

Diocesan Training Event: Preaching Online

Introduction

Preaching is a Gift... but it's a dangerous and difficult one!

So an important thing with preaching is that we keep on developing our skills, growing in our preaching, being encouraged and challenged in this part of our vocation.

And this applies to our online preaching as well. Which is why it's important to begin by thinking about our 'Theology of Preaching' which refers to:

- what we understand to be happening in the *act of preaching*,
- what we understand to be the *role of the preacher*, of *God* and of the *congregation*,
- what we understand to be the *point* of preaching – its purpose, its function, its role.

A theology of preaching is basically about:

1. What do preachers preach?
2. Why do preachers preach?
3. How do preachers preach?

Our theology of preaching is influenced by expectations (our own and those of our congregation) and by the culture and context within which we preach.

And our culture and contexts might change – and in this pandemic, they have changed.

We might go from preaching in the pulpit among a congregation of people you know and love, to preaching in the pulpit in an empty church with just your recording equipment, or to preaching in your living room where you've barricaded yourself in to stop the dogs and kids from barging in, and it's going up on Youtube or FB and you have no idea who will be listening to you...

If we return to the *what do preachers preach*, the *why do preachers preach* and the *how do preachers preach*, I suspect the 'what' part doesn't really change depending on our context – hopefully we're preaching from Scripture!

I suspect the 'why' of preaching – what is the point of preaching – doesn't massively change either, but it is important to *remind* ourselves about this because it's often what first sparked the fire in us to preach and is what keeps us rooted in our calling. A change of context can sometimes make us wobble in this, and sometimes wobble in our calling – so it's good to remind ourselves of why we preach.

Questions:

1. Why do you personally preach?

2. What do you think is the reason for preaching?
3. Why did Jesus preach?

It's really important for us to remember that the WHY of preaching stems from one thing:

We preach because of the character of God.

We preach because God communicates with his people, and in preaching we hope to enable the congregation not just to hear God in the conversation, but to join in with the conversation.

But it is the 'how do we preach' that I think has the most changes in it when our context changes – and especially when we are preaching to the little green dot. We're now going to look at the 'how' of preaching, focusing on two aspects: (i) how to craft the online sermon, and (ii) how to deliver it in front of the little green dot.

Crafting the Sermon

At this point I always talk about the 'hokey cokey' style of preparation.

When we're preparing to preach online, we still need to stick to good preparation which means that firstly, we need to pray, and then we need to put our whole self into the bible passage:

1. **Explore the scene** (imagine being there in the cave with Elijah/in the crowded house with Jesus when the roof caves in/in the belly of the whale with Jonah or on the sand after you've been puked up by it; look at the characters – pre-formed ideas of them e.g. Thomas?; onlookers, main ones; inside/outside.
2. **Explore the text** (repetition, words jump out, difficult words?) – maybe use *lectio divina*?
 - Anna Carter Florence argues that when we focus on the nouns, then we automatically feel distanced from the text, we spend a lot of time translating, a lot of time arguing and a lot of time telling ourselves that it meant something different then so it doesn't quite mean the same for us today. And so, she suggests that one way we can enter into the text is by looking at the verbs because (i) we all share the same verbs; (ii) they are generally cross-cultural ('you may not know a Samaritan but you know his verbs (*came near, saw, was moved with pity, took care of, etc.* p.19); (iii) verbs permit very little dissociation – '*You and I may not want to have much in common with Cain or Caiaphas or Judas or Jezebel, but they have verbs we know, verbs we have chosen for ourselves. We may wish we hadn't, but we have*' (p.20).¹

¹ For more on this, see Florence, A.C., (2018). *Rehearsing Scripture: Discovering God's Word in Community*. Norwich: Canterbury Press, chapter 2 'Setting the Stage', pp.16-31 and chapter 3, 'Reading the Verbs', pp.32-50.

3. **Explore the historical backdrop**
4. **Explore the overall content** – what is going on here? What’s the good news? What would be lost if this wasn’t in the Bible?
5. **Explore the Headlines** – if you were a journalist and this passage had just happened and you were asked to report on it in your local paper, what headline would you use? I find this a good way to tease out the different headlines – you can preach a million different sermons on one passage – the key is not to try to do all the sermons in one sermon! So, we need to pull out the different threads – what are the different headlines in this passage?

We then need to pray in order to see which ONE headline God wants us to focus on!

We need to be even more focused when people are watching us online because there isn’t the peer pressure to keep on concentrating – and more ways to get distracted when you’re watching this at home.

At this point, we need to do the next bit of the hokey cokey and ‘put our whole selves out’ – this is when you step out of the passage and you look around you but you do it with eyes that have been changed because you’ve soaked yourself in the passage.

6. **Explore your congregation, your community, your context.** Just because we’re preaching to a little green dot doesn’t mean that the congregation isn’t there. In preparing the sermon we really need to visualise the people we know – pray for them – hold them in God’s love – pray for the people who might watch it who we don’t know – place them in God’s love. We need a way to still connect the sermon to the congregation in a personal and loving way – one way to do this is to literally sit down and write down their names – visualise their faces – walk through the streets of your community – look at the shops, the homes, the schools, the pubs etc. through your new eyes which now can see this passage really well. Only when we do this can we...
7. **Explore the application.** This is where we take our headline or point of focus and knit it into the congregation, the hearts and souls and minds of those who will be listening to you, and therefore joining in with the conversation with God.
8. **Explore the content of your sermon.** How we craft the sermon is always important, but especially when we’re preaching online – because – we can’t see when people are nodding off, or when the penny is dropping, when there are frowns or tears or smiles. And so we need to really work on putting some really juicy bits into our sermon – like illustrations, images, stories.

When we're preaching online it is REALLY important that we capture and then re-capture people's attention.

However, it's absolutely brilliant that someone might be listening to your sermon while they're doing the ironing, or ordering the food shopping, or walking the dog, because then we know that the sermon, that listening to and talking with God doesn't just happen in a box, in a church, in the pulpit, but it happens in our homes, in the busyness and messiness and wonderfulness of life, in life that we share with others, in life that has cracks – and in life that God talks and shines through these cracks.

9. **Explore your voice** – practice it and pray! Have a run through recording it and watch it – where did you get bored watching/listening to yourself? Do you smile? Are you, you?

10. **Pray and Press Play!**

- Picture the people in front of you. Write their names down. God has called you to love them and they love you and you all stand in God's love. And when you see those faces, your heart smiles and your face smiles! Put a cross in front of you to remind you of God's love for you. Make eye contact, don't be afraid.
- Authenticity – in your home – the real you – you're a human being who's forgotten to put the pile of washing waiting to be ironed away from behind you, you're a human who has a mobile that rings half way through, you're a human who has a toddler shouting they need a wee in the background – this authenticity is important because they see that a real person believes in God, believes in Jesus Christ, puts their faith in Jesus even though they're living a not-perfect life. It's really important. Therefore, don't stop the recording just because these everyday bits and bobs happen. Keep them in. if you stumble over your words. Just keep on going. Doesn't matter. What matters is not perfection but God's Spirit shining through your authenticity.
- Don't be afraid to want to develop and grow in your skills. Watch yourself back. Cringe. But ask yourself how you think you need to get better. Ask a friend. Have you smiled? Do you sound like you? Are you wooden or shifting around too much? Are you too slow? Too fast? Do your words match your delivery? Does your body language and your voice match the message of your words?

And then, pray.

Leave it in God's hands.

And go and make a cuppa.