

SERMON FOR ST JAMES' DAY | 23.07.23

Acts 11: 27 – 12: 2; 2 Corinthians 4: 7-15; St Matthew 20: 20-28

I was intrigued this week by a radio broadcast about TikTok. For those of us who are just about familiar with the sharing of messages and pictures on FaceBook but for whom Instagram is still a bit of a mystery, this latest form of social media may not mean much! But just so we all know what we are talking about this is one definition: *TikTok is a social media app dedicated to the sharing of short videos. The length of these videos is 30-60 seconds. The average age of TicTokers is 20-30.*

The format lends itself to entertainment and comedy. However, it is increasingly used for 'info-tainment'. 'Influencers' who gain a steady audience on TikTok offer snippets of advice and tips - along with a lot of self-promotion. Beauty, fashion, personal finance, and cooking are all popular topics for these informational videos, increasingly designed to sell products - and make money.

Launched in its present form in 2018, a 2022 marketing report predicted that TikTok users will spend \$3 billion by the end of the 2025. However, like many social media companies, TikTok has been the target of persistent concerns about the potential misuse of the private information that it gathers about its users. This fear has been enhanced by the fact that the majority of TikTok is Chinese-owned...

What interested me most was the length of the videos that are posted – 30 seconds; a minute at most. And the aim is to intrigue the viewer so much in that first minute that they will want to find out more. Once caught the influencer will then produce a series of follow-up videos, not very much longer than the first one, that will reveal a bit more - and a bit more – and a bit more – on the topic being discussed, all in small bite-sized chunks.

The interviewer on Radio 4 was clearly non-plussed by all this. *How can you possibly get any depth, any proper analysis, if everything is reduced to 30 second slices, he asked? And the answer was: well maybe you have to be very smart in summing up the key points in a very short time span. Nobody these days has time to cope with waffle and padding. Cut to the chase, give it to me straight. Spare me the detail...* are the watchwords.

Which got me thinking about the way we share the Christian faith? In hour long services; with twelve minute (ish!) sermons; usually without any pictures let alone videos! And we use poetry; we expect people to work hard at understanding what is going on, in finding meanings. And some of the symbolism and many of the actions are never explained at all!

In today's Gospel, two of the disciples, the brothers James and John have obviously been talking to their mother because here we find her asking Jesus to reserve special places, in fact the best seats in heaven, for her two sons. Better even than that for Peter who was leader of the gang! Of course, Jesus isn't fooled: he knows this request has come from the boys themselves and he talks directly to them afterwards as if their mother wasn't there!

And his reply is one of exasperation: *have you been with me all this time and still you don't understand? Are you willing to suffer; are you willing to give up everything for me?* Yes, they say, as if that is all Jesus is asking of them! And before they have had any chance to digest these answers he is off comparing them with the way Gentile rulers spend their time scrambling for the most prestigious places in the assembly – and telling James and John (and all the other disciples indeed) to behave like servants not like masters.

And how long has my quick summary of Jesus' words taken? A whole lot longer than the Tiktok 30 seconds, that's for sure!

That's the bind. We Christians don't do short; we probably don't do 'intriguing' anything enough. We do long explanations - and we split hairs over the tiniest details if we get the chance, dividing ourselves from one another – Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists – as if these issues are matters of life or death.

And we are reaping what we have sown: if the statistics are right we have largely lost the X and Y generations. We are too slow, too wordy and certainly too demanding. St Paul, writing in our readings today, is right: *we have put our spiritual treasures into clay jars*. No contemporary style, no instant excitement, no chance of making this modern generation sit up and take notice. We simply can't keep up with the Tiktok generation who want the faith all stripped down and available in 30 seconds.

Funnily enough it seems that God never intended that we should try! In fact Jesus berates James and John for wanting instant success – and he tells the disciples to stop smirking because they weren't any better! How often the Gospels describe Jesus' irritation when the Twelve want to send the crowds away or call down fire from heaven on people who don't get it. They were every bit as keen to get quick results as James and John.

But for those who will take time, we hear Jesus saying: *here I am, offering to be a ransom, a hostage, willing to give up my life on the Cross for those who, frankly, don't deserve it. And you? You can't even wait 30 seconds for me to finish the sentence before you are off looking for something else to amuse you.*

It is true, in St Paul's words, that *We have God's message in clay jars* because only then can we be sure that the message is from God and not some bright idea that we have devised to keep busy people entertained! We aren't here because Church is fun or smart. We are here to allow God's spirit to work his transformation. And that takes time. And patience. And lots of getting over disappointment when things don't go as well as we might hope.

Here, on our Patronal Festival, on St James' Day 2023, we come together to celebrate God's slow cooker approach. And I can't think of a better way of doing that than by commissioning seven new eucharistic ministers, five of them from the recent Confirmation course.

And the key text that we used in their training I discovered by accident in San Francisco over twenty years ago. It was written by Michael Kwatera in a small pamphlet called 'Being and Giving the Body of Christ**'. And the whole piece is about 'being': not teaching, not controlling, not being busy, just being – unashamedly loving.**

It reminds us all that Christianity is not really about information, it is about communion: holy communion. We make disciples not by our ability to spell out the truth in 30 seconds or less but by our willingness to exude the love of Jesus. Michael talks about touch – not in the purely physical sense but in the sense of something being 'touching' as in *I was touched by your kindness*. He talks about the way we give ourselves to one another in a way that expresses how important the other person is. It is the antidote to those who make relationships simply to get things done. So he talks about *welcoming people with undivided attention and unmistakable reverence*. It is all about the gift of time to enable God's presence to be felt – and enjoyed.

By chance this week I came across 'the top 10 causes for a longer life'. Somewhere near the bottom of the list were the obvious things like not smoking, not drinking too much, and taking plenty of exercise. At the top of the list for a longer life? The amount of time we give to relating to other people, encouraging them and being encouraged.

That is, ultimately, what makes life fulfilling and Jesus gives us the impatient St James' as our patron saint to remind us to take the slow train, to give each other time, to smile ... and to remind each other that just as Jesus came to show us what God is like – which we call the incarnation – so we are each called to show what Jesus is like.

And how did he do that: by laying his hands on children, anointing the blind, pulling the lame to their feet and allowing himself to be touched by a woman who was incurably ill. And if that wasn't enough, he finally submitted to the soldiers who nailed his body onto the Cross with barely a word spoken – certainly not ones that we can easily understand.

St Francis of Assisi was right: *only use words when you have to*, he said. Much better to be loving, to be willing to serve without being thanked, to find ways of telling people how much you value what they are about even if their lifestyle is completely different from yours. As Michael Kwatera says, *Together you profess your faith and call forth in others an increase in their faith too. The Body of Christ: Amen.*

You touch me by the kind of person you are.

I am immensely proud of our seven new Eucharistic Ministers being commissioned today. I am immensely proud of the members of St James' who exude that loving witness to the Jesus who patiently waits for the right moment to draw us closer to the love of God.

And as a result, I think we can do without TikTok, don't you?