

The Selfie-Stick and the Sunflower

A sermon by the Rev. Richard Smail, Rousham

A frightful new device has begun to appear on the streets of Oxford, a device which renders tourists even more irritating - and indeed dangerous - than they were before, a device which often causes them (quite obviously) to step backwards into the path of oncoming traffic. It is the selfie-stick!

For those of you fortunate enough never to have come across this new hazard to life and limb, I should explain that a selfie-stick is a metal rod about half the length of a billiard cue which is held in the hand. At the other end is the owner's mobile telephone, which of course contains a camera and faces back towards the holder so that he or she can photograph that subject of constant fascination and enduring delight: themselves! Now it is true that on occasion the owner will stand in a position whereby some beautiful ancient building or other object of real merit will appear in the background, but there in front of it stands the true subject of importance: the person choosing the image: the self!

The cult of self (and the word cult derives from the Latin for worship) seems to be growing in importance in so many areas of modern life. You may not have anything to do with Facebook or Twitter or Instagram (the list goes on) but your children or grandchildren certainly will. "I'm going to let all my friends know what I'm doing." "Here's a picture of my pony." Even - extraordinary as it may seem - "Here's a shot of what I had for my lunch!" No doubt followed by the pithy comment "Awesome!" or "Gross" with five exclamation marks.

Well, it's all very well to make light of such things, but their power is considerable, and that power can become damaging to those who fall under its spell. Once again, like the camera on the selfie-stick, social media tend to turn the attention inward, sometimes in terrible and destructive ways. Reactions of others to what is posted can be positive, but the remoteness of the respondent may allow them to be far more critical - or downright rude or hurtful - than anyone giving their opinion face-to-face. It is a ghastly reminder of the insidious influence of these devices that horribly critical posts have driven several young people to suicide. If one promotes the self so that it is all that matters, then attacks upon it can be literally deadly.

The cult of the self can also be damaging to relationships in other ways. It's very depressing, for instance, to see a whole family in a restaurant sitting silently, each looking at their own smartphone without a word, or even a glance, to the others. At home, the regular punishment for a wayward child used to be, "Go to your room!" I have a nephew of 18, and it is in his room that he longs to be, since that is where his laptop, his iPad and his smartphone are to be found. He's a normal, intelligent teenager, but what he really wants when he's at home is to be alone with his devices. So, paradoxically, the strictest sanction his father can employ is to forbid Matthew to

go to his room, thus compelling him to be sociable with the rest of the family in the sitting room or the garden or somewhere else devoid of electronic devices.

As Christians we are called to imitate the pattern of Christ. We are to learn from his words and to be guided by his actions. Virtually everything Jesus did and said involved other people. The only times when he appears to be alone are when he goes apart to pray, yet there he was in fact sharing the closest of relationships, because he was speaking to his Heavenly Father and listening to his words.

Christ creates community wherever he goes. He does this not by talking about himself, but by reaching out to others, so that they, too, become part of his community. Think, first, of his disciples. These are ordinary Galileans with very ordinary jobs: some are fishermen; one is a tax-collector. They aren't educated and don't understand much of what their master says - in fact he is often irritated by their failure to get the point he is trying to make. So why bother with them? Why not be a charismatic, highly influential preacher on his own? Because he knew that if he did, his teaching would never spread beyond a corner of an obscure Roman province, and knowledge of what he had said and done was likely to disappear as those who had listened to him grew old and died.

Jesus had faith in these rather dense, rather willful followers. He told them things he didn't tell the crowds, because he knew that it was these men - this fledgling community - who would carry his message onward and outward. That is why he stopped calling them disciples - pupils - and began to use the name apostles - those who are sent: they were to be men with a mission.

But first he had to show them that what mattered was community, relationship, and that these things were based on service. In the Gospel story, James and John come to Jesus and ask to sit on either side of him when he is glorified. The other disciples are cross with the pair, so Jesus gathers them and explains that in his community - unlike the kingdoms and power-structures of the world around them: "Whosoever of you shall be the chiefest, shall be servant of all." The basis of the Christian community is to be service, not power. Their focus is not to be inward: they are not to put their own status first, but to look outward to build community and restore relationship by making other people their principal concern.

How might we, who are the heirs of the apostles as followers of Christ, maintain and enrich that sense of community and service which he put at the heart of his teaching? In a famous passage, Christ tells his followers that they are to feed and clothe the needy, take in the stranger and visit the sick and those in prison. (Words, incidentally, which the rich and powerful of Europe might ponder today). But these are actions we are called to perform for people in crisis. There are also ways of strengthening community and cementing relationship which are always available.

In the gospels, Jesus shares meals (much to the disgust of the religious authorities) with those who polite society shunned: 'Publicans - that is to say tax-collectors, such as his disciple Matthew - and sinners.' Through hospitality Jesus is serving those whom others reject and through service he is bringing them into his community and restoring true relationship.

Jesus called the community where men and women who had been excluded were now included 'the kingdom of heaven,' a foretaste of what eternal life would be like. And when we read the gospels carefully we realise that these books are full of moments when true relationship is restored so that the outsider and the marginalised are included in. The blind; the deaf, the lame are healed. Those possessed by demons are set free. Yet it's not just in the narrative: think how many stories Jesus tells about dinners, wedding celebrations, feasting. In that most famous of all parables, the tale of the prodigal son, when the errant boy returns his father doesn't berate him, he commands a great feast, because the community must rejoice over the restoration of relationship.

Here, then, is a means by which we, too, can build community and cement relationship: simply by being hospitable. Food and wine, conversation and laughter: such things are not self-indulgence, when they bring people together and give an opportunity for forms of service which enrich both server and served. In serving and in giving hospitality we forget ourselves, our wants, our possessions, our status, and turn outwards, focusing - as Christ did throughout his ministry (even on the cross) on other people. Hospitality and celebration matter because community and relationship matter, and in providing an opportunity for such things we, too, look forward to that kingdom where the King who reigns is also the servant who serves.

I began this sermon with one image, an image which symbolises to me obsession with the self, and I have tried to show that such an obsession is not merely unhealthy, but that it is also not the way of Christ, a way we are called to follow to the best of our ability. I'd like to end with another image, one appropriate, I hope, to high summer.

Think for a moment of a sunflower. When in the bud, it hangs down and the heart within its husk of green is tensed and turned in upon itself. There's nothing about it to admire: it's just there on its own. But then it opens, drawn upward by the warmth and light of the sun. Its head is raised and its petals turn outward so that it can become what it is meant to be: a glory of God's creation, a glory which leads those of us who look at it to praise him for his handiwork. It has become a thing of wonder, a sign of that abundance of life Christ says he comes to bring. It has a fullness of beauty freely given and thankfully shared and through pollination it gives life to generations still to come. And yet - unlike the camera on the selfie-stick - its gaze is turned, not on itself, as its bud had been, but outward, to provide delight for whoever comes upon it. It, too, seems to find its purpose in service.