

## Stay Connected

Whatever did we do before mobile phones? Go anywhere where people gather - on a bus, in a cafe, in the park, on the train - anywhere and everywhere everyone is on the phone either speaking, texting, googling, using social media, playing games, taking selfies. It's difficult to remember what life was like before we had these all-purpose devices. Does anyone remember trying to find a red phone box in order to make a call while away from home? Or having to go to the library to find a reference book or encyclopaedia in order to research a topic? It seems light years away. These days it is so important to stay connected with people by texting, phoning, emailing, or using social media. A survey in the States found that teenagers in the US spend an average of nine hours a day online or using their smart phone. Even 8-12 year olds spend six hours a day. Still, when I think of it, I recall regularly spending two hours a night on the phone to my friends when I was a teenager until my mother would shout "I hope I'm not paying for this call!"

Staying connected with others is of central importance to human thriving and well-being even if the people we are connected with are not those of our family immediately around us but friends a long way off. I was in a cafe recently reading an ebook on my iPhone and was amused when I looked up to notice the family of five at the next table totally ignoring each other but all absorbed in their own phones and in their own little world. The phone has changed the way we relate to people close to us. A mother told me she was driving her daughter and a friend home from school and noticed it was very quiet in the back of the car. "Are you two alright?" She asked. "Yea, we're just chatting" came the reply. Though the two girls were sitting side by side they were not talking but texting each other. I guess that was a way to be sure Mum was not part of the conversation.

Human beings need to be connected to each other, to communicate on an intimate level in order to stay sane. Prisoners held in solitary confinement away from any human contact often develop odd behaviours such as talking to themselves, pacing their cells and rocking back and forth for hours on end. Human beings need to be connected in order to maintain their humanity. We may wonder how silent orders of monks and nuns manage so often to stay cheerful, sane and balanced as human beings. This is because studies show that more than 90% of human communication is non-verbal. In the 1960s a professor of psychology, Albert Mehrabian, did research into the factors affecting the success of travelling salesmen. He found that only 7% of their credibility depended on the words they

used while 55% was down to their body language and 37% to the tone and music of their voice. Over the years, monks living in silence get to read the subliminal signs of each other's behaviours, gestures and facial expressions so accurately that, in time, they get to know pretty much exactly what others are thinking without a word being said.

Staying connected is the theme of the Gospel today too. Here it is the overwhelming importance for us Christians of staying intimately connected to Christ Jesus because he is the vine through whose vessels his divine lifestream flows into us, his leaves and branches. You only need to go for a walk at this time of year to notice how beautiful fresh green leaves are just coming out on the trees and bushes and how that wonderful new life seems to have sprung from plants that only a few weeks ago looked quite dead. Thus nature is a sermon on death and resurrection, the seasons of the heart and the hope that springs eternal.

You might also have noticed on your walk, where a twig has been snapped but not broken off the tree. Being now cut off from the lifestream, it has withered and is dying. So it is with us when we are cut off from the life of Christ either by giving up the practice of our faith or by becoming cut off in some way from the Christian community to which we belong, as happens, for instance, when children nurtured in the sacramental life of the parish and in the sustaining ethos of their Catholic schools leave that environment and grow away from their roots in the faith as they make their way in the world and succumb to its soulless materialism.

We are grafted into Christ and his life through the Holy Spirit by our Baptism and Confirmation. When we come here on Sunday we are fed and watered with the very life of Christ through his word, through the Eucharist and through the active love and faith of those around us who make up his body. Here we stay connected; here we are grafted into the lifestream of grace that is essential if we are to grow, blossom and bear fruit as disciples of Jesus. As long as we remain connected to this root, no matter how much and how deeply the trials of life may prune us, we will continue to grow. In fact, Jesus implies - and I'm sure it's true - that we will be strengthened and become wiser and more resilient through this pruning and bear even more fruit, as happens with plants that are pruned, for, as Jesus says, "whoever remains in me bears fruit in plenty".