

Human Contact

Before the Corona pandemic struck, I was reading two books about our ‘digital age’. One, by the brilliant communicator and maths professor Hannah Fry is called ‘Hello World’ – subtitled ‘How to be Human in the age of the machine’. It is – to quote the blurb – “a wise guide to the benefits – and horrors – of our increasingly data-driven world.” The other, by Microsoft’s president Brad Smith and his senior director of communications Carol Ann Browne has the title ‘Tools and Weapons’ – with its strap-line ‘The promise and the peril of the digital age’. Both books make the same point. Modern technology has transformed the way we communicate with each other which can be both a blessing - and a curse.

So far, in week three of the Corona lockdown, we have been very conscious of the ‘blessing’. Conferences by Zoom and Moodle; conversations (around the world) by Skype; and even the good old telephone coming into its own as families and communities stay in touch. Social media platforms have gone into overdrive; and were Alexander Graham Bell (inventor of the telephone) still around he would have been astonished, having once tentatively predicted that ‘one day every city and even every town’ would have at least one of his devices! In this era of self-isolation and social distancing it has been very much a matter of ‘technology to the rescue’.

But my alarm-bells begin to ring when I hear people suggest (as many have) that this heralds a bright new future in which almost everything is done digitally. No more need to go and see people or have ‘meetings.’ No more passing on of bugs and germs by face to face contact. Won’t it be marvellous for all of us – and the environment – if we simply continue to stay at home and let our computers take the strain?

Alarm-bells because – attractive though that may sound – it ignores the most fundamental feature of ‘being human’: which is, of course, relationship. Every one of us has been made ‘in the image of God’, and as we know from the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity, God is in very essence ‘Relational.’ The whole of the Bible is about relationship of one sort or another (especially God with us and us with each other), and that sort of relationship relies on ‘human connectivity’ – not just mechanical, but face to face, which is very different. A recent online piece about leadership by Simon Barrington makes exactly that point. “Face to face contact and physical delivery are central to our services” he says. “They are core to our purpose and mission”. That’s true of the Church. It is even more relevant to the work of the Rose Castle Foundation, whose residential (‘face to face’) programmes are so basic to the process of Reconciliation.

Over the last three weeks I (like most of us) have had a huge number of conversations by phone, Zoom and Whatsapp, email and so on. Throughout those conversations one thing in particular has struck me. Everyone is longing for the time when we can ‘re-connect’- not just on some mechanical device, but in person. Broadcast worship and live-streamed services are much better than nothing: but they are not the same as gathering together round the Lord’s table for Communion. Waving at parents, children, grand-children and friends on a screen is great: but it can’t compare with giving them a physical hug. There is a lovely book by Norman Autton called ‘Touch’ in which he explores the vital role of touch in healing, nurturing, relationship, happiness and spiritual fulfilment. Amen to that – and I too eagerly await the day when we can actually meet (not just talk) together.

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