



TO BE SEEN OR TO BE KNOWN

Recently, a friend told me that on average he receives on his mobile phone 120 twitter messages a day. For those of us not quite up with this development in information technology, Twitter is a web-based means by which you can let any number of people know the latest news that is occurring in your life. You enter a short message, like, "John is enjoying a walk in the park" and immediately all those on your contact list are made aware of this significant event!

Even though I am someone who enjoys text messaging friends, the thought of receiving over a hundred twitter messages every day astounds me. We seem to live, however, increasingly in a cultural climate where many feel an extraordinary need to let the world know what they are doing. There seems to be an almost desperate need for us to 'be seen.' We can be seen by thousands of people on the social network website, Facebook; all those 500 friends of our own hundreds of listed friends can see us. Many put forward their inmost thoughts on internet blog sites to be seen by millions of people. In the Sunday papers we are titillated by the social pages where the fashionable are seen at the most sought after parties held during the previous week. And who of us does not from time to time glance at those accounts of which celebrity has been seen where. The ideal of the celebrity seems to saturate the media throughout. We want to become a celebrity, someone seen by all. Reality shows are curious not only because of their often banal content but because of the desperation of so many to be on them and thus to be seen by everyone. Even the TV show of several years ago, "The Abbey", which focused on four women's experience of life in the Benedictine convent near Wollongong, attracted some 6000 enquirers whittled down by the producers to 700 interviews before the selection of the participants was made.

We live in a media saturated age in which there seems to be such a desperate need to be seen by others. Are we that anonymous to one another that we have come to this?

We want to be seen but do we really want to be known? To be seen and to be known are not quite the same thing. It seems that to be seen has come to be more important than to be known. In fact, we actually find that the mark of our time is a critical tension: the need to be seen on the one hand, but the fear of being exposed on the other, the fear of being truly known in all our vulnerability. Thus, in the midst of this most delicate of tensions we actually find ourselves on a very harsh tightrope, and one often enough with very sad and tragic consequences – even as we have seen recently on 2Day FM radio in Sydney when a 14 year old was unethically quizzed about her sexual experience as she and her mother sought the advantage of concert tickets.

What do we really want: to be seen or to be known? To be seen is relatively easy. To be known is a completely different situation. To simply be seen by all is to be known by no-one. Perhaps many of us are afraid of being truly known; that is why we prefer to be simply seen.

Yet, we know that to be known by another is, in the end, that which alone satisfies us. We cannot be known though without allowing another to know our hungers, our deepest needs

and where and how we find ourselves vulnerable. As Thomas Merton, the great spiritual writer of the 20th century, once wrote,

I do have questions and, as a matter of fact, I think a man is known better by his questions than by his answers. To make known one's questions is, no doubt, to come out in the open oneself. I am not in the market for the ready-made and wholesale answers so easily volunteered by the public and I question nothing so much as the viability of public and popular answers, including some of those which claim to be most progressive.¹

A truly satisfying life thus calls us beyond simply been seen. It invites us to be known. To be known not by everyone, but by a few – a few who know us exactly as we are in all our hungers, in all our needs, in all our vulnerability.

Do we want to be seen? Or do we want to be known? In a sense, I think this is the question at the heart of our encounter with Jesus. Jesus comes before us and asks, what is it that we are truly wanting? What are we truly hungering for?

Jesus does not just see us. Rather he knows us. He knows us because he knows our hungers. He invites us to know ourselves as he knows us. He invites us into a life in which we are truly known, known to ourselves, known by him, without fear.

Bread which nourishes and sustains, not circuses which parade and display, is what we are given in him. True reality not virtual.

Father David Ranson
Academic Secretary
Senior Lecturer in Spirituality
Catholic Institute of Sydney

¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1968), v.