you your name and included you in God's chosen people.

In the Isaiah reading we have a situation where God challenges human attitudes to singleness.

I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

That's a surprising affirmation. Isaiah meant it to shock at the time. People hearing the passage would think

"That's ridiculous! How can foreigners and people who can't have children possibly be accepted by our God?"

Being 'cut off' has multiple meanings. In Middle Eastern historic societies, eunuchs were men who had been castrated in order to serve as royal court officials. They might have high status but were not a sexual threat. They could not have children themselves. In Old Testament Israelite terms, dying as a eunuch, for a man, or dying as a virgin, for a woman, was similar to dying without children. You were 'cut off' from covenant with God, from the blessing of God. That's why having no children or losing your children was so painful in the stories of Abraham, Sarah, Jephthah, Hannah, Naomi, Ruth, Jeremiah and others.

Isaiah is particularly significant for Christians in the way it points forward to a new covenant with God through life with Jesus. In the New Testament, God values people's faith, love and actions rather than solely their parentage, their marriage or ability to have children.

So fast forward to Jesus and the early Christians in a region now dominated by Greek and Roman culture. Typically, men married at the age of around 30, women in their late teens or early twenties. As girls, those young women may have been betrothed in their early teens. These were arranged marriages.

But clearly marriage was not for everyone.

In the New Testament reading from Luke's Gospel today we hear about the many women who supported and actually paid for Jesus' ministry. Some were unmarried. They seem to have been able to travel around freely.

They were acting unusually for the times. They had made brave, individual and unconventional decisions.

Jesus was single.

It's important that Jesus was single.

Important as both human and divine.

A single woman, Mary Magdalen, was the first to experience and announce the Resurrection. Through personal

conviction she had become a faithful follower of Jesus, spending time with him, learning from him. She was free to be in the right place at the right time, especially at the Resurrection when others had run back to their homes.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus, two sisters and their brother, were close associates of Jesus. Martha, unmarried, was head of the household.

The Apostle Paul is a single person with sometimes complex views about men and women. Paul says a lot of possibly controversial things about sex, marriage and singleness.

But we have to acknowledge that he is aware of balance. See what he says in the the first letter to the Corinthians. He wants everyone to be free of anxiety about the world and concentrate on pleasing God. He is aware that married men and women might be distracted by pleasing their husbands or wives, being too busy in married life to spend time with God.

What about the situation today?

Singleness comes at many stages of life.

It's a complex picture.

The Office for National Statistics reports in 2018 that of the population of England and Wales aged 16 years and over, 51% are married, 49% are not. That's not a simple contrast between

married and single. Many people have not married but live with a partner and children for any number of years.

Lakshmi Deshpande has been a teacher, vicar and also full time chaplain at Nottingham Trent University. She has written about different types of singleness in any typical church congregation today. It's in a Grove booklet called *Singled Out or One in the Body?*

I've adapted her headings about singleness. They all begin with D.

There are people who are single:

Through Devotion

Someone who stays celibate, short term or long term. They are a priest, vicar or member of a religious community.

By Default

Someone who has never or is not yet married.

Through Death

Widows and widowers.

Through Divorce and Desertion

Someone who was formerly part of a couple.

Now a single person might feel lonely, missing human contact a lot or just sometimes.

But living alone could also be a positive choice. Alone is not the same as lonely.

It doesn't mean someone is selfish or anti-social. Some married couples can be both those things.

Someone could feel safer living alone if their former partner was abusive.

A single person might also be living happily with others: family, their own children or friends.

Does all that ring true?

We could say that the ideal place for anyone, whatever their marital status, is in a church community.

Churches ideally set out to welcome and value absolutely everyone.

As you know, our church has just been recognised as an Inclusive Church. That means we declare that our church community

"does not discriminate, on any level, on grounds of economic power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race or sexuality."

Overall, in Cottenham and Rampton we do pretty well. We also know we need to keep reviewing our commitment.

But I have come to wonder if the Christian Church as a whole has mixed feelings about singleness.

Think of what we celebrate, publicly in churches (and they are of course wonderful occasions):

Engagements, weddings, christenings/baptisms.

Are there ceremonies celebrating someone being single?

That does happen in some religious communities when a single person dedicates their life to God, in monasteries and convents.

I'm also thinking of 'dispersed' communities, like Franciscans, Benedictines or others where individuals live and work in the outside world. Or the new Community of St Etheldreda, a local Fresh Expressions of church in our diocese. Dispersed community members follow an 'order' and 'rule of life'. They may be married or single.

However, to be honest, do we continue in the church to sometimes see singleness as something lacking?

Or worse still, do we sometimes imply it's that person's own fault?

Here are some things over the years I've heard people say about single people:

She/he shouldn't leave it too late.

It's such a pity he/she never found the right person.

I'll never have grandchildren now.

In a church vacancy: We really want a married vicar, a man with a wife and young children.

Perhaps we're thinking we are being sympathetic or just practical. But that may not be how it is received by a single person.

Here are some quotes from a book called *Single Minded*. It's by a single vicar, Kate Wharton who is a regular speaker at Christian conferences. Various single people have talked to her. Here are a couple of examples:

James is in his thirties and is not married. He doesn't like it when some single people fall into the 'pity me' mentality. He has noticed that some married friends invite him and other singles for 'casual' dinners but save the 'special occasion' dinners for other married friends.

Barbara is in her sixties and has never married. She has no children of her own but enjoys being a godmother. Her church has put on various relationship events, including honest sessions about the joys and challenges for single people. She values friendships with married people but feels sometimes they are unaware of how it feels to come home to an empty house with nobody to share experiences or emotions.

Kate Wharton herself says what she loves about her married friends who are Christians. These are the ones who really get it.

I can just hang out with them and their children and I don't feel they've invited me out of pity.

They understand there are times when I don't want to be on my own, and times when I do.

They see me as a whole person, not a half waiting to become a whole.

Where do we get these mixed feelings from?

Is it from the Bible or from society?

The answer is of course, a mixture of both. It's complicated.

However, it's also very simple. Here is a quote from a book by Barry Danylak on *The Theology of Singleness*:

"Of the three great monotheistic religions of modern time, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, only Christianity affirms singleness as a distinctive calling and gift within the community of God's people".

In our own region, the Ely Diocese values singleness. Think of Etheldreda who founded the abbey at Ely. Think of our two single bishops: Stephen and Dagmar. They were appointed for their faith, love, knowledge and experience, not for their 2.4 children and a wife or husband.

And thankfully we no longer think that foreigners are also cut off from a relationship with God. Thank God that

people from Derby, Devon, Liverpool and even Willingham are welcome here.

Some final thoughts on real action

In an ideal church community, we are all sensitive to each individual. That means not making assumptions. Not relying on stereotypes. Not being patronising.

We are all in some way single, loved individually by God.

Here is a great example of encouragement and affirmation from Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

The wording is from The Message version of the Bible:

"Where you are right now is God's place for you. Live and obey and love and believe right there. God, not your marital status, defines your life".

God takes that seriously.

So does Jesus.

So can we, whatever our human status.

Amen.