**John 1:1-14**

**Social Media and Mission**

It was distressing last week to hear the news of the teenager Molly Russell who committed suicide and the anguish of her family in their loss. And it was a story that made the news particularly because the family has claimed that Instagram is partly responsible for her death by displaying images and information that, in their eyes, encouraged her to commit suicide.

We can’t go into the rights and wrongs of that particular case. But it does throw up again for us the conversation that is happening around the impact of social media on all of us.

And, of course, the reality is that social media, as a concept, is a neutral one: social media, in and of itself, cannot be either good or bad because it is just a type of technology tool. But social media can be used in a good way or a bad way. It is the users themselves who give value or take away value from the social media platforms.

Just like a car, I suppose. A car is neither good nor bad – it’s just a car. But if it is used to take someone to hospital, for example, then it is used well. But if it is driven at high-speed and knocks someone down, then it is used badly. The value of the car is not inherent in the car itself, but in how it is used. And the same is true of social media: it is a neutral technology that can be used either in a good way or a bad way.

Generally speaking, the Church has been slow to pick up on the power of social media. Many churches have a website but not all of them are of a particularly good quality. And far fewer churches are actively using social media as a focal point of their mission and ministry strategy: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Podcasting and so on…

These are platforms that millions of people around the world are living on nowadays. And if the church wants to engage in effective mission, we absolutely must have a good and professional social media presence. And in doing that, all we are doing is exactly what the church has always done throughout its history: to use the latest technologies available to promote the Gospel. The church has used the printing press, radio, TV to spread the Gospel - and now, in an age of social media, we need to use this new technology too.

And, of course, this is mirroring the mission of God too because, as we heard in our Gospel reading, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God didn’t remain aloof from human culture, human society. Instead, he embraced the form of humanity himself and came and dwelt among us in a way that we could easily understand to show his love to us.

God spoke loudly about his love for us by embracing human culture, by becoming Flesh himself. If we want to speak loudly about God’s love, then we need to find ways to be heard.

And it’s not easy: there are many competing voices for people to listen to nowadays.

It wasn’t so long ago – certainly within living memory for some - that almost everyone you knew went to church. That was for many different reasons, of course: for some, it was about faith, for others, it was the entertainment value of a good sermon, for others, it was a chance to catch up with friends for a bit of a gossip! All the things that motivate us today to come to church were the motivators through the generations. But the big difference is that now, of course, church is not the only – or indeed the main – place to be fed in this way. If you want faith, you can download an App or listen to a Podcast. If you want entertainment, there’s Netflix on all your devices. If you want to catch up with friends, there’s Facebook.

But the problem with many churches is that they still act as if they are the only voice that people are listening to. But that really isn’t the case anymore: we are just one voice amongst many, competing for people’s time and attention.

And, actually, I think that’s a good thing, not least because it is forcing us to up our game and do better in promoting the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The truth is that I have to work harder on my sermons now than ever before because people can now compare the quality of my sermons to thousands of others they find online. We need to work harder at improving the quality of our services because people can now opt to go to any type of church they want or even to participate in worship online. We need to work harder to address the questions that people are actually asking rather than the ones we think they should be asking. We need to be looking at people’s lives; their anxieties, their agonies, their concerns, and presenting the Gospel in a way that speaks into their lives, rather than just presenting an irrelevant message.

Isn’t that what Jesus himself did? The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and brought healing and peace to people’s lives in a way that they really needed…

As Christians, we believe that God can make a profound difference to our lives and we simply must present that truth to people in a way that actually means something to them. Because the reality is that people who don’t go to church rarely think about church, or what we stand for. The average unchurched person will think about church as often as you think about going to a Hindu Temple, which, I imagine, is not very often…

Too often, we think that people will turn to the church when they have a crisis in life. But, to be honest, they are more likely to download a Mindfulness App or go to a Yoga Class.

The harsh truth is that, for many people, the church and the Christian faith just seems irrelevant. And we need to do everything we can, in this fast-changing world to impress on people the relevance of church and the relevance of God for their lives.

That is what we are about as a church, and using social media is a key way of doing that…

One of the things that stops churches from engaging with social media is the fear that if we put our ministry online, then people will stop coming to church. If we put sermons online, or do podcasts or Bible Studies, why would people bother coming to worship in the building? Surely they will stay at home instead. But I think that is a misguided idea, for a number of reasons

Firstly, most people do not see a divide between the digital world and the real world. Either doing something online or engaging with people in real time is just not at the heart of how people make choices in life. I don’t stop seeing my friends in real life just because I am friends with them on Facebook! The real-time friendship and the Facebook friendship complement each other; one does not replace the other.

Secondly, people are increasingly checking out a church online before they decide to come to it. And not just once, either. People may follow a particular church online for 6 months or more before deciding to come along for a worship service. So, in that sense, a good online presence is actually the front door to the church through which people come in rather than the back door of the church through which people leave.

But thirdly, and crucially, people are genuinely hungering for a deep sense of community. And most people know that this involves face-to-face engagement rather than virtual engagement through a screen. Our Mission Statement at St. Andrew’s, on the inside of your pewsheet, is very simple: “Building community together on the values of Jesus”. And community only becomes real when we share our lives together; when we meet together, talk together, laugh together, cry together, when we share meals and stories and concerns and celebrations. That depth of community can be supported by good use of social media, but it can never be replaced by it…

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us…” God came down to earth in Jesus and gathered a real-time community around himself as he interacted face-to-face with human communities. No amount of social media usage can develop that type of meaningful community.

So if we are wanting to use social media to enhance community, but not replace it, what sort of things can we do effectively through its use as a tool for mission? Well, it has to be more than a glorified Newsletter! We don’t just use social media to advertise events.

I want to briefly suggest 4 good uses of social media as a tool for our mission at St. Andrew’s.

**1. Have meaningful conversations**

Through social media, we can engage with people who we might never have the opportunity to be in the same room as.

Our Facebook Group has 350 members, many of whom are in regular conversation and dialogue about church and faith.

Our Podcast, launched at the end of December, has people listening and interacting from across the UK, the United States, Samoa, South Africa, mainland Europe and Barbados.

Some people will talk through social media in a way that they never would in person.

So these conversations are building meaningful relationships.

**2. Learn what’s happening in people’s lives**

Social media is a tool for listening as much as speaking. And as we listen, we can learn about what is important to people, what people are celebrating, what losses they are mourning.

The art of using social media as a tool for mission, I think, is to read and listen more than we post or tweet.

In that way, we will learn about people, learn more about our community, and crucially, gain a sense of what we should be praying about.

**3. Share resources**

There are so many great resources online for the faith and social media gives us the opportunity to let others know about them.

And, of course, we can give away our own resources too, for others to use through posting sermons, Bible Studies and so on. And over the next few years, we will be giving away more and more of our material.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, using social media as a tool for mission can…

**4. Remind people that we care**

People need to know that the church is there for them. People need to know that God cares for them, and so do we.

If we are only in contact with the community for one hour on a Sunday, then there is little sense in which we are showing people that we really do care. How much better to create daily opportunities to interact with people and to remind them that St. Andrew’s is here, and active and a developing community?

That’s just four ways to use social media as a tool for mission: I’m sure there are many more…

But one thing is for sure – the world has changed so dramatically since the invention of the Internet in 1990; still less than 30 years ago!

And the Internet is not going away any time soon!

The world has moved away from the idea that the only way to find out about the Christian faith is to go to a local building that is open for a set few hours each week.

God is open for business 24/7. He always has been, of course. But the digital world has made that an even greater reality for millions and millions of people - and the church will neglect this at its own peril.

So, we are all about building positive relationships in community with one another and building community together on the values of Jesus. And that has always been God’s mission too, expressed most clearly through the Word made flesh and dwelling amongst us.

And as we seek to build that faith community, we need to see social media as our friend, not our enemy. We need to embrace technological advances for the positive benefits they can bring, not fearing the negative.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us”: God embraced human culture to show us how much he loves us.

As we seek to share God’s love with others, we have a great opportunity to do so through social media; not replacing face-to-face community, but enhancing it.

Let’s do all we can to dwell amongst our community, sharing the love of God with everyone.