

In my Midnight Mass sermon I spoke about the changing demographic of Hall Green over the last 10 and more years. This is particularly significant when we look at the number of people of other faith communities who are increasingly becoming our neighbours in Hall Green. One of the ways we are responding to this in our parish is by working together as 'Families Together' - mainly Muslim and Christian families finding things we can share as we meet regularly in church and halls in our special days. This is a challenge, of course, to make friends with those we may not otherwise have talked to. But it is also Gospel stuff. Even Jesus himself was challenged by strangers to show compassion to the Syro-Phoenician, the Samaritan and the Roman soldier.

All of the above is who we are, and, as parish priest, I am continually challenged to balance what is an extraordinarily fulfilling ministry with other more challenging and changing roles. So, on the one hand, I rejoice in the very tradition that places me here, and I see myself doing what others I have respected have done in all sorts of ages. I am reading about George Herbert, poet and priest from the 17th Century. Even in his very different world I find echoes of a way which is familiar: 'Teach me, my God and King, in all things thee to see, and what I do in any thing to do it as for thee.' And sometimes I am deeply conscious of walking with my own father, a parish priest, both full time and in retirement, for nearly 60 years, and saying, 'Well, he would recognise that as familiar, as the right thing to do, as the way to do it.'

Yet on the other hand, here I am, in 2014, typing this on to a screen on a computer which can connect me instantly to any piece of information I seek, to any part of the world. It can enable me to shape in images or words almost anything I could want to say or see. I spend a lot of my week in front of this screen, much of it responding to needs, giving support, organising worship or pastoral care. In essence a lot of the work I do is no different to what George Herbert or Robin Stephenson did. But in superficial ways my ministry is completely different - almost completely unrecognisable. Having the capacity to instantly contact one or more people, to plan things on line, to send instant copies of minutes and rotas, to write and re-write letters and sermons on screen, all this has changed the way a priest relates to the people whom he or she serves.

We talked at our little study group recently about the challenges of communicating in a world of instant communication. What we are finding is that it isn't as easy as it was, even as recently as five years ago, to encourage young people to come out to Boys' Brigade or Girls' Brigade, for example. We wondered if the instant communication that young people have through the internet and social media is hampering groups like these in their efforts. Time will tell. What I think will never go away though, is the value of face to face meeting, both for those in pastoral ministry like myself and for all of us in our relating to friends and family.

I wonder to what extent you, as Readers around this diocese, find that the electronic age is changing the way you communicate, the ways you minister? And in what ways is what we ministers do the same as it always was?

We will never, of course, do without the internet now. But we will also never really make and build relationships unless we meet face to face. In the balance of old and new which we try to strike day by day we have to remember that. A real conversation is worth a thousand emails.

Martin Stephenson
Warden of Readers