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Our
Contemporary
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Our Contemporary Culture

– *Pastoral Challenges*

Philip McParland

We are the most indebted, obese, medicated and addicted generation in history. Sadly this is the stark reality in the so called developed world today. But why? Why are we so given to compulsive behaviour? It would seem that we cannot deal with uncomfortable feelings. Our personal emotional conflicts are too much for us to handle. We take what appears to be the easy way out. We eat, we shop, we drink and gamble, we over-work, we take drugs, prescribed and unprescribed, all to comfort ourselves, to take away the pain we are feeling inside.

In this short article I would like to do three things. Firstly, I would like to name some of the uncomfortable feelings we find difficult to deal with. Secondly, I would like to identify issues in our contemporary culture that may be the underlying causes of these uncomfortable feelings. And thirdly, I would like to suggest three pastoral priorities that the church could focus on in response to the reality our generation is experiencing.

UNCOMFORTABLE FEELINGS

Uncomfortable feelings are part and parcel of the human condition. Throughout our lives we are likely to experience a whole range of them. The uncomfortable feelings that seem to be most common in our contemporary culture are low self-esteem, loneliness and insecurity. These experiences are having a powerful impact on the way we feel about ourselves and on the way we are living our lives. Let me say a word about each.

LOW SELF-ESTEEM

It is a fact, perhaps an ironic fact, that the developed world is rife with low self-esteem. Self-rejection, self-hatred, poor self-worth, feelings of inadequacy are all different ways of describing how we really feel about ourselves. The truth is the vast majority of people

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do not like themselves as they are. Here is how Brennan Manning author of 'The Ragamuffin Gospel' describes this reality as he encountered it in the United States: 'Self-hatred is the predominant spiritual problem that I've had to deal with in twenty-eight years as a vagabond evangelist. Unhealthy guilt, shame, remorse and self-hatred are no respecters of persons. Vague feelings of existential uneasiness before the Lord God transcend poverty and wealth, cultural and educational differences, distinctions between clergy and laity.' He goes on, 'As I've tramped about the country as an evangelist over the years, dealing with a cross section of humanity from CEOs to street people, it has become luminously clear that self-hatred is rampant' (*A Glimpse of Jesus*, p.7). I have found the very same to be true in the work I do. I now take it for granted that most of the people I offer a ministry to are struggling with low self-esteem. Low self-esteem is no respecter of persons or professions. As Manning discovered it is masked by wealth and achievement and success. In fact our desire for possessions, power and popularity is our way of making us feel better about ourselves. But accumulation, achievement and the approval of others will never change the way we feel about ourselves because these are all external sources of value.

LONELINESS

Loneliness seems to be a major condition many people are experiencing today. Loneliness is caused by isolation, the breakdown in relationships and the lack of real communication. It is true that the mobile phone and the internet are serving our need for connection but the kind of connection they create is limited and often superficial. They lack a mutual physical presence and depth of engagement which the human person is made for. A contemporary phenomenon is the growth of urban population. But urbanisation is leaving those who are left in rural areas feeling more and more isolated and those who have moved into cities feeling lost in a vast sea of impersonal restless activity. It is a fact that many people who live in cities do not know their neighbours. Some even admit to the television being their main source of company. Isolation and loneliness have the capacity to create darkness in the human heart which in turn leads to depression. This is understandable since we are made for relationships. To be human is to be in relationship. In the well known words of John Donne, 'No man is an island unto himself.'

INSECURITY

Insecurity is a very common human experience. Often our feelings of insecurity are so deep that many of us are not aware of how

controlling they are. One of the most obvious manifestations of our insecurity is fear. There is plenty of fear in our contemporary world. Shortly after the result of the British referendum on EU membership was announced, a friend who was convinced that a vote to remain would carry the day sent me a text with these words, 'Eating my hat as I speak! Fear is a terrible thing!' Fear is indeed a terrible thing. Brexit exposed many of our fears which in fact was an exposure of our deep-seated insecurities. When we are insecure we retreat into ourselves, circle our wagons, pull down the shutters and close our borders. We become overly preoccupied with our survival and safety needs. The move to the 'right' in political thinking and allegiance is surely in part due to fear born of insecurity. Insecurity makes us unnecessarily anxious about our future. Anxiety is rife. It often is linked with depression and is the reason why many people are taking prescribed medication.

Another manifestation of our contemporary insecurity is our desire for certainty. It is a fact that more and more people are attracted to forms of religion that offer them black and white answers to questions about the meaning and purpose of life. Fundamentalism is not just the feature of some branches of Islam. It is also on the increase in some of the Christian churches. Religions which promise to offer certainty can give the impression that their type of certainty will take away our feelings of insecurity. But this is false religion. The purpose of religion is not to provide certainty but to help us surrender our lives in trust to a God who loves unconditionally and faithfully.

It could of course be argued that low self-esteem, loneliness and feelings of insecurity have always been around. No doubt this is true. These experiences have surely been part of the human condition since it was wounded in the Garden of Eden. But we seem to be experiencing low self-esteem, loneliness and insecurity at deeper levels of intensity today. Our modern culture seems to be breeding them in a way unknown before. So what is it about the culture in which we live that is the cause of our low self-esteem, our loneliness and our feelings of insecurity? No doubt there are many causes. Let me say a word about four. These are rootlessness, busyness, relativism and instability in family life.

ROOTLESSNESS

It seems to me that centuries on we are still experiencing the effects of the industrial revolution. The mass movement of people away from the countryside and from rural villages has brought a loss of belonging and community. Furthermore I believe the lack of contact with the land and the rhythms of nature has had a negative impact on the human psyche. People feel disconnected from their

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roots and from their fellow human beings. Without this connection a very important anchor in our lives is missing.

If there are no sources of stability in our lives we will be restless. Rootlessness creates restlessness. There is no doubting the fact that a deep restlessness has taken hold of the lives of many people in the western world. We are constantly on the move, going from one place to another and from one thing to another. We are continually looking for the next fix, the next source of excitement, the next experience.

BUSYNESS

Another thing that is making us restless is busyness. Busyness is a contemporary phenomenon. Most people need to keep themselves busy. Indeed most want to be described as busy. But why? What is driving our busy lifestyle? Certainly unrealistic expectations. We want everything and more. But the truth is we can't have everything. Choices need to be made and the ability to say 'no'. Perhaps a deeper reason for our busyness is utilitarianism. An Anglo Saxon utilitarian philosophy has crept into our lives. In utilitarianism value is equated with usefulness. Unless something or someone is useful it has no value. If we measure our value by our usefulness we will be driven by a need to be productive. What is more we will only feel good about ourselves if we are doing something. What began as a theory in the study of Jeremy Bentham over two hundred years ago became a philosophy and gradually found its way into our bloodstream. It seems as if we are going to need a blood transfusion to get rid of utilitarianism and its consequence – busyness. It feels as if nobody will let us do nothing anymore! No wonder so many people today seem to find it difficult to relax. This inability to relax inevitably leads to burnout and even breakdown.

RELATIVISM

Relativism has us believe that anything goes and everything is up for grabs. There are no absolutes anymore and therefore no anchors. If it feels right it is right. We have moved from an obedience centred culture to an experience centred culture. We certainly needed more experience and less obedience, but experience has become equated with feelings which is surely irresponsible and therefore dangerous. Relativism has left us without a moral compass, without some core values to build our lives around. Core values give meaning and purpose to our lives. If we lack a sense of meaning and purpose we are likely to feel lost and rudderless thrown about by the storms of life. Traditionally religion provided us with a moral compass and a clear sense of meaning. But even religion has now lost credibility and many of its beliefs are questioned.

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Relativism also creates a culture of individualism. There is no doubting the fact that the philosophy of individualism is widespread in the developed world. The philosophy of individualism seeks to put independence and personal freedom before everything else. Putting independence and personal freedom first frees us of any responsibility for others – moral or social. It is selfish and eventually leads to isolation and loneliness.

INSTABILITY IN FAMILY LIFE

Most cultures believe that the institution of marriage and the family is the bedrock of society. It meets many of our basic human needs and is the foundation for a mature and fulfilled life. Yet divorce and the breakup of family life are rife in western society. The impact of marital breakdown on children can be devastating. A year six teacher once asked the kids in her class to complete a series of sentences that began with the phrase, 'I wish ...' The teacher expected her students to write about their desires for bicycles, toys, animals, trips to theme parks, etc. Instead, twenty of the thirty students made reference to the breakup of their families or conflict at home: 'I wish my parents wouldn't fight.' 'I wish my father would come back.' 'I wish I could get straight A's, so my dad would love me.' 'I wish my mother didn't have a boyfriend.' 'I wish I had one mum and one dad, so the kids wouldn't make fun of me. I've three mums and three dads, and they botch up my life.' This is very strong evidence from the 'mouths' of children. It is clear that every aspect of their lives is influenced by family instability during their developmental years. I am not arguing against divorce here, neither am I judging anyone whose marriage has ended. But it is true that children can become adversely affected if their parents separate. In particular the breakup of the family home can create deep feelings of insecurity in children that are hard to get rid of even in adult life.

PASTORAL PRIORITIES

In the light of the reality I have described what might the pastoral priorities of the church be? I believe that going forward the Church needs to focus on three things in particular. First and foremost the Church needs to offer an experience of belonging and community. One of the purposes of the Church is to create community among those who believe in Jesus. The Church is meant to be a life-giving community. If the Church does not offer an experience of belonging and community she is failing in her mission. Jesus sought to create an inclusive community, a community where all were equal and everyone was valued. Because of this his ministry was characterised by acceptance and compassion. Nothing creates

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community more than acceptance and compassion. The Church today is not going to offer people the experience of belonging and community they long for unless she puts flesh on the acceptance and compassion of Jesus.

Secondly, the Church needs to help people encounter the Jesus of the gospels. The primary reason the Church exists is to bring people into a relationship Jesus. To know that Jesus is in relationship with us is to know ourselves as loved and lovable as we are. It is to know that we do not have to own something, do something or be something in order to feel good about ourselves. In healing people Jesus seemed to give priority to changing the way they saw themselves and the way they felt about themselves. Jesus' primary concern is the wounds in the human heart that make people feel inadequate and shameful. If anything can heal our low self-esteem it is surely encounters with an affirming and affectionate Jesus. It is the mission of the Church to facilitate these encounters.

Thirdly, in her teaching the Church needs to focus more on what Ronald Rolheiser calls the non-negotiable essentials. It seems to me that one of the strengths of Islam is the five pillars. Islam is built around five core values. Every Moslem knows what these core values are and seeks to practise them. The Gospel provides Christians with core values to build their lives around. Down through the centuries there has been a tendency to complicate the Christian religion and indeed to multiply the rules and regulations for those who belong to it. This is what institutions do to religion and it is why the Church constantly needs to be reformed. Today people need the Church to tell them about Jesus and his vision of life in a way that is inspiring, accessible and clear. A constant focus on the core values of the Gospel is a very good way of getting the message of Jesus across. It also offers people a spiritual path that can give meaning and direction to their lives.

CONCLUSION

There is nothing new in the three pastoral priorities I have identified. Sometimes it is necessary to get back to basics for we all have a tendency to miss the wood for the trees. Life today often seems complex and confusing. Yet behind this complexity we are all searching for the same essential things. We need to know that we are not alone, that we are loved and lovable as we are and that our lives have some meaning and purpose. If the Church is seeking to offer these things then she is faithful to the mission Jesus has entrusted to her. It also means she is relevant for she is providing people today with what they most need in their lives.