

Like most Christians, I find myself increasingly challenged to live and work in a world that seems to pay less and less attention to the God to whom I am committed. Recently, I came across an old book, *Celebration of discipline: A path to spiritual growth*, by Richard Foster. I remembered enjoying reading it some years ago and found that I was quickly challenged by its contents. I thought it might be my challenge to relate some of the issues raised in this book to us as Christian teachers and educators.

### Part 3. Solitude

Home alone. Well almost, the cat's still here.

I must admit that I don't mind a weekend alone. I can get a few jobs done, including *TCFNews*, and time doesn't seem as important as it usual does. But it is a bit quiet and I'm not sure I would like too much of it, which is why I was attracted to the chapter on *Solitude*.

Solitude can be loneliness but it is more. As humans we often fear being alone and go to extraordinary lengths to fill our lives with people or human voices. We all know of homes where the television or the radio is on all day, and even while travelling we have the car radio. Perhaps it has to do with our childhood. As an only child, being alone was common and learning to use this time a necessity of psychological survival. Perhaps for those who grew up in big families with the current media bombardment, being alone was not common.

Loneliness, we are told by sociologists is an increasing phenomena within our society despite an increased access to the mass media. Communities bend to the individual household where daily work for most members means longer hours and often more travel time than in days past. Households become isolated from their neighbours and local community. This may especially be the case as children grow up and become increasingly independent providing even less reason for parents to interact with the community.

For Christians such loneliness is countered by their involvement in a Christian community, their church. But loneliness and solitude are not the same. Loneliness can be depressing and is often used as a punishment, "solitary" confinement.

Solitude is about inner fulfilment and is a state of mind. It's about being at peace with one's self and the world, it's about knowing God and being in closer touch with God. Distinguishing between loneliness and solitude is to distinguish between unconnectedness and being connected to self, others and God.

When Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness before beginning his ministry he wasn't seeking to be alone but solitude. Such solitude might come when alone but it is not the same as being lonely.

The Gospels provide many accounts of Jesus seeking solitude. It seems that he needed to take time out to ensure his communication with his Father and to focus on his life goals. While escaping the crowd was often a motivation, his solitude in the Garden of Gethsemane also featured loneliness as his disciples fell asleep and he anguished over this coming separation from the Father while on the cross. Yes, Jesus was to experience the ultimate in loneliness.

If solitude is a discipline then what are its characteristics. One characteristic is silence. Often the subject of songs and poetry, and often linked to loneliness, silence can also be "golden". Few would doubt that silence can be powerful and one of the reasons for this is that when we are not listening to someone or anything else, or planning words or thoughts of response, we have the opportunity for reflection. This is particularly true of teachers and educators, all professional talkers who are use to speaking and often dominate conversations. (Ever wondered why non-teachers avoid going out with a group of teachers?)

Solitude can be about speaking when we need to (Ecclesiastes 3:7) and controlling our tongue. For instance, I am not bad at this control in other people's meetings, but when I am the Chair, my desire for control can often result in me saying too much.

In his book, Foster also talks about the characteristic of "darkness". For many, solitude is not a pleasant experience. As a state of mind it can be associated with dryness, depression and let down. Christians, often believing that their life should be upbeat, are not good at acknowledging this solitude to self or others. It is these experiences of solitude (let down) that strip from us any over-dependence on emotion. It is at these times that knowledge of our dependence on God is more acute and in this

knowledge we are able to better order our lives and its goals. Such solitude is a reality we all experience, but prolonged depression is not solitude and needs to be handled differently and professionally.

In practical terms, we need to order our behaviours to practice the discipline of solitude. Moments of solitude can be easily snatched from a busy day by taking the opportunities that abound. It might be a few minutes of quietness at the beginning or end of the day at home or in the work place. It could be that walk to or from work, even a few minutes from the station, or it could be in the car without the radio on. Solitude is not about being in isolation but a state of mind.

Solitude is linked to personal prayer and a prerequisite. It gets us ready to speak with God by closing us off to the world around us, for in prayer we need to listen as well as speak.

Longer periods of solitude can help us to consider broader life goals and reflect on and take stock of our lives. If such times are never taken, then we stand the chance of continually being caught-up in the agendas of this world with little time as Christians to respond to what God wants us to do, and we know as teachers just how easy this can be. Probably holidays provide an excellent time for solitude but many can make them as hectic as term time and still not provide any solitude.

Finally, there is of course a warning that solitude can be negative, using it as an escape and withdrawing from the world and reality. But for Christians, solitude can provide much needed time in this world to think of the next. In such reflection Christians can draw closer to God and know better his will for their lives.

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