

Singleness

“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” John 10:10

This may seem a strange subject for a group of married couples to discuss, but the fact is that singleness affects all of us at some time in our lives. Even though we are married now we may well become single again at some time in the future through bereavement or unfortunately divorce.

“Not all marriages survive. Spouses die. I know people who have lost spouses relatively early. Getting married is no guarantee of companionship and care for life. Neither is having kids. Life in this tragic and fallen world is fraught for all of us. No one situation provides any ultimate security. Whatever our station in life we live with uncertainty. It’s not a problem of singleness; it’s a problem of life. The only guarantee is that Christ will never leave us or forsake us. He is the only one we can be sure will stick by us.” (Allberry p140)

Sam Allberry describes how his grandfather, who lived to be one hundred and had been married for fifty years, spent equally as long single as he had been married, since he outlived his wife by several decades.

I, myself, taught a student who was 22 years old and a widow. Her husband had died of cancer after they had been married for just eight weeks. She had to rebuild her life as a single person.

As married people we need to try to understand singles and the issues that they face. We need to be better equipped to know how to help them and how to avoid the ways that we may make it harder for them or hurt them; even though that is not our intention.

In order to accomplish these goals we may need to examine our own convictions and assumptions so that we can have a really positive influence on our children, grandchildren and the singles that we fellowship with at church.

Singleness affects all of us in society:-

- The young and single, who have never married, although some may have been sexually active as teenagers before becoming a Christian.
- Life-long singles, who have never married and may have lived their entire lives celibate.
- Those previously married but now divorced who may be with or without children.
- Those once married but now a widow or widower, again with or without children. They may have lost their spouse recently or some time ago when quite young.
- Both male and female face the issues of singleness although we may often stereotype singleness as more common amongst females.
- Singleness has implications for both heterosexual and homosexuals. In fact for those who experience same sex attraction and commit themselves to living a celibate life theirs is a life-long commitment.

Pressures and assumptions from the culture and society

The term 'single' has a very different meaning and connotations in society than it did some years ago and no longer implies virginity but that someone is temporarily without a regular partner and may be looking for a new relationship.

"When Christians say single they mean unmarried, and therefore unattached and celibate. When non-Christians say single, they mean without a partner, and therefore free and available for all sorts of sexual encounters.....We can sometimes feel that society isn't set up for us, and that it doesn't quite know what to do with us." (Wharton p28)

Kate Wharton goes on to explain how easy it is to soak up our cultures value system:-

"Sadly, the culture of the world, particularly our postmodern Western society, has become one in which, relationally and sexually speaking, anything goes. And so to live within this world is to be constantly bombarded with images, messages, pictures, headlines, and ideas which reinforce that, and which it is easy to be influenced by and drawn into." (p97)

It would appear that in our culture the primary issue that is misunderstood is not singleness but celibacy:-

"In wider culture, singleness is not a problem in and of itself. But *celibacy* is. It is fine not to have married. It can even be a good thing – you are footloose and fancy free. But to be without sexual or romantic intimacy is another matter." (Allberry p17)

Andrea Trevenna describes how, especially for young women, to be single is never what they would have chosen and they constantly feel that this wasn't how it was meant to be.

"That feeling is reinforced by our culture.....we are bombarded daily with all sorts of wisdom on how to find, get and keep the man of our dreams.....our culture says we need 'the one', and that we are right to feel incomplete until we find him." (Trevenna p8-9)

To live counter culturally in this area when family, friends and work colleagues might think that we are crazy or weird takes real courage and commitment to God's mandate in the scriptures for our lives, the help of His Holy Spirit and the grace of God to live His way a day at a time.

Pressures and assumptions from within the church

"Church life often tends to be set up, at a default level, for people who are married, and also, in general, for people who are married and have children. Much of the language used in our churches is about 'couples' or 'families'. Lots of churches have that wonderful thing called a 'family service', which can feel exclusive for those who are not in a traditional family."

This observation is made by Kate Wharton, who is a vicar in Liverpool, and is single. She also notes that when a church is looking to grow, the conversation is about the need for more young families in the church and never the need for more single people. (That may be less true for an inner city student church!)

She also feels that the bias towards couples is true when there is a ministry need for home group leaders, those committed to pioneer a church plant or to plan a church weekend away. She concedes that there may not be the intention to exclude single people, but that may be how it is heard and felt.

One of the ways that we, as married couples, can put pressure on singles is just to assume that they want or are looking to be married, when that may not be the case for everyone and for a number of reasons that we do not know about. Jesus spoke of this in Matthew 19:12, taken from The Message:-

“Marriage isn’t for everyone. Some, from birth seemingly, never give marriage a thought. Others never get asked – or accepted. And some decide not to get married for Kingdom reasons.”

Sam Allberry, who is a single man in his thirties, records when at friends weddings there was always speculation about who would be next to be married.

“Then there came the well-meaning but slightly awkward speculation about when my turn might come. But even worse than people speculating about when you might get married is when they eventually give up speculating about when you might get married.” (p126)

The problem with this kind of pressure on singles is that it communicates that they are not living a ‘normal’ life and that they will start to live a ‘proper’ life when they are married. They can feel that they are in the waiting room for real life to begin and thus not seek to live a full and complete life in Christ now, but instead put it on hold.

Singles can also experience some crass and insensitive comments, often from those who do not know them very well in church. Kate Wharton considers that this is because marriage is valued more than singleness:-

“I think it comes down to the way in which marriage and singleness are thought about, talked about and valued in the church today.....my conclusion is that the church in the UK today seems to value marriage far above singleness. This often serves to make many single people feel that they are unable to have a full and active role within their churches or even, sadly, to feel a full and valued member of their church family.” (p50)

The opposite problem can also occur when singles are regarded by married couples in the church to have much more free time and therefore to be expected to do far more jobs or to jump to at short notice because they assume that singles don’t have the responsibilities that married people have. There is of course some truth in this but it confirms to a single person, who wants to serve in the church, that their time is somehow less valuable and doesn’t take into account that, especially if they live alone, they have to do everything.

In surveys, loneliness is rated as the most difficult issue for singles within the church. This is especially true for those who live alone. The irony is that solitude is not the problem and many singles prefer to live alone and to have their own space particularly if they are older. We may think that singles like to be with other singles or that young people aren’t interested in older couples or that to be around a young family with kids will make it harder for them

not to have a family, but this is far from the truth. We will come back to this issue later since it is such an important area.

Kate Wharton records that many singles find that in the church, the very place where singles should feel supported and encouraged, they often feel they are disregarded, overlooked and not understood:-

“Church should be the one place where we can be sure of finding love, acceptance and support. It should be the place where we can take our pain and struggles and find people to love us through them and to pray for us in them. And our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ are surely the very people we ought to be able to rely on to love us unconditionally for who we are, not for who we would be if we were only paired off, and to allow us to be part of the same Christian family as them.” (p62)

Pressures and assumptions from the heart of the single person

I'm incomplete without my other half-

Married people often speak about their husband or wife as ‘my other half’ but a single person may feel that because they are not married they are only half the person that they could be, that they are not whole but incomplete and unfulfilled. Singles may be tempted to think that if only they could find that person, who would make them complete, then they would be content and satisfied. But as married Christians we know that is not the answer, only Jesus truly satisfies.

“Jesus said “I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.” This is the life that we are offered in Jesus Christ. Full life. Complete life. Not a life that will only be complete when we find the missing other half of ourselves. Life that is full and complete and whole right now *because* it is life in him.” (Wharton p22)

The reality is that the issues a person has when they are single will not just be solved by being married and in fact they may be magnified by living in such close proximity to another human being. Rather, both singles and marrieds should aim to be content, fulfilled and satisfied in their own individual lives as they live a life totally surrendered to God.

I just need to love and be loved -

Women especially can be susceptible to the longing to love and be loved and to think that a perfect husband will be the answer to all their deepest needs and dreams. No man can bear the burden of fulfilling all his wife’s dreams and in fact the challenge will crush him, disappoint her and possibly destroy the marriage. As Isaiah 54:5 says “Your Maker is your husband” He is the only one who can bear the weight of our needs and longings and will not disappoint.

The problem is that when the desire to be married gets a grip on a person’s heart, so that it becomes the ultimate thing to live for, it becomes an idol.

“An idol is simply something or someone we love in our hearts as the place where we will find our identity, security and satisfaction. My idol is the thing that I’m chasing, or clinging onto, which I think is what I most need, and which I can’t imagine living without.” (Trevenna p24)

Andrea Trevenna reminds us that marriage is a good thing, but like anything else in our lives, when we make it into our god, we put it in God's place, it becomes an idol and all rivals to God in the affections of our hearts He calls "worthless idols".

I hate ticking the single box on forms -

As a child of God the relational status that should define us is not 'single' but 'married to Christ', this is our true identity. Andrea Trevenna (P58) makes a helpful observation about this:-

"It's as we realise how amazing Jesus is that our hearts begin to see where our true identity lies. We begin to say not: "I am a single woman (identity) who happens to be a Christian (circumstances)", but I'm a Christian (identity) who happens to be single (circumstances)."

It's not that the single person needs *more than* Jesus, but that they need *more of* Jesus.

Singleness, the gift I wish I could take back -

Some singles can struggle with the concept that singleness is a gift. Indeed they probably think of it as an unwanted gift. This idea is based on Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:7 "I wish that all were as I am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind one of another." The context is that Paul is advising singles to stay as they are rather than to marry, if they are able to, and may seem to imply that those who are able to cope with singleness have some special gift or 'super power', not available to all.

The conclusions that most writers come to is that 'gift' in the context means the best plan that God has for your life at this time, whether that is marriage or singleness; that both marriage and singleness are a gift from God and that the term 'gift' could be better thought of as the grace God gives us to live in whatever situation we find ourselves at the present time.

How can God's plan be good if it doesn't make me happy? -

A verse that is often appealed to by Christians struggling with singleness and longing to be married is Romans 8:28 "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." But this can be fraught with danger to our faith, since the interpretation of the promise can be different depending on who is defining 'good'.

"When I get to define what 'good' means, I come up with something like: good= what I want. It is painless and pleasurable, and it is definitely not what is painful or difficult in any way. If that is my definition of good, what happens when I have prayed about something and the Lord has not answered in the way I wanted? I am left thinking: this is not good and so I end up defining God through my disappointments." (Trevenna p59)

When God gets to define what is good for us, it may not be what we would like, it may even be painful in some way, but He always uses the circumstances of our lives to help us to grow in Christlikeness.

“For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” Romans 8:29

A single person could feel that this is some kind of punishment or that God is holding back from them what is best. But Romans 8:31-32 goes on to reveal that this is far from the truth:-

“If God is for us who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will He not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

I long to have children but the time is running out -

Perhaps one of the most painful issues to be faced by singles, whether male or female, and one that can deepen with advancing years is childlessness. The onset of menopause can be a time of mourning for some women as the last opportunity to conceive passes them by. It is probably hard for those of us who are married with children of our own to understand how deeply this loss hurts those who are childless. It is not limited to women who are single, Sam Allberry wrote:-

“I realised I would never have a daughter to dance with on her wedding day. I don’t know why that suddenly hit me – the idea had never occurred to me before. But there it was and it cut me deeply.” (p83)

There are times of painful reminders such as when friends and family members have babies or when, surrounded by families they talk incessantly about their children. Even in church life there can be occasions that trigger emotions such as Mothering Sunday or during infants being dedicated.

I can’t face a future without relational intimacy –

Singles often feel that without the promise of marriage, they are consigned to a life without the human intimacy that they long for:-

“It has become an unquestioned assumption today: singleness (biblically conceived) and intimacy are alternatives. A choice to be celibate is a choice to be alone. No wonder for so many this seems too much to bear. Can we really expect someone to live without romantic hope? It sounds so unfair.” (Allberry p47)

He goes on to say that biblically the only alternative to marriage is celibacy, but that the choice between marriage and celibacy is not the choice between intimacy and loneliness. This is affirmed by the fact that Jesus modelled a life of celibacy, as did the apostle Paul and many others. They lived full lives with close relationships and friendships. The bible says in Genesis 2:18 “It is not good that the man should be alone” since we are not designed to live without relational intimacy, but it may be considered that marriage is not the only answer to fulfil this need. Allberry would say that part of the problem lies in the fact that our culture cannot conceive of genuine intimacy without it being ultimately sexual. That although sex and intimacy overlap they are not identical. This can be shown by the fact that our society is awash with sex which makes no attempt to meet the others needs for true intimacy.

I've given up, better to marry a non-Christian than be single for life –

The desire for marriage can become so overpowering for some singles and since the pool of eligible husbands or wives can be so small (especially for women since they are in a 2:1 ratio in most churches) that they can be tempted to date an unbeliever. In 2 Corinthians 14-16 Paul wisely pointed out the pitfalls of committing our lives to someone who does not share our faith and love for the Lord. Even to be unevenly yoked with a believer who does not share the same commitment to Christ's lordship over our lives or desire to be involved in his mission can lead to much unhappiness. Marriage is challenging enough without the added pressures brought about by not sharing the same worldview, priorities and commitment to Christ.

How singles can help themselves

By focussing on the benefits – singles often refer to the freedom and opportunities open to them because they are single:-

- They can make spontaneous decisions to go on holiday, where and when they like.
- They can eat what they like, when they like or choose to go out to eat.
- They can take a new job, move house or go travelling without considering others.
- They can arrange their living space and timetable to suit their own needs.
- There is time for solitude to think and pray and draw near to God.
- There is more time to witness for Christ or to pursue ministry opportunities.
- 1 Corinthians 7:32-35 explains that one of the advantages of singleness is that whereas the married person rightly needs to spend time being concerned about the needs of spouse and family, the single person is able to focus on the Lord's work and give undivided devotion to Him.

Many who are single, and have never married or who are single by way of being bereaved, would give up all of these benefits gladly for the joys and companionship of marriage but to recall with gratitude and to utilise the opportunities may still have some compensations.

Know yourself – the single person needs to know themselves, how they are made, where their weaknesses are, at what points they are susceptible because of their temperament. There will always be stress points that come along such as weddings, Christmas, holidays and attending social events alone. These times can be unsettling and remind the single person that they are alone. But there can be self-imposed issues such as watching romantic comedy films that breed discontent and possibly foster sexual frustration. Also letting thoughts linger on past relationships and what might have been. Controlling the thought life is vital since it is so often Satan's point of attack causing us to doubt God's word, His love and goodness towards us.

Knowing themselves also means being pre-emptive in self-care. Getting good rest, exercise, and work/life balance since exhaustion exposes us to temptation. The introvert will suffer from too little solitude and the extrovert will suffer from too little social interaction so plan around these needs where you can. Build in times to spend with the Lord in his word renewing trust in His promises and His love; seeking the grace to follow Him.

God knows you since He made you – Psalm 139:13-16 expresses this so well:-

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

This psalm assures us that God knows us; that He made us just as we are and He doesn’t make mistakes. Because He made us He knows our personality, our needs, how we function best and what is good for us. He has made us who we are for His purposes and he knows all that comes into our lives and uses it as part of His plan for us – a plan that is good and will give us a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11).

Guard your heart –

Guarding our hearts is about the choices that we make in how we respond to our circumstances, the attitudes and emotions that we allow to occupy hearts and thus to determine those responses. We can allow bitterness, resentment and jealousy to take root in our hearts or we can choose a life full of joy, love and purpose.

“We cannot always affect or alter the situations around us and the circumstances in which we find ourselves, but we can make a choice about what our response to those circumstances will be. We can choose joy, a fruit of the Spirit, and allow it to grow, bloom and blossom in our lives.” (Wharton p79)

Amy Carmichael wrote “Joy is perfect acquiescence – acceptance, rest – in God’s will, whatever comes. And that is so, only for the soul that delights in God.”

Look outwards to the needs of others –

One of the dangers for singles, especially when living alone, is to become self-centred. This is of course a danger for all of us not just singles, but living alone it is possible for it to go unchallenged, especially for those who are naturally happy with their own company.

As Christians we are called to look out for the needs of others and in fact to put them before our own “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Philippians 2:4

The single person in a demanding job may just feel tired at the end of the day and lack the motivation to get involved in the lives of others or for some going to new places and meeting new people takes real courage and thus is avoided. Either way this compounds the problem and it may need some forward planning to ask someone to accompany you to a social event or to invite people you are comfortable with to your home. Joining a home group to get to know a few people and volunteering for a ministry at church will give a focus outside of oneself.

There is more than one way to reproduce and have children –

“Sing, O barren one, you who did not bear a child; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married,” says the Lord.” Isaiah 54:1

Children are a great blessing, responsibility, and gift from God. The bible speaks not only of physical children but of spiritual children, as in the quote above. There is a real privilege in being part of bearing children in the gospel and being able to ‘parent’ their growth and walk with God.

The apostle Paul never married nor bore physical children and yet he considered that he had many offspring in the Lord. He wrote a letter to Timothy as “my dear son” and in the letter to the Philippians he wrote “...as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel”. In his letter to Titus, Paul described him as “my true son”. Indeed Paul’s language in describing how he followed up young believers is that of a parent “...we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.” 1 Thessalonians 2:7

This may not salve the heart cry of those who long to have children of their own but it carries the value of being of eternal worth in God’s eyes. “For what is our hope, our joy or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed you are our glory and joy.” 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20

If “God sets the lonely in families” where’s mine? -

“It is common for people to assume singleness means closing the door on having family. But this need not be the case. Just as the bible has a different conception of friendship, it also has a very different way of helping us think about family.”(Allberry P64)

Although Jesus had a literal, physical family, when they arrived in an attempt to curtail his ministry, probably because they were concerned for his welfare, he answered ““Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”” Matthew 3:33-35

Sam Allberry would say that Jesus reconfigures how we are to think about family. That Jesus’ real family were defined along spiritual rather than biological lines. That as believers who do God’s will, we join God’s family and that it is our spiritual birth rather than our physical birth that ultimately defines us. Part of the cost of following Christ is to put him first and for some that means leaving family but he promises that God is no man’s debtor and it will be worth it both in eternity and in this life. Mark 10:28-30

Sam Allerry points out that in a sense we are all responsible to fulfil God’s promise that He has put the lonely (i.e. singles) in families:-

“Those who would otherwise be alone are grafted into the community life of His people. When God calls people to Himself, He draws them to one another as well. The people of Jesus Christ are to be family.” (p68)

Social media is not enough, I need real friends –

“O the comfort – the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person. Having neither to weigh thoughts, nor measure words – but pouring them all right out – just as they are – chaff and grain together – Certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them – Keep what is worth keeping - and with the breath of kindness blow the rest away.” Dinah Maria Mulock Craig

True friendship is a precious gift from God. As Sam Allberry points out that “One of the peculiar glories of friendship is its entirely voluntary nature.... A friend is someone who has chosen you.....a friend is there always. There’s constancy in friendship. Friends are there at all times, through thick and thin, rain and shine. No matter what. The sign of a real friend is that they are there for you in all seasons. That means that they are there for you when you are at rock bottom.” (p57)

Gien Karssen likens friendship to a plant that grows slowly and needs continuous care which costs time and effort. To experience friendship we must first be a good friend to others. It will take thinking of their needs, serving them, giving time to develop the relationship, allowing ourselves to be open and vulnerable in communication and at times being willing to accept constructive criticism.

There are different levels of friendship and it will not be possible to have many relationships that operate at this soul to soul level but this is vital if a friend is also to be a confidante and one who holds you accountable, as a single person, to God’s best for you.

“We worry that if someone really knew us, they might not love us as much....There is something vulnerable about being deeply known. So when we do find people we can share our inner selves with, it is a huge relief and a great gift.” (Allberry p59)

Remember marriage, even a long happy one, is just a ‘blip’ in eternity –

“We were made to live in loving relationships. Love and marriage were invented by a loving God as part of His perfect world, Genesis 2:22-24.” (Trevenna p9)

But however wonderful and loving a marriage is and however much it meets our needs in this life, it is temporal and not eternal. In Ephesians 5:22-33 Paul explains that marriage is a picture of the marriage of Christ to the church in the resurrection.

“Marriage is a picture of Christ and the church. So when we enter into the fullness of our relationship with him, when the church is finally presented to him as his perfect bride, the institution of marriage will have served its purpose. We will have the reality; we will no longer need the picture. Life then is a fulfilment of all that marriage now is meant to point to.” (Allberry p119)

Marriage should be valued and honoured by both singles and marrieds while remembering that even a long marriage is just a ‘blip’ in eternity when we will finally experience the real thing.

Go to God to meet your thirst-

The scriptures often liken the deepest longings and desires of our hearts to thirst and it is easy to understand why, since thirst is a need that cannot be ignored. The scriptures also remind us that the only place where that thirst can be truly quenched is by coming to God; and He invites us to do just that.

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” Isaiah 55:1

The appeal is made to those who are both thirsty but have no money, in other words those who have a pressing need but no means to meet it, other than to come to God.

On the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles in the Temple courts Jesus gave the same invitation “On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice “If anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink.” John 7:37

“Jesus’ living water transforms us as His Holy Spirit enables us to see how beautiful, precious and infinitely worthy Jesus is. We need to see how he has loved us, and what he has done to make us his own, so that our hearts will be captivated by him.”(Travenna p49)

Single again – the divorced or widowed

To find oneself single for the second time has all the usual issues of singleness with some added complications, and is often at a very different time of life, which also has its own issues.

“There are obviously a whole variety of different circumstances around why a marriage might come to an end, and therefore if you find yourself single again you may find yourself feeling devastated, bereaved, relieved, freed, bereft, or any combination of all of these – and other emotions.” (Wharton p125)

When a spouse has left, the person (man or woman) may feel confused, abandoned and shocked. There may be feelings of shame, guilt or failure that the marriage failed. The person may feel betrayed and struggle to trust anyone again or be haunted by regrets that they didn’t try hard enough.

Divorcees report that it is just at this time, when they need a place of safety and acceptance that the church should provide, that they feel abandoned by the church as well. Some churches disapprove of Christian divorce and they may have been ostracised even by friends. In some situations divorcees felt that their married friends and the church as a whole didn’t know what to do with them. There was no obvious category for them.

Those who had previously been friends didn’t invite them to social occasions since these were usually arranged around married couples, so they didn’t fit. There was also a sense that there was a degree of suspicion from other wives, leaving the person feeling excluded. This is compounded when there are young children so that to go anywhere involves a babysitter.

Add to all this the burden of suddenly managing the finances alone, making all the decisions and trying to make ends meet, as well as coping with all the practical jobs around the house.

There may be differences between the experience of those who are widowed and those who are divorced. Widows and widowers will probably have been treated with sympathy and support from family, friends and the church community during their time of grief and loss. Although this may not continue to be sustained over the long haul, even though it is needed.

Fortunately there are many churches where both the divorced and the bereaved are well supported and cared for. Kate Wharton describes one church where a lady who had been supported well during divorce, later set up a group that met together to discuss the practical and emotional challenges of life after marriage. They met sometimes as adults and other times with their children.

To be thrust in to the position of being single again in midlife or older is a massive transition. It may also include learning how to function as a single parent with all that that entails. Some people will hope to marry again whereas others will not want to. For some the pressure comes from family and friends for them to remarry but for others the pressure is not to remarry especially if they are single due to divorce. The single after marriage person may be perfectly content to remain single and to seek how God would want to use them and their gifts at this stage in their life.

Fear of Growing old

Another issue for those unexpectedly single again and for those who have always been single but are now getting on in years, is fear. Many of these fears are linked to being lonely or just being alone, especially if family live a long way away and have demanding careers and busy lives, or as many older people face their friends die and they spend their time attending funerals. This loneliness and isolation can lead to depression with a lack of motivation even to eat properly, since it just means eating alone and doesn't seem worth it. They may dread old age; fear that there is no one to look after them if they are ill or infirmed. They worry that they might have a fall and no one would even notice and they would die alone.

It may not be easy to ask for help in such circumstances and no one wants to feel that they are a burden on others. The church can have a real role in this situation not just by praying for them but in practical ways. Many churches have meetings for their older members but it is also important to make sure that they can get there! Older singles are often good at looking out for each other but it should also be a matter of pastoral care that they are on the radar so that someone can help with practical needs that have become too hard to manage. That they are supported spiritually and given a sense of being valued.

The problem with fears and anxieties is that they are of themselves crippling, since they focus on the dreaded problem, which may never happen, and take our eyes of God. "The point is that when we imagine all those worst-case scenarios, we are imagining them without factoring in the presence and grace of God that would be there if they actually happened." (Allberry p138)

Things for 'marrieds' to avoid in order to be helpful to singles:-

- Don't try to set them up with someone. This confirms to them that their singleness is a problem and that marriage is the answer.
- Don't keep asking if they have met anyone yet, or why are they still single when they are such a lovely person, or make comments like "I'm sure the Lord has someone for you" (by the way these are real comments). Although well-meant these sort of comments focus the person on the issue, and can appear patronising. We cannot be sure of God's plan for that person and it is better to encourage their faith and trust in Him.
- Equally it is unhelpful, when a single person is struggling with their situation, to speak as though you know exactly what they are going through when, as a married person you cannot possibly know, even though you may be able to sympathise with them.
- It is also unhelpful to give unsolicited advice like "Perhaps you are being too picky" or "Have you tried internet dating to find someone". Such remarks will probably get the response that they deserve.
- It is better not to undermine marriage e.g. "It's so hard to be married with all the pressures and responsibilities" or to emphasise the benefits of singleness expecting the person to be grateful.
- It is unhelpful to create a world in which everything you do involves couples or other families. We need to include singles since they usually enjoy being with couples and families of all ages.

Things for 'marrieds' to do in order to be helpful to singles:-

- Be honest about marriage (without being disloyal or critical) don't just present marriage as blissfully happy all the time.
- Treat a single person as an equal friend rather than someone in a lesser state who is to be pitied, which is how some singles say they feel.
- Be a good listener if a single person needs to talk about the issues they are facing with being single, but don't make it the only or the dominant issue.
- Be available as a sounding board when they may need to make important decisions.
- Pray for and with singles you know, especially if they are struggling. Pray for their growth and deepening of their walk with Christ so that, if his plan is for marriage or singleness they have learned to be content and fulfilled in Jesus and living life to the full in him.
- Invite singles round to your home and be real, as a family, in front of them. Make them feel welcome in your home and your family life so that they feel at home and not in the way or as if they are intruding.
- Invite them for meals, not just special meals but casual meals with the family. Invite them on their own not with others just to make up the numbers. This is genuine hospitality rather than entertaining.
- Make and value singles as friends and as part of your family. Involve them in your children's lives (so long as you are sure of their motives and influence). Our children

have been greatly blessed by singles in our home over the years and hopefully they were a blessing to them.

- Singles of all ages value offers of help with those practical jobs that are hard to do alone such as house, garden and care maintenance. Those who are single again due to widowhood can be overwhelmed by these things that they may have never faced before.
- Be aware of a single, who may feel vulnerable living alone, especially getting home at night in the dark from meetings and may need someone to make sure they get home safely.
- For singles, some days and seasons in the year are particularly difficult to be alone e.g. birthdays, Christmas, Easter and times when people would usually be together with family. This would be good time to invite them into your family. Where everyone is comfortable with it, some families include a single friend on holiday with them.

“We were far away from God but have now been brought into His presence, into His very household. God has taken us in and seated us at His table. And He has done all this through the blood of Christ. He was forsaken and left out so that we could be folded in. The sign that we have received this kind of hospitality is that we offer it to others.” (Allberry p74)

Points to Ponder:-

1. Reflect on your personal experience – how did you cope with singleness? What hopes, fears and worries did you have? Did you ever realistically contemplate that you might be single for life?
2. Think about your church and other churches that you are familiar with – is marriage valued more than singleness? Why? Does the programme of the church bias towards couples not singles? Do singles (other than staff) feel that they have an equal contribution?
3. What are your own personal assumptions about singleness? How might these affect how you relate to singles and the impressions that you might give?
4. If a single person, who was struggling with their singleness and longed to be married, came to you for counsel, what would you say?
5. If a single person came to you, not because they were longing to be married, but for help in living a pure, content and full life as a single person – what would you encourage them to do?
6. Although we may sympathise with those ‘single again’ due to divorce or bereavement, do you think that we recognise sufficiently the issues that they face, especially if they are older and have been married for some time?
7. As couples and as churches, how do we create ‘family’ for those who are single?
8. How do we help those who are growing older as singles with their practical needs as well as valuing, honouring them and supporting them spiritually?

Bibliography

Allberry, S., 2019, *7 Myths about Singleness*, Crossway

Foyle, M. F., 2009, *Honourably Wounded*, Monarch Books

Karsen, G., 1983, *Getting the most out of being single*, NavPress

NIV Study Bible, 2003, Hodder & Stoughton

<http://peterswife> *Must Singles be Lonely?*, 2009

Peterson, E., 2002, *The Message*, NavPress

Trevenna, A., 2015, *The Heart of Singleness*, The Good Book Company

Wharton, K., 2013, *Single-Minded*, Monarch Books

