

St Edmundsbury Cathedral  
Sunday 13 June 2021  
The Second Sunday after Trinity  
The Reverend Canon Dr John Parr

## Holy Influencers

Ayeda Shadab is a 26 year old Afghan woman who owns a boutique in Kabul. She travels around her country being photographed wearing the clothes she sells. But not just to promote her business. Ayeda has more social media followers than the Afghan president. “I want to change the picture people have of Afghanistan”, she says. “This is not just a country racked by war and terror. It has beautiful landscapes and magnificent culture”. Ayeda Shadab is an influencer.

In March 2020 the footballer Marcus Rashford used his Twitter influence to call for more government help for our poorest children during the pandemic. His tweet attracted massive public support. So he formed a partnership with the food poverty charity FairShare, and together they managed to persuade a reluctant government to extend free school meal provision over the summer and October holidays.

Marcus Rashford has since teamed up with the chef Tom Kerridge to teach families to cook healthy meals on a budget. And he’s also turned his attention to the nearly 400,000 UK children who don’t own a book. He’s launched a partnership with a publisher who promised to donate 5000 titles to 850 primary schools in England and Scotland.

Ayeda Shadab and Marcus Rashford are influencers who want to persuade others to see the world through different eyes. The same was true of St Paul. In a line from today’s New Testament reading he says: ‘knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others’ (2 Cor 5.11). Paul was one of the creators of urban Christianity in the cities of the Roman empire. His genius lay in his ability to work out what the gospel of Jesus Christ looked like in the intoxicating, messy diversity of his world.

How did Paul see the gospel influencing and shaping the lives of people who’d been scooped up by massive social and political changes, and dumped here and there around the Mediterranean? Paul’s persuasive ministry helped to create multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-generational communities that flowed from the life of the crucified and risen Christ. ‘For the love of Christ urges us on’ (2 Cor 5.14) in our calling as followers of Jesus.

Paul’s ministry as an influencer fulfilled the vision of the prophet Ezekiel. In today’s Old Testament reading the prophet sees Israel’s God as an arborist. ‘Thus says the Lord God, “I myself will break off a tender young twig from the top of a cedar and plant it on a high mountain in Israel,

so that it might become a noble cedar. And in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind” (Ezekiel 17.22-23).

This Jewish prophet spoke to people exiled from their homeland about 600 years before Christ. He saw their ancestral lands as a home for all people, all nations, all races. Today we pray that the new government struggling to be born in Israel-Palestine will allow themselves to be persuaded by one of their greatest prophets. Jesus was certainly influenced by Ezekiel’s vision, when he compared the kingdom of God to a tiny mustard seed, which grows into a great shrub whose branches are big enough for all the birds of the air to nest in its shade (Mark 4.30-34).

I wonder what motivates these influencers. Ayeda Shadab clearly loves her country. Marcus Rashford’s character has been shaped by his family’s experience of poverty, and the impact of his mum’s Christian faith. I came across the story of another influencer whose motivation is just as apparent.

Imad Alarnab is a Syrian chef and restaurateur who lost everything when his home in Damascus was bombed in 2012. In 2015 he arrived in England as a refugee, with just £12 in his pocket. At first he worked as a car salesman. Then he partnered with a charity and opened a number of pop-up kitchens providing Syrian cuisine in London and the Home Counties. They were so popular that he’s now opened his own Syrian restaurant in London three weeks ago.

Since he arrived here Imad has raised over £200,000 for an international charity that supports refugees throughout the world – people who live in tents and makeshift shelters, and travel in search of safety. He’s promised £1 from every bill in his new restaurant to the charity. What motivates Imad’s commitment to refugees? His own experience as a refugee, certainly. But he also speaks of his faith in God. And the name of the charity he supports shows what that means: it’s called Choose Love.

And St Paul the influencer, who created Christian communities that straddled the boundaries of gender and race and wealth and education and status in his world: what motivated him? ‘The love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that he died for all’. And now ‘we make it our aim to please him’ (2 Cor 5.14, 9). Crucified love enabled Paul to see the world through new eyes.

‘We no longer regard others from a merely human point of view’ (2 Cor 5.16). In other words, we no longer see with the judgements and prejudices of those who glorify the great or denigrate the downtrodden. Why? Because we no longer see Christ as we once did: weak, foolish, humiliated in his crucifixion. What we now see in Christ is God’s new creation slowly, unmistakably taking shape, influencing the world for good by altering the way we see ourselves and everyone else.

Like Ayeda Shadab, persuading her social media followers to see her country through new eyes; like Marcus Rashford, persuading government ministers to see that poor families deserve further support; like Imad Alarnab, persuading those who enjoy his food to see refugees as worthy of love and practical help; so Paul the influencer wants to persuade us to see the world differently, because the love of Christ calls us to 'live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised for us' (2 Cor 5.15).

We don't need to be big on social media to persuade others. You and I are called to be holy influencers, who make it our aim to please Christ in a world that is being scooped up by the many varieties of this pandemic; a world that must build back greener if there is to be anything worth handing on to our children and grandchildren; a world that must learn the value of its ever older and ever more vulnerable and ever poorer citizens; a world that must come to see its many differences as something to celebrate not fear.

In our vocation as holy influencers, we are not driven by the latest focus groups, or the latest lifestyle fads, or the latest versions of political correctness. We're simply called to glimpse God's new creation taking shape in Christ. In the words of Jesus' parable, we are to build our nests with all the other birds of the air in the shade of that great shrub that grows from the mustard seeds of God's kingdom.

You and I are invited by God to persuade ourselves and everyone we can that there really is no better way to be alive than in the love of Christ. Pray that we may increasingly make it our aim to please Christ, whose crucified love fills us with hope and never ceases to urge us on.

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