

# Along the track

## Going Viral

Isn't it amazing how many times we see the expression 'going viral'. It is supposed to be a feature of modern social media. When something goes viral, it spreads to a very large number of people in just a short period of time. But such fame can be fickle – we can probably only recall less than a handful of them after a short period. Going viral is not a sure foundation for fame or success.

I have often thought that Jesus must have been the first figure to 'go viral'. We are told that, even though Jesus told the lepers he had just healed to tell no-one, 'yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses (Luke 15:5)'. Matthew wrote that 'news about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralysed; and he healed them (Mt 4:24)'. And again, 'in his own city, news of this spread through all that region'. Mt 9'. Mark writes that news about Jesus spread so widely that Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere (1:45).

Despite such instant fame, despite the huge crowds who came to see and hear him, despite the healings, despite the message that attracted so many, they left him, moved on to other things or they simply went back to their old ways. In his hour of greatest need, very, very few people were with him, not even his closest friends. Going viral didn't help all that much. Something else was needed.

With the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the message went viral again. In the early centuries Christianity was an explosive, viral movement that spread with extraordinary speed. It captured minds and hearts. Persecution could not stop it. In fact, it often helped to spread it.

But today, the Gospel is no longer spreading like wildfire throughout the western world. In Africa and Asia, yes but not in the west. Christianity is not capturing minds and hearts as it once did. In the West, has Christianity become so institutionalized that it no longer grips us with the excitement and the spirit of those early years? In those times the message spoke to the minds and hearts of the people in various lands and many cultures. It spoke to the situation they lived in, it gave them direction, it spoke to their hopes and dreams about who they were and what they might become, what they might be called to do, about what ultimately matters. It gave them a sense that they were loved and a passion to go out and tell others the same.

Perhaps we might ask ourselves whether it has morphed into what Pope Francis suggested Europe has become when he addressed the EU Parliament last year:

*Europe seems to give the impression of being somewhat elderly and haggard, feeling less and less a protagonist in a world which frequently regards it with aloofness, mistrust and even, at times, suspicion. We encounter a general impression of weariness and ageing, of a Europe which is now a 'grandmother', no longer fertile and vibrant.*

Sometimes when institutions grow large, much energy and resources can be spent on preserving the institution rather than on what it is a vehicle for. Pope Francis has been called 'a radical' because he wants us to return to our roots, to reflect on the Gospels, and how their message relates to our world today. The Pope says that: "I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security." Out on the streets and at our very door people are starving. Jesus still says to us, "give them something to eat." They are not starving only from lack of food but for the things that nourish their souls.

We can spend too much time pondering about the things that mark out the boundaries of our faith and practice – the things that separate our group from others. We can do that rather than asking, do we have a passion for God and God's ways and for our fellow human beings of whatever persuasion? Surely that passion ought to be what marks us out.

The early Church trusted the Spirit that Jesus had promised them. That trust led to an unpredictable journey at times, a pretty wild ride – good times and bad, persecution as well as peace and harmony. Jesus said 'The Spirit blows where he wills' – and that's not always where we want to go, or how we think things ought to be. Since those early times, the Spirit calls us to look outwards, to ask who in our world are in need of 'bread', who needs healing, freedom, justice and love, and to ask how can we reach out to them. The Spirit asks us to proclaim the Gospel boldly by going out to them.

Writing to the Galatians, St Paul says, But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)

When we reflect on what is happening in our world, on the violence and injustices, we are nonetheless surrounded by people of the Spirit. Go through that list of St Paul and think of people you meet, even daily, who radiate one or more of these qualities. Ordinary people who may never make the headlines but who, because they try to be open to the Spirit, are the leaven in our society. Give thanks for them.

Give thanks too for the Spirit who shows us in countless ways that God accepts us, even with all our warts and failings. We are deeply loved. Go out and tell others about that too.

Regards  
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