Lent Talks 2008 – 6 'The communications revolution'

The runaway success story of our era must be the spread of global networks of electronic communication. A whole new range of possibilities for collaboration between governments, scientists, politicians, educators, scholars, game players, even criminals – now exists. New kinds of business, news-gathering, information sharing, art. New demands for public accountability, global campaigns on issues of concern that were impossible till this decade. Television offers its world view to the public, a view controlled by the owners of the medium. Cyberspace has room for anyone to give their view of the world, for better or worse, to find like-minded others and encounter those one might never otherwise meet. Thus internet has been described as a new utopia – a social reality in which all kinds of ideas and ideals can flourish freely. Utopia means 'no place'. Ability to relate instantly by text phone, video means distance is abolished. The net is placeless. This novelty lets users be exceptionally candid, expressing themselves freely to strangers. A typed conversation is a more direct for expressing thoughts than speech. The act of voicing an idea may arouse feelings, taboos, the caution of leaving things unsaid that can expose one's vulnerability. Posting pictures and writing on the internet can divorce you from the impact of your words, from your feelings. It's a worry with youngsters disclosing intimate personal details and addresses where the wicked can find and abuse them. Too much published information can be dangerous to someone too immature to realise the risk. There's a perverse conviction that freedom of expression means anything goes, that if it can be said, done or seen, it should be. If the media offers unrestrained possibilities, there's no bar to explicit pornography, or brutal violence. Videos of people beaten up, raped, murdered or committing suicide are published. Half of all internet access traffic in the USA is to pornographic websites - dehumanising, both to those who perform and those who can't resist looking. Pornography sacrifices humanity and dignity to this ideology of total transparency. If it can be seen in must be seen. In the eyes of faith we're totally transparent only to God.

Those advocating this total transparency put themselves and their desires in place of God. It's technology's version of idolatry. But it's not the whole story. Russia was saved from military coup in 1993, when the internet was very young, by academics emailing out news before a TV and newspaper blackout could be imposed, giving time for the news to be broadcasted and support rallied behind the rule of law. The publication of weblogs, reporting technical innovation, new science, trends in business, whistle-blowing on human rights abuse, immoral practice in government or industry has created citizen journalism, ordinary folk combining to use their knowledge to campaign for justice and change globally, or debate new ideas and policy before the mass media and government spin doctors can hijack and wring the life out of them. Old monopolies on information possession are challenged or crumbling. More people than ever are involved in shaping the evolution of ideas and actions globally, acting as a counterweight to the often conservative inefficient actions of established government.

In times of disasters, local citizens involved in search and rescue can have survivors' names published before army bureaucrats or news reporters arrive on the scene. Response can be organised to political crises, using mobile camera phones, as we saw recently in Burmese monks' insurrection, making it harder for evil doers to get away with things unquestioned.

There are many excellent as well as terrible religious websites on the net, but all they can offer is information to work with, pointers to religious experience not the experience itself. More accessible than specialist libraries, it's easier to find out about the supermarket of religions – providing that it's better websites you find.

Terrorists, criminals and school-yard bullies can use mobile phones or email for their own purposes. The web can be used to spread hoaxes, fraudulent rackets, slander and scare stories and useless advertising - billions of spam messages a day – slowing down, and even crippling the network. An al Qa'eda associate is currently offering via the web special encoding software to render email or chat unreadable by MI5 or the FBI. There's a hidden battle against both violence and

pornography in cyberspace being waged now, driven by moral consensus on what is dangerous to us all. Religion on the web is marginal to this. Both these evil plagues are a blight on a creative social inventions – a reminder of how readily human beings can, unchallenged, abuse their gift of freedom. You only suppress the evil by banning the means to communicate. It's best to train people to recognise danger areas and avoid them, train them in discernment, moral and spiritual, train them to limit their curiosity, and have clear boundaries to what they hold as sacred. This doesn't abolish dialogue or openness, but acts clearly where danger lies. It's vital for preserving dignity, self-worth and freedom.

The phone and the internet convey the illusion that we can always be up to the minute in the picture, always contactable. The speed of information spread can have a negative impact, as we observe with stock market panics and bank runs. In life and work instant responsiveness is becoming an expectation, with poor consequences for work-life balance. You can have all news at your fingertips, always ready to react. But privacy gets eroded, leaving no space to consider and reflect before responding. The boundaries between public and private self shift until you're left wondering who you are.

The new communication tools tend to inflate one's sense of importance – notice how people on their mobiles walking pay little attention to where they are going, expect others to avoid them. With a phone is sold the illusion of being more capable and powerful in relationships simply because we have the devices and can make them work for our benefit. Propaganda says that with the right tools you can do lots of things at the same time. Science demonstrates this is an illusion. We can do several things at a time, but less well than we can when we concentrate our energies on one thing at a time.

It's true the simplest of phones can be a life saver to granny if she's in difficulty. But useless if nobody's there to answer or the battery is flat. They're only good if they work as intended and used prudently. Yet, how dependent on them we've become so quickly for a sense of who we are and what we can achieve.

Positively, behind the mobile phone millions are employed around the world, to serve half the planet's population - in just two decades! A whole new dimension of inter-dependence has been created, full of challenges and moral problems unprecedented in human history. You can't achieve such progress without trust, openness and transparency, those ambiguous values.

The internet is a visual realm. Seeing is believing. If it can't be seen in some way, it doesn't really exist. We need to take care about what's worth believing. Computer graphic animation, and simulation devices make it possible to create virtual worlds – the simplest we all know, money machines with touch screen icons in place of real buttons to press. At the most sophisticated, 3D animated figures from fiction brought to life, with a vividness that puts traditional cartoons in the 'quaint' category. With tools available there's no limit to what imagination can create, delights or nightmares. For better or worse the individual becomes capable of God-like invention. Players can be who they like and project on to their virtual character the darkest and most brutal wicked aspects of themselves and the loveliest. The dark side inevitably seems to hold the greatest allure however, so game players spend much time rehearsing being bad, playing at violence. The world of film and cartoon entertainment is shot through with elements of fantasy violence and destruction, most of it never quite authentic often exaggerated and in defiance of the laws of physics and physiology, leading people to develop quite an unreal self-estimation where their strength and robustness are concerned. In the real world, people do not jump or fly far through the air or fall far without injury. Not so in dreams, or cyberspace. The games and simulation realm, whether in real life or cyberspace imagination can impart an illusion of omnipotence to players that fits dangerously with natural social interaction.

Massacres perpetrated by youngsters of late may have dysfunctional families or mental illness as driving components, but the crucial factor is the wide tolerance to violence in entertainment and on the net, as part of lives where fantasy acting

out of murderous thoughts and revenge is commonplace. It nurtures desire that translates the virtual into real action. Faith perceives that the worship of illusion, giving fantasy pride of place in life, is like material idolatry a deadly pursuit.

It's argued that gaming isn't socially destructive, but allows players to develop mental and physical skills in complex problem solving through play. But many games re-create society around violent exchanges, and acquisition of combative skills and strategies. Dwelling on the distorted ideas of the world represented in many game scenarios distorts the sense of values acquired, then acted upon. There are areas of gaming concerned with real life, business, sport, managing a team, which certainly do help develop positive social skills and collaboration. Driving, flight, and now surgical simulations, are invaluable in training. These do help gain confidence with the real thing, but any of these devices, as just home entertainment can lead to fragmentation of family and social life which becomes dominated by interaction with a screen rather than a person.

In today's ultra mobile society, separation from kith and kin is commonplace. The internet webcam is a valuable tool for keeping in touch, but can never give the sense of intimacy that belongs to face to face encounter, most necessary for our sense of being human, for which no substitute is adequate.

Faith asks of us – what do we want from our brief sojourn on earth? Are we content to settle for illusory virtual reality, part of the truth or the whole truth in relationships with each other. The internet abolishes distance, but cannot replace genuine intimacy, only produce an unfulfilling distortion of it. That which at one level can enrich our lives also impoverishes them.

Faith in the future will call upon courage, resourcefulness and real imagination to ensure that we do come together and grow close to others and learn how to belong together, work together when near or far away. Communication is more than words or data whizzed around the globe at the speed of light. You can download the Bible, to your computer or your phone, along with prayers and meditations and religious sayings. Sacred words as commodities for consuming

like any other. But consumption doesn't make for a relationship with our Maker, it doesn't turn words into prayer. It's the realm of silence between words and phrases, like the space around a sacred image that conveys or points towards divine mystery. One may use an electronic device in silence, but silence and space for contemplation aren't commodities in the cyber world, they are part of our way of being and becoming human, and their reference point is as much in relationships with others face to face as it is with ourselves alone. Discovering silence together unfolds a whole new realm of meaning and mystery to us. How can people of faith help others to come together and re-discover divine mystery? People think they can believe without needing to belong. It's always been possible to belong without inwardly believing. In this age of individualism one of the great afflictions is loneliness encouraged by the cult of selfhood, of the absolute sovereignty of me, my choices, my taste, my values.

This can be overcome by yielding to the deep longing to open up and seek closeness in relationships, with the risk this entails, because the reward is worth the effort and the alternative no longer tolerable. Faith in the future will give itself to making this happen in every possible circumstance, to building community in new shapes and forms - the greatest of adventures, rediscovering the presence of God in other people.