

Faith in Culture “Would Jesus have a Facebook profile?”



Invite everyone with a phone which connects to the internet to wave it in the air. We live in an increasingly connected world. Just this week I saw photos from my parents in remote South Wales, arranged a catch up with friends visiting New Zealand later this month, Facetimed my sister in the supermarket and my husband as he drove home, watched youtube clips, and followed the news about the skycity convention centre fire, all from the comfort of my home. The indispensability of the internet in our daily lives means that we don't often get the time or space to reflect deeply on its influence. Nor do we necessarily consider the ways our faith can be engaged in this medium.

This morning I want to briefly explore the cultural phenomenon that is social media, the connectedness that characterizes our digital activity, some of the darker implications of the internet, and finally, how we can use the internet to enrich our faith, to have meaningful conversations with others about the Gospel and the story of Jesus Christ, and how we might find it useful to switch ourselves off from being online from time to time.

Internet – pros and cons



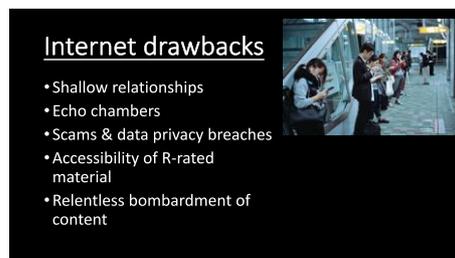
Pros

- Connectedness, global is local, we can expand our perspectives and learn and appreciate more about the world and other people. The online network means we can have ongoing relationships with people from all over the world. We are aware of what's going on instantaneously and

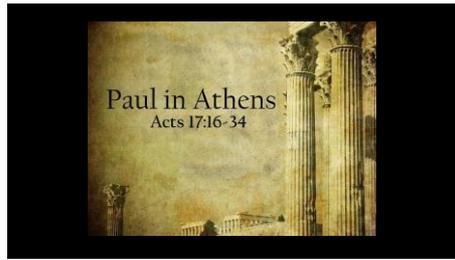
can respond in that moment. We can grow in our understanding of so many different perspectives, customs, and ways of living.

- Access to information and resources – online shopping, podcasts, ebooks, givealittle pages. Powerful search engines provide us with information and you can even do university courses online. We can know so much, there is no excuse for ignorance about current affairs, or for being unable to do your Christmas shopping in time any more. The internet offers tools for growing spiritually as well, apps such as “Pray as you Go”, daily readings, podcasts, blogs from Christian leaders, there are many ways we can be equipped by online resources for growing as disciples of Jesus.
- Convenience – the world is at your fingertips 24/7

Cons



- Shallow and transitory relationships – is it real or Insta-real? Hiding behind anonymity. Social media can form a barrier to authenticity as people can curate only the image that they want to project rather than their genuine reality.
- Echo chambers, only ever engaging with like-minded perspectives, and we see this in the rise of sectarian groups claiming supremacy and phenomenon of online trolls.
- The rise of online scams and hacking, viruses and malware. What is happening to our information? Cambridge Analytica scandal demonstrated that data is a valuable commodity and nothing is free or no strings attached
- Accessing material that is damaging – x-rated material, addictive content
- Bombarded with content all day, every day, relentless. The news cycle is no longer hourly on the radio and a 6pm bulletin – we have a continuous stream of news, both significant and banal and it can become overwhelming and we begin to screen out all of the information.



Let's turn to the text describing Paul's encounter with the people in Athens. Paul has been travelling throughout the Ancient Near East, where he'd met with varying degrees of hospitality and hostility. From Thessalonica, through Berea, finally to Athens, where he spent time walking around and getting a good feel for the place. He spoke in the synagogues and in the marketplace, and whenever and wherever he got the chance, he preached about Jesus. And yet his approach was captivating and as Michael Frost, Australian missiologist would describe it, "winsome" and he was invited by a group of Philosophers to a meeting of the Areopagus, a sort of council of the elders of Athens, to present them with these "strange new ideas".



Paul described to them his observation of how serious they were about religion. "I see that in every way you are very religious". He respected their culture and their beliefs and looked for common ground to be able to share his dramatic story. He was able to link the story of Jesus with the culture of the Athenian people and to bring the gospel alive to a hungry and curious society. In a city where there were idols everywhere, Paul's declaration that "the Lord of Heaven and earth does not live in temples built by hands" and "he is not far from each one of us" must have sounded so intriguing and yet paradoxical to his audience. Not everyone who heard his message responded kindly, but the writer of Acts records there were a few men and women who became followers of Paul.

I wonder whether there are some lessons we can learn from Paul's encounter with the Areopagus in Athens for our own sojourns on the internet.

The Internet is like a city



I'd like you to imagine for a moment that the Internet is a sort of city – just like a geographically located town, the internet has marketplaces and stores, places for meeting others, schools for learning, places to have fun, but also some dark alley ways and decidedly seedy zones where you don't want to stumble down. Perhaps we could call it, New Athens. Paul's experience in Athens reflects the world we see online.

Acts 17:21 (NIV)

"All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas."

I love the NIV translation of 17:21 – “All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.” Doesn't that just sum up the world of surfing the internet?

Here's how I observe Paul engaging in the conversation that is on top for those around him. How he makes his faith relevant and real to the people who are searching for meaning.

Pauls' approach to the Athenians

- He understands the culture
- He is respectful
- He looks for common ground

- He gets to know his context – he walks around, observes and engages with the people around him.
- His approach is respectful and takes into consideration what he has seen and heard, referencing their own poets
- He goes for common ground, looking for ways to answer the big questions with the big story of God. Verse 24 proclaims “The God who

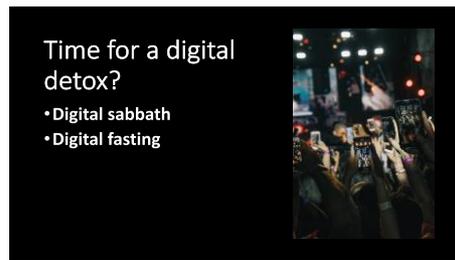
made the whole world...” and verse 25 “he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else”.

- Only once he has achieved these things does he start to drill down into the details of what God has done in Jesus and what that means for those who hear his message.

I think these are really useful guidelines for us as we navigate ourselves online. Just as Paul engaged with those around him and in the cultural framework of their daily lives, we too engage with those we relate to online: friends and family on social media, colleagues in work emails, comment threads on forum groups with strangers, potential partners on online dating apps.

Paul remained respectful of the people and tried to make connections that were meaningful to them. Today, we are still searching for purpose, for relationship, for contentment, but we are more frequently doing it on the internet. Whether that is by listening to inspirational podcasts and following Instagram celebrities, or dabbling in online dating, or binging on Netflix. So how can we connect the story of Jesus with these common online activities? And in light of this sermon series, a reframing of that question is “How can we be salt and light in this digital city?” If Jesus says that we are light that shouldn’t be hidden, how do we bring that light into the online realm? Do we see our activity on the internet as an opportunity to witness to Jesus and also to demonstrate Christlike characteristics such as compassion, forgiveness and joy?

I don’t have any easy answers to these questions, but I am encouraged by the example of Jesus and of Paul. They didn’t shy away from rolling up their sleeves and getting involved in the culture around them. Perhaps, if we’re wanting to bring our distinctive voice to the conversation online, taking a leaf out of Paul’s preaching book and going for big overarching connectivity before entering into specifics is a good starting place. He proclaims that “God gives everyone breath and life and everything else...we are God’s offspring”.



Ultimately though, a life lived in virtual reality is not the life that we were designed to live. We've all seen people in the midst of what should be a profound or beautiful experience too busy trying to capture the moment on their devices to appreciate what is going on around them. Or the schools like Dio which have banned cell phones during break times because they were stopping the students from building relationships face to face. Lynne Baab, author of a number of books including on Sabbath and digital media, advocates for both Digital sabbaths and Digital fasts. She suggests that digital sabbaths are regular times away from technology, to rest from the bombardment of connective noise. Perhaps this could be done for a certain period each day, or for a day each week. A digital fast, on the other hand, is perhaps a more intentional putting aside of all things technological for a set period to focus on listening to God for a specific situation. We might call it a detox these days.

Both of these disciplines help us to continue to engage in the real physical world, in God's beautiful creation, and to hear God's voice in the quiet and away from the clamour of our phones, pings of notifications and relentless chatter of the online network. To paraphrase Elijah, God was not in the earthquake, nor the fire, nor the email notification.

I captioned this sermon, "Would Jesus have a Facebook Profile?" And the answer is I don't think he would. Jesus was more interested in being present in the moment. But that doesn't mean people wouldn't have been talking about him online, perhaps sharing photos of feeding the 5000, or livestreaming the Sermon on the Mount.