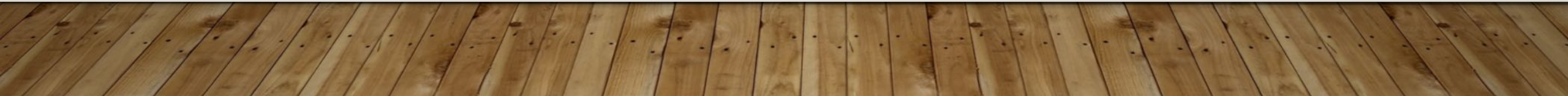


ISOLATION AND LONELINESS: AN EARLY CHURCH PERSPECTIVE

GREG CLARK (FOR BYZANTINE SOCIAL JUSTICE COURSE)



MIDDLE EASTERN HOSPITALITY

- My Old Testament Professor Dr Waldemar Janzen stated that the Middle Eastern hospitality is the foundation of Old Testament ethics. Perhaps we might say of Biblical ethics. The word most often associated with hospitality in the LXX and the NT is *xenos*, which literally means foreigner, stranger, or even enemy. In its derived sense, however, the term comes to denote both guest and host alike... We see ethic in the story of the three guests in Genesis. “In these narratives the practice usually illustrates bedouin traditions having to do with a resident’s obligation to nourish and protect travelers who find themselves in hostile environments. Thus, in Gen 18:1ff. Abraham rushes out of his tent to greet three strangers who approach him “in the heat of the day.” John Koenig, “Hospitality,” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 299. And here I would like to suggest that the core concepts of Byzantine Social Justice are centred in this key ethic.
- Recently I spoke to a couple when I was presiding at a neighbouring parish. I had been preaching on the Biblical ethic of hospitality. This was one of the readings. They had just spent a year in Saudi Arabia. “I know what people hear about Saudi Arabia here”, she said. “But there is someone knows your name they think they are your friend... I have decided that Canadians are just rude.”
- Is it true? Are Canadians “just rude”? Are we just rude, or are we increasingly isolated and thus, lonely?



SHALL WE GATHER?

- It certainly wasn't that way when many of us were growing up. In our household people: children, friends, missionaries, fellow members of our little holiness church, the youth of the church, prayer meetings, people who were virtually complete strangers were in our home. And then there was church three times a week and camp meeting each year. "Shall we gather at the river" had a strong emphasis on "we" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_WVnDBcl8c in its *eschatological* promise.
- Increasingly Canadians are deciding to not gather with others. Or rather are being nudged into increased isolation and loneliness. The *oikos* was the locus of *philoxenia* in the ancient church. In the ancient world the idea of "household" was much more expansive, including all who dwelt there. Houses or apartment buildings often were also places of business and the early Christians gathered in households *oikoi*.
- Agnus Reid Polling working with the Cardus Institute has produced a recent survey of Canadians that provide a picture of the state of social connectedness, or isolation and loneliness currently experienced by Canadians.



Manhattan Beach Pentecostal Camp, Pelican Lake
Manitoba

THE RESEARCH

- “An extensive [new survey by the Angus Reid Institute](#), conducted in partnership with think tank Cardus, finds that 23 percent of Canadians suffer from extreme social isolation and loneliness. An almost equal proportion of Canadians struggles with neither of those issues. The survey also found:
- 33% of Canadians say they’re not sure they could count on anyone for emergency financial help.
- 18% of Canadians say they’re not certain they could lean on anyone during a personal crisis.
- 45% of Canadians say they haven’t interacted socially with a neighbour in the last month.
- 38% of Canadians with a physical disability struggle with social isolation and loneliness.
- ‘Social isolation and loneliness are one of the biggest challenges of our time,’ says Ray Pennings, executive vice president of Cardus. ‘They’re a symptom of our culture’s obsession with personal autonomy, leaving us living life as ‘I’ instead of ‘we.’ In doing so, we reap the poorer financial, mental, and physical health associated with isolation and loneliness, possibly making us more vulnerable to things like drug abuse, suicide, and the debt spiral caused by payday loan use.’

THE GOOD NEWS AND THE RESOURCES

- The survey also identified pockets of resilience in Canadian society:
- 75% of Canadians who were neither isolated nor lonely were married (or living common law) compared to just 48% of those who struggle with both issues.
- 63% of Canadians who were neither isolated nor lonely had children, compared to 58% of the most isolated and lonely.
- 36% of Canadians who weren't isolated attended religious services at least monthly, compared to just 17% of the very isolated.
- 51% of Canadians who weren't isolated prayed at least monthly, compared to 38% of the very isolated.
- 'Two key social institutions seem to provide a buffer against isolation and loneliness – family and faith,' says Pennings. "Governments, media, the academy, social agencies, and all Canadians need to recognise the value of these institutions in order to find the solutions so many of us need.' "
- <https://www.cardus.ca/research/spirited-citizenship/press-releases/extreme-social-isolation-and-loneliness-affect-almost-one-quarter-of-canadians/>

RESEARCH BEGINS AT HOME

- My wife volunteered to go door to door for the Kidney Foundation a few years ago. She went to 20 nearby houses. She identified herself as a neighbour and briefly explained the cause. 10 households responded to her manner that was not very "neighbourly" (!). 5 were disinterested but polite; 5 were interested. We can see how closely the research matches this small sample perhaps revealing the correlation of loneliness with habits of unwelcome. This is not the Western Canada that either of us grew up in. What has nudged us?

I would show her picture but she is clearly too SCARY looking!



Clearly a threatening looking person

ELIADE ON SECULARIZATION



- Romanian Religious Studies scholar Mircea Eliade describes the fragmenting effect of secularity “[Man’s] dwelling is a microcosm; and so too is his body. The homology house-body-cosmos presents itself very early. Secularity is defined by Eliade as “...properly speaking no longer any world, *there are only shattered fragments of a shattered universe, an amorphous mass consisting of an infinite number of more or less neutral places in which man moves...* Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 172. Intentionally or unintentionally Eliade reflects an Eastern and Patristic understanding (See for example St Maximus the Confessor on microcosm/microcosm). Also the refusal of the Eastern Church to fragment reality into different spheres.

LOCALLY

- Similar statistics can be seen in the Calgary and Area Social Outlook reports 2008-2015 which are available. They rate very similar numbers on a sense of “belonging” to one’s neighbourhood to the Angus Reid numbers on isolation and loneliness. It is interesting that while the 2008 report highlighted the importance of local churches (as being the largest part of the volunteer sector) the most recent report does not mention faith communities at all (except in their role as providing emergency food services). It does highlight the importance of sexual minorities, recent immigrants and seniors each of which is significant. And it promotes engagement with arts and culture. It also creates local government initiatives such as “community hubs”. While this is an excellent and promising initiative its hours of engagement are ((to this point) very small compared to those of faith communities and the importance of urban planning or “non-conformity” in overcoming alienation.
https://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/CNS/Documents/social_outlook_2011-2016.pdf



WHAT NUDGES US?

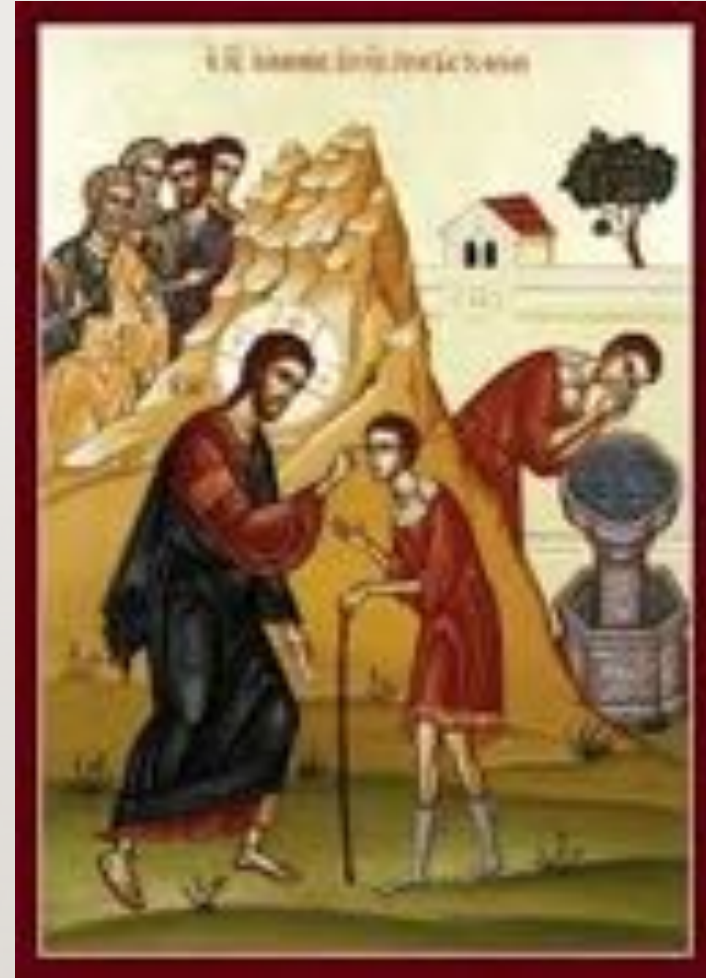
- Andrea Mrozek “it takes something of a wilful blindness not to see connections between our ideological commitments to individualism, sexual freedom, and small families and the effects of those commitments on loneliness and isolation, including waning social connections and the rise in living and feeling alone.” The state cannot reverse this process without attempting to strengthen the mediating structures of society. Or worse by attempting to undermine them. <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/single-beds-were-made-for-one/>
- To this we might add terrible urban planning. Which nudges people to isolate themselves in their backyards. Instead “con-conforming” neighbourhoods allow for natural interaction. See below. <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2017/6/9/learning-from-a-non-conforming-neighborhood> Architect David Gruesel notes that living on a cul-de-sac has deprived him of at minimum 7,670 opportunities for interaction with others in his neighbourhood. <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/intentional-isolation-in-suburbia/>

WHAT CAN ANCIENT CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ETHICS DO TO HELP US WITH THE EPIDEMIC OF ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

As we said earlier hospitality is the central concept. That is "to be a neighbour". This brings wholeness to society.

In the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man St John Chrysostom points out that the Rich Man does not "see" Lazarus. He is not cruel. He is not unfriendly to his friends. But he is not "hospitable". In the Roman world the weak were not valued. But the Jewish values which motivated Christian ethics led the powerless being "seen". We need to "see our neighbour".

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew points out that the created order is a place of potential "encounter". We anticipate encountering Christ in our neighbour.



ANCIENT CHRISTIAN ETHICS

St John Chrysostom and the Fathers in general are suspicious of wealth. Excess wealth belongs to the poor. We can ask “how has our wealth led to the creation of urban planning which isolates us? Would not a less luxurious, less self-contained life be better if we could live in “non-conforming” neighbourhoods which are more organic and thus more human?”

The Ancient Church was not afraid to confront abuses of the neighbour even while maintaining close ties to the state. Is the Church currently confronting the right matters. Should it not confront poor urban planning? Should it not confront ideology which undermines the mediating structures which thus create isolation?

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN ETHICS

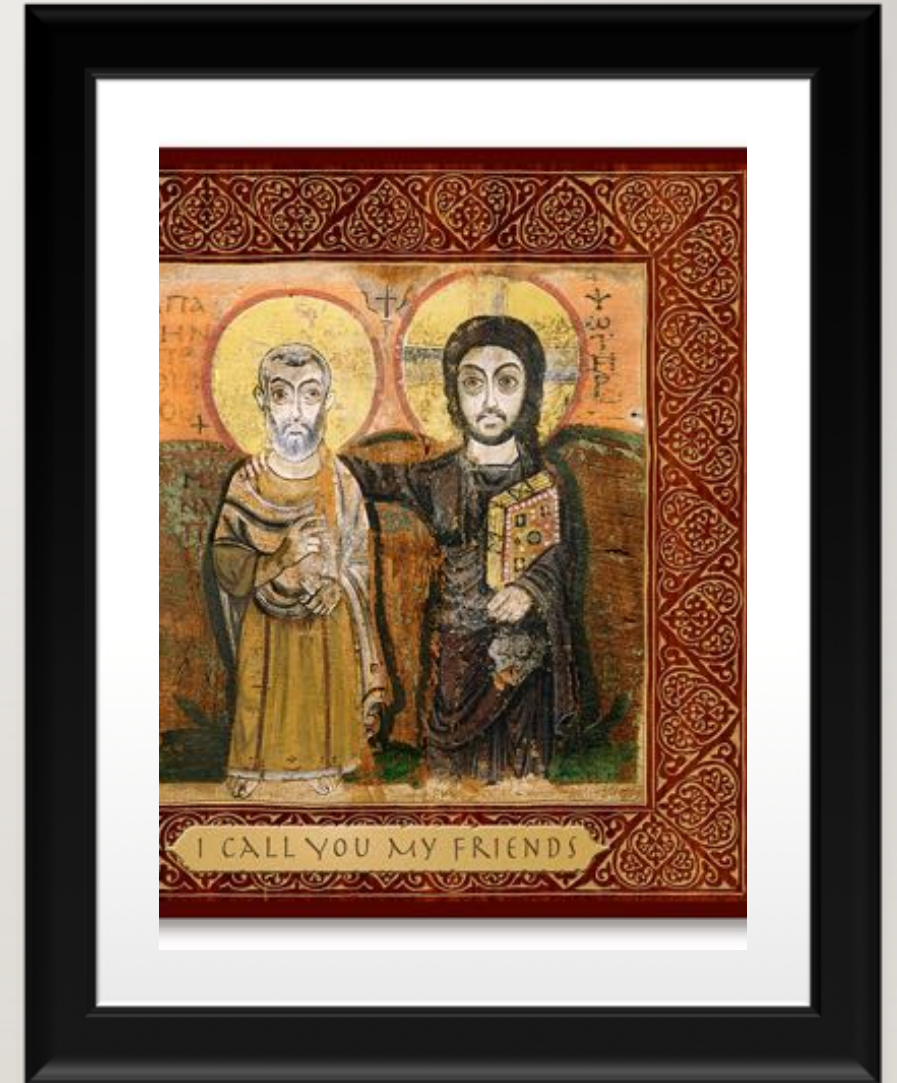
- We can also note how Eastern theology places on emphasis on human freedom. God out of his freedom has created us in freedom. We can also see that the definition of sin, born out of desire to "divide and conquer" reality leads to a kind of bitterness towards reality. And thus towards creation (and one's neighbours). In the East in which sin is considered more corporately (and cosmically) we can be aware of how we become nudged towards the "subservience to the force of hardened habit" as Patriarch Bartholomew puts it. Inhospitability can become habitual.



SPIRITUALITY

We must be aware of the parodies of spirituality in a culture which cause isolation and loneliness. In the Jesus prayer we encounter both the ineffability and intimacy of God in Christ receiving and giving inner hospitality, in solidarity with other sinners. This requires solitude. "Spiritual silence as the starting place of action" says Patriarch Bartholomew *Encountering the Mystery*, 212. We must be aware of the effects of technology and (now legalized) narcotics which creates false solitude and false *theosis*.

But this does not suggest an oppositional or even "just war" attitude towards our culture or the state. Eastern Christianity has always sought for peace, even with Barbarians. It has functioned under various regimes while maintaining its own *polis*. We might think of the gates of Constantinople both well defended and whenever possible open. The ancient church was "strong at the centre and open at the boundaries" as much as possible.



THE “WE” AND THE ESCHATOLOGICAL PROMISE

- Patriarch Bartholomew is clear, speaking on behalf of the Eastern Church, that the eschatological promise is cosmic in scope. Therefore it is deeply social. It involves the *oikos* (household) of the body, the household, the Church, humanity and the cosmos. If secularity is fragmentation and objectification, this is the great ingathering and renewal of all things. This is the opposite of fragmentation. It is as St Maximus the Confessor put it, a “cosmic liturgy”. We might say a “dance”.



The renewal of creation in the Theophany

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN ANSWERS

In a time of fragmentation, loneliness, isolation and increasing incivility what can a parish do? Some thoughts:

Stand before the presence of God in Christ receiving *philoxenia* (love of the stranger) from him. And knowing that we live in solidarity with other sinners. We too are also "in exile".

Expect the world and one's neighbour to places of encounter. Stake claim to the reality that "fragmentation" is false and a hardened habit. In reality the cosmos is organically linked in one cosmic dance. We will train our hearts and eyes to be neighbour-focused as did the desert Fathers and Mothers.



BYZANTINE ANSWERS



Set aside a year of Jubilee. That is a year dedicated to learning the practice of hospitality. This must begin (as above) within ourselves, with those who interact with our parish (such as our preschool and visitors), among ourselves.



As part of this, break down the barriers that make our households isolated. Resist the nudging. Make this year of Jubilee a year of invitation.



Also go out our way to meet our neighbours. “The sun shines on the just and the unjust”. The uncivil are alienated in their incivility. Engage the State productively. Insist on remaining part of civil society.



ARE CANADIANS RUDE?

- We are increasingly isolated as the mediating structures of parish, family and neighbourhood fray. This is new. It is driven by many forces. But the ancient world was renewed by the Christian practice of Middle Eastern hospitality (see Julian the Apostate's frustration at its effectiveness).
- The world is a place of encounter. This is our new mission. Christ is waiting in our neighbour.



THE PATRIARCH SAYS

KEEP THE COSMIC DANCE IN MIND.

IT IS ALWAYS PRESENT.

LEARN TO RECOGNIZE IT.

