"I/thou" relationships in the electronic age – is the internet the preacher's friend or foe?

 When Jewish theologian Martin Buber published his famous book "Ich und Du" in 1923 he made the important point that Christian faith is based not on "I/it" but the more interpersonal language of "I/thou". Existence is encounter. God is not an object but He is a person. We relate to God in this way because God internally relates within himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At the heart of the universe is an interpersonal God and all human relationships which flow from this foundation.

I have been thinking quite a bit about the role of modern technology and the preacher's role. As I have done so, Buber's important book has been ringing in my ears. A couple of recent encounters have stimulated my thinking.

The Medium and the Message

First, at the Evangelical Homiletics Society meeting which I attended in Chicago recently there were a number of good papers on the relationship between the preacher's task and the use of the internet. For some, relationship is *so* important that even recording sermons, let alone uploading them for a world-wide audience, spoils the preaching beyond redemption. I partially agree. Preaching is intended to be relational. If, as Marshall McLuhan famously stated, *The Medium is the Message* then the medium of the internet has deleterious effect on preaching. The message communicated by the internet is one of passivity, ultra-selectivity and independence. Preaching should engage, it should interact, it should connect *with people!* Thus, for some, the internet is an enemy of good preaching.

On the other hand, some have emphasised the pedagogical benefit of the internet. After all: reading is a highly selective and individualistic activity. But most don't see reading as an enemy of preaching, but rather, for most people, it is a supplement to preaching. Although, in passing, remember that for years Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones refused to allow the printing of his sermons and then only if the full unedited text was published in order that the reader could at least *attempt to hear* the message.

Perhaps the danger from the internet is more subtle. After all, something is always "lost" (as well as gained) when we make use of media. McLuhan argued that the media is an extension of the self. Media are not just a means to an end, but they encapsulate the personality and body of the person who uses them. They are a message in and of themselves. McLuhan's concern was to warn of the costs of unthinkingly using the technology, for there is always a cost involved in using such means of communication.

The "i-age"

Secondly, the highly individual nature of modern communication was observed in an article in The BBC News magazine (26.10.10) entitled *i – how can one letter mean so much?* http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-11625862.

Commenting on the recent launch of the Independent Newspaper's "i" edition they speculate over what it is that is so attractive about the "i". Apple has added to their increasing array of gadgets from the imac; to the ipod; to the iphone; to the recent ipad. Now, the magazine notes onto the market have sprung the idog and the iteddy toys alongside their own BBC iplayer.

The new Independent, aiming at a younger audience claims to communicate concepts such as intelligence, incisiveness, interest, influence and ideas. Young people want things to be personalised (using "my space" and personal branding, for example); they want their information to be instant, headline grabbing and easily digestible.

So, what might this all mean for today's preachers and congregations?

Is the internet the preacher's friend or foe?

For years I had read the (poor) translation of Colossians 3:16 "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly…" (NIV) in highly personalised terms: God's word living in my heart, that is what keeps me on track, I had thought (of course there is some defence for this view in Psalm 119:11 "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you"). I had a serious "aha" moment when Peter Adam rightly pointed out that the "you" is plural, and of course, the admonishing and teaching role which follows in the rest of the verse is something which happens in the corporate gathered community. The Word of God at work among God's people. That's the preacher's task!

In a highly individualistic, web-surfing, "i" world I offer the following cautious advice for preachers using the internet:

- beware of the disembodiment of the preacher from the hearer; and the listener from the wider body of Christ. Christian learning happens in Christian community;
- beware of pulpit plagiarism, or, more subtlety, the "drag and drop" approach to sermon preparation. Serious thought militates against web surfing. Books – with margins – foster deeper thought.
- value the plethora of good models of preaching which can be heard with the click of a mouse (my forthcoming *12 Things Good Preachers do Well* has a positive take on this modern benefit). But use resources wisely and discerningly.
- don't binge or snack on homiletical fast food. Feast and savour.
- words matter; images are liable to distort. Do all you can to foster the primacy of words and the Word.

 I am sure there is more. These are my first thoughts and I would value and further discussion. Overall, being "all things to all people in order that we might win some" seems to be a good maxim for the internet. But be a critical user and shun the standardising individualism of our age, preferring rather to be "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (1 Cor 9:22; Rom 12:1-2).