

Signs of the Times

(This may not start out sounding very pastoral, but read on – it gets better and should make pastoral sense eventually)

Ushaw College is a big place. Indeed one of our lecturers used to claim, tongue-in-cheek, that it is the only seminary that can be seen from the moon. The focal point for communicating information to the student body was the main notice board on the wall outside the refectory. It was a spot that everyone passed any number of times throughout the day and it was simply a matter of developing the habit of checking the notices on it at regular intervals.

At some point not long after our studies began I became aware that I was missing bits and pieces of information to do with one thing or another, information that I subsequently found had been posted on boards elsewhere. One day I decided to do a count and, almost unbelievably, discovered there were at least twenty-five different notice boards scattered throughout the complex of college buildings! It was impossible to keep tabs on every one of these and consequently it was relatively easy to miss information posted on a board somewhere else throughout the college rather than on the main board outside the refectory. I made the – to me quite logical - suggestion that this board be enlarged and divided into sections and become the single, central notice board for all communications, but no, that was too logical for Ushaw because, after all (in a phrase heard in parishes everywhere), “We’ve always done it this way”! And so the miscommunications continued.

You don’t need me to point out that we are living in an age of unparalleled communication. It was a huge step forward when William Caxton’s printing press replaced the need for a room full of hastily scribbling scribes. Even greater steps were taken with Marconi’s work on radio signals, Alexander Graham Bell’s invention of the telephone, and John Logie Baird’s development of the television. The march goes on with today’s marvels of telecommunication and our total dependence on satellite technology and the worldwide web, not to mention electricity.

One of the consequences of living in an age so dependent on communication is that we are constantly bombarded by information, up to and possibly even beyond saturation point.

Imagine for a moment, if you would, a typical high street in Victorian times. With no electricity, there would be no illuminated shop fronts; no neon signs; no LCD displays; nothing (or at least very little) demanding your attention or aggressively vying for your business and your money. There would probably be one or two advertising boards on the sides of buildings: typically for

cigarettes, or medicines, or cleaning materials, but that would be it. It wasn't yet the age of pressurised commercialism and therefore all you'd see would be discreet notices above shop windows - "Brown's the Baker", "Jones the Butcher", "Smith (Grocer and General Dealer)", "Wilson (Apothecary)" – complemented by discrete displays of goods in each window. Happy days!

In contrast, ours is the age of information technology, we have never been so surrounded by information. It comes at us constantly and from all directions: buy this, buy that; do this, do that; come here, go there, don't go there; look at this, look at that. The skill we therefore have to develop is that of differentiating between the important and the unimportant, the essential and the non-essential.

Advertisers, for example, would like us to consider everything they place before us as important – that's what their industry relies on. I tend to ignore advertising completely though I occasionally allow myself to be entertained by particularly clever or amusing adverts, but only in terms of the entertainment value, not rushing out to buy the product concerned. On the other hand there are some very important pieces of information that we ignore at our peril: "danger: high voltage", "warning: cliff edge", "mine field: do not enter", and a few less perilous but nonetheless important notices like: "wet paint", "no trespassing", "no parking", and "ladies" or "gents".

Surrounded by - indeed bombarded as we are by – so many notices, advertisements, posters, warnings, and various and sundry sources of information both physical and electronic, how do we make sure we don't tune out the things we need to know? How do we make sure that in instantly processing a dozen street signs in front of us, we don't miss the one that says: "one way street – no entry"? When we walk into the supermarket, how do we tune out the blizzard of notices urging us to buy everything in sight, but make sure we see the one that says "caution – wet floor"?

I have a feeling, backed up by observation, that we are actually becoming immune to the information around us. There is just so much of it that it has become ordinary, it doesn't catch our eye anymore, it is part of the background that's there but we take no notice of it. For example...

Before we had automatic closers fitted at St Hilda's, people were for ever leaving the doors open so letting the birds and weather in and the heat out. I therefore had to put signs on the doors asking people to close them – the signs were ignored. So I then had to spend money having door closers fitted and this time notices asking people to allow the doors to close by themselves (so they don't slam), but they ignore those also. I find money left on the piety stall (where it could be stolen) all of twelve inches below a sign saying "Please put monies in the wall box"! Either people read the notices and choose to ignore

them – which is quite an attitude to bring to church – or they clearly don't even see the notices in the first place which, if that is the case, raises the question of how safe they are, out and about on the streets, never seeing warning signs and notices.

And it's the same with the parish newsletter. It's one of the better newsletters in the diocese even if I do say so myself. It's attractive, easy to read, and informative (hence the word *newsletter*), and yet there are some who don't even pick up a copy in the first place, much less read it (and so they probably won't read this either). Consequently when, for example, following swine 'flu guidelines, we asked people to receive communion only in their hand, there are some who continue to receive on their tongue because they have absolutely no idea that they have been asked to do otherwise. So, too, with my many and frequently repeated requests not to disturb other people's prayer by talking in church. It's still going on and in fact I can hear some of the conversations from in the sacristy, that's how loud they are. They are probably the same people who are still receiving communion on the tongue because they never pick up and read the newsletter to know what is being asked. (And yet if I said I was giving away £5 notes after Mass I bet they wouldn't miss that piece of information!)

A major source of information for us is the media – newspapers, radio, and in particular the 24-hour rolling news cycle on television. You don't need me to tell you just how much bad news dominates. Nothing sells newspapers or keeps us glued to our television screens like scandal, sensationalism, disaster and destruction. Good news just doesn't do it. We revel in bad news. The basis of most gossip is knowing something bad or negative about someone that you just can't wait to tell others. Not much gossiping goes on about how good someone is and the wonderful things they do. Good news doesn't make "good" gossip (which is precisely why gossiping is sinful, by the way).

Today we are celebrating what used to be called "Gaudete Sunday". The old Introit of the Mass used to begin: *Gaudete in Domine semper* ("rejoice in the Lord always"). We light the pink candle of the Advent Wreath to signify the spirit of rejoicing, taking us temporarily away from the purple of repentance. The emphasis of the readings today is on good news, *the Good News*¹ of the coming of the promised Messiah in less than two weeks time.

The question for us is how can we be messengers of good news and specifically the Good News of the gospel? How can we ensure that good news (and *the Good News*) dominates in our life? What sources of information do we need to

¹ The word *gospel* is from the Old English *godspell* meaning "good news". In turn, the Latin words *eu* (good) and *angelos* (messenger) give us the word *evangelium* – "good news", hence to evangelise is to bring the Good News of the gospel.

make sure we are not tuning out, not ignoring, so that we are not missing something this important especially to our spiritual lives?

Quite clearly one vitally important source has to be the word of God: our familiarity with God's word in scripture. It was that word, revealed through the Old Testament prophets, which gave the people of God down through the ages the knowledge that a Messiah was promised. And as the signs and the prophecies began to come together, the people knew that the time of his coming was at hand. By Our Lord's time, it was precisely those who had missed the signs – the religious leaders of the people – who also missed the boat, as it were. They were so busy looking for the wrong signs and in the wrong places that they rejected their Messiah, even when he was right there with them, because he didn't fit their mistaken expectations.

As I said before, we are living in an age of unparalleled communication. The question for us as followers of Christ is: to whom are we listening?

- We don't need what the world is trying to sell us and so we need to reject all its temptations and invest ourselves instead in that which will earn an eternal reward.
- The spiritual street we walk down is littered with signs; we have to reject the unimportant and misleading ones and ensure we take notice only of Our Lord who shows us the way, his way.
- We have to read all the notices that Christ has provided for our information, not least scripture, revelation and Church teaching. And we surely can't afford to ignore his (good) news letters, his teachings in the gospels. When we are one day asked by God for an account of ourselves, let's make sure we don't find ourselves saying "I didn't know", "I don't remember being told", "I must have missed that".
- And our prayer life is our 24-hour (good) news cycle – tuning in to God whenever we need to, praying with scripture, listening to his word and then spreading the good news ("gospelling" not gossiping) through the witness of our lives.

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