

## Spam, Emmaus and getting the Right Message

Email provides daily evidence of the generosity of humanity. Why, only yesterday, amongst eighty unsolicited emails, various 'Hot Russian Babes' (their description, not mine) offered me shared sleeping arrangements; other correspondents were keen to 'hook up' (whatever *that* might mean...) and a Christian business person very kindly wrote several times to say they have \$46 million dollars and wanted to share half of it with me. They were all 'reaching out' as the latest cliché has it, and *reaching out to me*. It's hard not to feel touched.

A very few of you here don't do email. But many of us do, and unless we have only recently adopted an address, the chances are that we receive a good deal of spam. I saw a claim that spam accounts for well over 90% of all email traffic.

Once your address reaches someone who has no personal interest in 'reaching out' to you, but only in exploiting you, the battle is virtually lost.

There are nasty programmes that search the web for your email address and then harvest it, and once the genie is out of the bottle, there is no getting it back. Your address is then passed around and spreads unstoppably: sex, drugs, home improvement plans, conspiracy theories, free money and things to increase your personal magnetism beyond all imaginable bounds, simply flood in.

This unintended consequence of email has led to anti-spam software, some free but the best ones you have to pay for. Another new, unanticipated, industry. All to help protect us from manipulative Hot Russian Babes (and presumably their equally hot brothers); from, also, absurdly generous chums with millions they wish to share with us, and from many others whose offers and enticements you are probably familiar with.

At my workplace we recently switched to a new and ferocious anti-spam tool. It takes no

prisoners. It shoots first and asks questions later. So, very many *legitimate* emails get sent into the spam folder, including some from clergy colleagues here, who unexpectedly find themselves in the company of those hot babes and purveyors of illicit substances, thus fulfilling, in cyberspace terms, a gospel precedent of hanging around with sinners and other low life.

Once a week I am meant to go through upwards of 500 emails in the spam folder to check for legitimate messages. There are always some to be found. Funnily, I quite like doing it. It reminds me of the parable of the Good Shepherd. I leave the flock in the in-box to seek for the lost sheep in the spam. *Except* – the flock, too, has its problems. Not only does the ferocious spam programme steal away some legitimate email, it also, inexplicably, let's through some of the bad boys. We have to stay on our toes. And if you are new to all this, please remember the basics: don't open attachments or follow links where you do not know the authenticity of the sender. And even the sender can be wearing disguise, appearing as a name in your address book (and so seeming to be safe) whilst all the time being a wolf in sheep's clothing.

You are not here for advice on internet security. Does this, you ask, have anything to do with why we have decided to meet together on a Sunday morning? Let's see.

Spam – the product – first hit the shelves in 1937 and this year celebrated its 80th birthday. It is reckoned that we have bought nearly 8 billion tins of it. It comprises pork with added salt, potato starch, sugar and sodium nitrate. Some wags have said that SPAM stands for 'Something Posing As Meat'. Its use for describing unsolicited, junk, email came about in the 1990s, inspired by the Monty Python sketch which featured hordes of Vikings in a London greasy spoon where everything on the menu included the ubiquitous Spam. There was no escape from it.

Religion, too, has its spammers and spam. Unsolicited offers designed to trap the inexperienced and unwary: those who desperately seek answers and healing and fulfilment – so much so that the usual anti-spam faculties get by-passed.

Some religious spam is blatant: think of the selling of indulgences to gain remission from God's punishment; think too of the religious TV channels of today that offer guaranteed blessings and godly solutions in return for money (*All cards and PayPal accepted; instalment options available*).

Other forms of religious spam are not so blatant, but on examination are as fake and as dangerous. Spam religion is interested in control and not freedom; its morality is tightly defined in conventional terms; conformity is emphasised, narrow roles for the sexes are maintained, rational thought is discouraged and God, it asserts, communicates exclusively through texts (sacred ones that is, not the SMS variety).

Hymns can contain dodgy ideas and dodgy theology and impart dodgy views. Think of them as church spam. Our first hymn today was written by an accomplished hymn-spammer, Charles Wesley. It is said he fired off at least 6000 of them. He was concerned with 'sinless perfection'. His hymns contain a lot about suffering and sin figures heavily. Not untypical of the time, not untypical of today, yet it seems to be spam-like in this sense: battering our senses with a subliminal message which can be very costly and damaging. (As it happens, I very much like this hymn – '*Dark and cheerless is the morn unaccompanied by thee*' is a hauntingly beautiful line for example. But in the next verse: *Visit then this soul of mine, pierce the gloom of sin and grief*'). Not much mention of original blessings, or the unconstrained delight our Creator may take in each of us.

The lesson from contemporary spam is that some spam-filters dispose of legitimate messages and sometimes let through the dodgy stuff. I think there is a parallel in the life of Christian faith. Our spam-filters are not pieces of software but rather that mixture of experience, intelligence, emotion

and observation which we scrape together as we progress through life. Not always reliable, but really all we have, and sometimes very reliable.

Common sense, which we might apply to the rest of life, we sometimes put on a puzzling hold in matters spiritual. How else do we account for what some people believe, what they take 'as gospel' (we might say) from religion's functionaries and purveyors, especially where clearly harmful and oppressive?

One of the things I value in our liturgical life here [at St James's] is that for the Eucharist we surround the altar and *receive the sacrament standing*, not kneeling. I know that it can be said that to kneel shows respect for God's presence in that sacrament. But I like better the sense that God invites us to stand on our feet and to engage with Him/Her in a serious, grown-up way. Similarly, I am certain that every one of us is required, by using the gifts of reason and wisdom as far as we can, to develop our spam-spotting faculty; to learn to spot the fake from the genuine; to test the claims and assertions of others against our own insights and experience, to read scripture with these same skills. In these ways, we shall get better at spotting the spam in society, in the church, in the institutions and ideologies of our day. And in ourselves.

But what about those *legitimate* messages that we don't see, that our over-active or badly calibrated anti-spam preoccupations may cause us to miss?

*"Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?'"* [From this morning's Gospel, Luke 24].

Developing the ability, in all departments of life, to spot the dangerous and fake is essential. So,

too, is *knowing* what is real and good when we encounter it. This morning's gospel is curious. Did Jesus conceal his identity, or were those on the road to Emmaus simply not seeing what was before their eyes? They were preoccupied, for sure, by recent events.

*And we are often preoccupied*, and perhaps miss those messages – reaching us from people and events, from circumstances and coincidence – which form part of God's never ending disclosure of God's own self.

*“When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him...”* [today's Gospel, Luke 24.30-31]. A conventional point, for the preacher to make here, is that the Eucharist is supremely important in encountering Christ. But let this *'being at table'* and *'blessing and breaking'* serve as a metaphor for something beyond the comprehension of those 'hot Russian babes' and the whole company of spammers: that in sharing our lives with one another, seeking to love one another as Christ said we should, in risking our own brokenness (repeatedly, very often) – that in and through these things, our eyes are likely to be opened, the real message perceived, the wonder of this human adventure more fully experienced. Amen.

Hugh Valentine 2017