

INTRODUCTION

Robert Frost's much-loved poem *The Road Not Taken* is often seen as a metaphor for life choices. We can only take one of the options in front of us, and whichever one we choose will make a huge difference in our lives. Perhaps for better, perhaps for worse – as the sigh of the traveller at the end of the poem can be interpreted either way.

Those of us who live a single life are only too well aware that we are on the road less travelled. The married people on the other road seem to outnumber us significantly, and our road, the one they have not taken, is wanting wear. We look wistfully, longingly even, at the other road and wish for the comfort and companionship there is on it. Again and again we try to cross over to the other road, but so often our way seems barred. We get scratched trying to push through the brambles and ruefully retreat. And we are stuck, alone, on our single road through life.

Robert Frost made a choice to be on this road, but most of us have not actively chosen to be single. Most of us do not want to be on this road, which is why the road of marriage draws us so much. Perhaps somebody else chose our singleness for us, through a divorce or a broken engagement. Or choosing not even to go out with us. Maybe there was no choice – bereavement left us single again, or some accident, injury or circumstances of our birth has significantly reduced our chances of finding a partner.

But most of us cannot identify a specific reason why we are on this road. Well-meaning friends and relatives ask us “When are you going to get married?”, as if we knew, as if it were something under our control that we can schedule into our busy diaries, and this only adds to our frustration¹.

Choice, if there ever was any, was probably not a massive turning point, but the accumulation of any number of small decisions – not to take that job, to change a hairstyle or to be a member of that church - all of which have influenced the outcome in the same way as a myriad of little streams all gently affect the course of a mighty river.

So we spend the rest of our lives wondering why we're on that road, and what went wrong with our navigation, and whether it was really supposed to be this way. We imagine the lush beauty of the other road, and wonder how our lives might have turned out if we were on it, and we can become jealous of those who are enjoying it. Our friends who are on the other road tell us how wonderful it is, which only makes it more frustrating that we can't join them.

And without noticing it, we can end up paying more attention to the other road than the one we're on. We can fail to notice the dappled sunlight, the moist moss, the fallen, golden leaves crunching underfoot, the birdsong and wildflowers. Or if we do notice, it only highlights our loneliness, as we observe to ourselves that it would be nice to have someone to share the experience with.

It is my observation that many single people spend most of their time in either the past or the future, missing out on the beauty of the present. We dream about how much better our future lives would be if we were able to get over to the married road, or we look back to the fate or choices that led us onto this single one, and we never fully embrace the road we're taking. Thus the road we are on becomes shrunken, drab and empty, meaningless for us except to remind us of the brightness of the road we're missing out on.

¹ See chapter 35 of *Single Mission* by Hawker and Herbert

Until we turn our full attention to this road, the one which we travel now, and resolve that since this is the road that we find ourselves journeying on, we will make the most of this beautiful route and enjoy everything it has to bring us. We may be living in our second-choice world, but that doesn't mean we can't have enjoyable and fulfilling lives in it.

Like us, Daniel was on a road he didn't want to be on. A wealthy, educated, upper class boy who loved his God, perhaps he had dreams of being a politician, a civil servant, or a wealthy and influential individual. He would have expected to find a godly wife, get a prestigious job and a nice house, and settle down to enjoy the good life. He probably thought he was destined to be a man of substance.

Until his country was invaded by a massive army. Daniel, like many other elite youths, was taken captive and shipped to the enemy capital to become a civil servant there. Even though he would enjoy rank, power and prestige, it would come at a price. He would never see his homeland again. He would effectively be a slave. And, in common with current practice at the time, he was probably castrated, so he would never have a family. We'll come back to the significance of eunuchs in Biblical imagery in chapters 3 and 4.

Yet Daniel did not apparently try to escape, or rebel. It seems that he got on with making a new life, no matter how far it was from his dreams. Perhaps he knew that his compatriot and contemporary Jeremiah had sent a letter to the Israelites living in exile in which he prophesied that they should "build houses and settle down, plant gardens and eat their produce..." (Jeremiah 29:4-7). In other words, make the most of it, because you can't go back. Had Jeremiah been using Robert Frost's imagery, he would have told them to commit fully to the road they were on.

Likewise, other characters in the Bible seem to have understood that whatever hand God dealt them, was the one that they should play. Joseph, once he had got out of prison, showed no signs of wanting to return to Israel and get even with his brothers. He embraced his new Egyptian identity, and called his sons Manasseh ("making forget") and Ephraim ("fruitful") to show that he had made a new start, as you can read in Genesis 41:51-52.

Moses, who in a fit of impetuosity forfeited being a prince in Egypt for the life of a desert herdsman, seems not to have considered returning until God sent him, and even then he was reluctant. Mary probably never planned to be the young unmarried mother of the Messiah, but submitted meekly to Gabriel's words. You can probably think of plenty of other examples of God's people who got on with the life they didn't choose.

And that's an inspiration for those of us who are living a life we didn't choose. Because often the alternative, if we're not going to spend the rest of our lives thinking about what the other road might have looked like, is to do something desperate to get onto it, and that can lead us to another path we don't want to be on - the one where we're married to completely the wrong person.

As I mentioned in *Single Mission* – my previous book which I co-edited with Dr Debbie Hawker – I never expected to be still single in my 60s. When I was in my 20s, I assumed I'd get married. In my 30s, I wondered why it hadn't happened yet. In my 40s, I wondered if it would ever happen. And in my 50s I finally became thankful that it hadn't happened! Over the past two decades I've shared what I've learned about doing singleness well in workshops, retreats and conferences, and I now feel it's time to share it with you too.

Helping people learn to be content with the road they are on is important to me because I've found that my walk with God, my own sense of peace and fulfilment, and my social life all improved significantly once I began to embrace my singleness rather than struggle against it. I'm not saying it's

always easy: there are still challenging situations, mostly around how other people treat me, but I've got to the point where I wouldn't change things now, and so I want to share some of what I've learned with you through this book.

In this book we're going to look at the various ways in which we can strengthen our discipleship, well-being and self-esteem so that we are less likely to think "If only I were married this would be so much easier". Sometimes we can become so aware of how hard the single life is that the 'other half' becomes in our minds the solution to everything, when in fact it might not be, and marriage could bring a whole different set of challenges. The more we are fulfilled and contented socially, spiritually, emotionally and (within limits!) physically, the less we are going to be filled with that aching longing for a partner.

We'll take a look at a theology of singleness and find the company of a lot of single people in the Bible whose singleness can go unnoticed. We'll examine the values of society and church which can leave us so excluded, and we'll take a look at that putative 'gift of singleness' that causes us so much confusion. We'll develop strategies for emotional fulfilment and examine what it's like to revisit singleness in later years. And we'll talk frankly about sex, which is all too often skipped over.

"Not another self-help book for singles!" you may cry. Unfortunately, yes. The alternative is for me to write one on 'how to get married', which my own enduring singleness proves I don't know anything about.

But I write this book not simply to help us all hang in there while we wait for our soulmate to arrive. I write it because – although many of us who are currently single desperately want to find a partner – the fact remains that many of us won't, and I have learned that while I'm waiting, I can enjoy the road I am on instead of getting frustrated by it. This is not merely about hanging in there, it's about thriving.

The situation we singles find ourselves in could be compared to a traffic jam on the motorway. Most of us use motorways to get quickly to our destination and cut down on unproductive travelling time. Enjoying the journey isn't the point; getting there speedily is. But sometimes the traffic grinds to a halt and we can all be stuck in first gear for hours. It's then that I turn off the motorway and start to find my way down little country lanes and former A-roads that have been lost to most long-distance travellers. I discover quaint villages, majestic market towns, rolling hills and mature woodlands. Suddenly, the journey acquires character and interest all of its own.

When I was younger, I assumed that I was on the motorway to marriage. But somewhere along the journey I took an exit (I'm still not sure where!) and found myself on the single road. And after a bit of frustration trying to get back on the motorway, or find an equally quick alternative route to my destination, I have found that the single journey is not just something to endure with gritted teeth. It can become something to be enjoyed in its own right.

Hopefully, by the time you've finished this book, you'll have been on a journey that has led you to feeling more positive about being single, and better equipped to handle the difficult bits of it.

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*