

Read John 17:14-19

We have been increasingly encouraged, and even ordered, in recent days to self-isolate. Work from home, only go out if it's essential, and if you do keep a "safe" distance from others of 1.5 metres.

One introvert recently tweeted, "I've been preparing for this moment my entire life!"

But even we introverts must be careful not to isolate ourselves too much. We need to maintain contact with others. Partly for our own benefit, partly for the benefit of others. Because we were not created to be isolated individuals, but to be social creatures who live in community. And it is in our interactions with others that we get the opportunity to contribute to and enrich their lives, and they to ours.

As Christians, God calls us to be salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13-16), and to "proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). We cannot do that if we are not engaging with the world around us.

In John 17:16, Jesus says that we are not of the world just as he is not of the world. Over the centuries, some Christians have interpreted this to think that we ought to have nothing to do with the world, that we should withdraw from it to keep ourselves pure. The classic example of this is monks and nuns shutting themselves away in their monasteries and nunneries. However, some have taken it to greater extremes than that.

Simeon the Stylite is my favourite example. Simeon started out by joining a monastery. But his behaviour was so extreme that he was asked to leave. So he became a hermit. He lived in a round enclosure with his leg chained to a pole. Then he built a platform three metres high, before graduating to successive pillars (*styloi* in Greek): a six-metre one, an eleven-metre one, and finally a *stylos* twenty metres high. Hence his nickname, Simeon "Stylites," or "the pole-sitter". Simeon spent thirty-seven years of his life standing on his pillar. He ate as little as possible, and refused to sit or lie down: he would tie himself to a pole fixed to the top of his pillar so as to sleep upright. He had no roof, and no walls; a leather garment, long hair, and a beard were all he had for protection against the elements. All done for God. Or, more accurately, for his own spiritual growth.

Simeon is perhaps the best, certainly the most extreme, example of "asceticism." Asceticism describes a life characterized by abstinence from "worldly" pleasures. Ascetics believe that purifying the body helps to purify the soul, and thus get closer to God. The ascetic looks to verses such as John 17:16, and Matthew 16:24 ("If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"), and 1 Peter 2:11 ("I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul"), and responds to this call for self-denial and abstinence by denying themselves all worldly comforts and pleasures.

However, admirable as the dedication of ascetics like Simeon is, I think they may have only caught part of the message. Yes, there is evil at work in the world and we must avoid being corrupted by it. But rather than run away and avoid the world, we are called to engage with it. Look again at John 17. Right after Jesus says in verse 16

that we are not of the world, he prays in verse 17 that God would sanctify us (make us holy) and then in verse 18 he sends us into the world, just as he was sent into the world.

We have to keep these two things in balance. We don't belong to the world, but we are on a mission to the world. So, rather than hiding away in "holy huddles" we should be out there as God's representatives in the world. We should be trying to live godly lives not only in the monastery, but in the hospital, the boardroom, and down the mines.

Now, how we do this in these times of enforced social isolation is a challenge. But (and I don't always say this!) thank God for all the technology that we now have at our disposal. I can send you this email, without you having to see my face (see, there's one good thing to come out of the coronavirus!). I can record a video again for this Sunday, which I hope you'll watch. We can get on YouTube and other sites to find talks and teaching from great speakers around the world. We can catch up with each other's news on Facebook. We can chat on Zoom, or GoToMeeting, or a multitude of other platforms (more on this later). You can text your friends and family to check up on them and share news with them. Janine just received a text message from my sister with a Bible verse (not sure why I didn't get it too?).

This challenging time might tempt us to become modern "stylites," sitting on top of our own metaphorical poles and isolating ourselves from all around. But we must resist that urge, and find new and creative ways of reaching out to each other and to the world around us.