

Tips for Preaching to an Invisible Congregation



Preparing the Sermon

If you're preparing a sermon for streaming or recording, then here are five main points I think are important to consider.

Conversation

One of the first things you need to do is just remind yourself: what do you think is the point of preaching? What do you believe God is doing? And, does this change if you're preaching online, to an invisible congregation in an empty room?!

I happen to think that an essential point of preaching is in order to deepen a conversation between God and his people. Clearly, this will happen on different dimensions: you want to deepen the conversation between God and yourself as the preacher, between God and each person listening to the sermon, and between God and the whole community listening together, acting as one body, striving to have one mind, to discern together the will of God. Preaching is a community event.

But how does this happen – how do you enable a deeper conversation to happen between God and his community in your online sermon, when you're standing awkwardly in front of a tiny camera on your own, when you might be preaching and recording it several days before it is due to go out to everyone, and when the community is scattered all over the place?

Firstly – we need to visualise our congregation – picture those faces! Do this as you prepare, and as you preach.

Secondly – pray for them before you write your sermon, and before you deliver it.

Thirdly – rely on the Holy Spirit to use the act of preaching as a way to deepen this conversation between God and his people.

Fourthly – there are little practical things you can do with your body language, your voice and your eyes to make the experience 'personal' and communal. Make sure you have good eye contact (and that you look at the camera and not at the middle of the screen!) but don't just stare at the camera for the whole time as that will just be weird and intimidating! Be natural, use your own voice, your 'conversation' voice, the voice that people hear when you're talking to *them*. Smile, be open in your body language and be relaxed. Remind yourself that as you preach, you are standing in God's love, and that you are joined together in this amazing community through God's love and grace. This bit is really important.

Energy

Whether we're introverted or extroverted, we probably all gain energy from standing up in front of two, twenty or two hundred people. We get energy from doing this, our adrenaline runs, it gives us confidence and oomph!

But – where are we going to get our energy and oomph from if we're in an empty room?

If we don't think about this then we will lack energy when we're preaching to the camera. And:

- A lack of energy can impact upon our confidence levels, which means that we will be able to hear the voices of doubt in our heads telling us we look stupid and sound stupid. And we will want to hide under the table. Not a good look when you're preaching.
- A lack of energy will make us look a bit wishy-washy, a bit jaded, a bit floppy. Again, not a good look. Don't be floppy.
- We will look as if we're not even convinced about what we're saying. We'll look as if we're bored of ourselves – which, again, isn't a great look for preachers... We need to be passionate about what we're saying – and this needs a certain level of energy.

We need to be energised and energising.

We need to be convincing, inspiring, attractive.

Record yourself and watch yourself back: quite frankly, do you look as if you've been employed to read out stories slowly to people who suffer from insomnia, or do you look as if you have the best news in the world?!

Being full of energy will look different in each person – figure out what your energy looks like in a natural way when someone is watching on a screen. You are called to preach as *you* whether that's to a camera or to a live congregation.

So – where are you going to get your energy from?

Really spend time praying beforehand and ask for God to encourage you and fill you with his Spirit, giving you courage to confidently preach the Good News, affirming you in your call to preach, upholding you with his power. But, we pray for God to fill us with a divine energy that reveals more of God, than of ourself.

Capture and Re-Capture

Basically, you can't see when the congregation are smiling or frowning, when the penny has dropped for someone, when people are eagerly listening to you, or when they are nodding off. We've all seen it – that point in our sermon when you can see people drifting off. And normally, you can either think on your feet and change a bit, or change your delivery style to re-capture people.

Also, when we are part of a congregation and listening to the sermon, there is a certain amount of peer pressure, by which I mean, that if we're surrounded by others who are concentrating, then this will motivate us to concentrate! But – when we're watching on our own, or with just a few close friends or family, there's not a lot stopping us from getting distracted!

This means that we need to be even more careful in crafting our sermons: shaping it, making the structure clear, using rhetorical strategies as little hooks to keep people involved in the conversation or to bring people back – illustration, personal story/testimony, metaphors, repetition, etc. You can even try using the 'call response' style in your sermons!

However, a top tip from Liz Kent here: be careful to use completely anonymised illustrations as the audience is 1. potentially wider on Youtube and 2. the material will be around a long time!

These rhetorical strategies help to shorten your sections into bite-sized chunks and make it more digestible. Very important for online preaching. But they also can help to re-engage someone who is drifting.

Another idea might be to preach your sermon in two shorter sections?

We also need to think about body language: how can you use this to make your sermon more 'visual' and to keep attention? We can learn some good lessons from BSL (British Sign Language) here: a BSL user doesn't just use their hands but also their face, their body, and the space they inhabit. So, if they are telling a story about Alfie and Alia, then once they have finished talking about Alfie, they will physically 'place' Alfie to one side of their body, and then move on to describe Alia and then place her at the other side of their body; and when they go back to talking about Alfie, then will turn to the space where they placed Alfie. We can think about how to use our space more creatively to deliver the sermon in a visual way – although we need to make sure that we are still in the screen!

Furthermore, our voice is still important. Remember that it is an instrument, and we can use it to emphasise parts of our sermon by increasing or decreasing the volume, accelerating or decelerating. Pauses in the right place also act to make sure that an important point 'lands' in the mind of the listener.

Why not think of creative ways for the congregation to still participate, even from their own home? (I've heard that someone once used the hokey cokey...).

So – we need to think carefully about capturing and re-capturing people throughout the sermon.

Develop

And finally, we must, still, as preachers, seek to develop our preaching gift – and especially our skills at preaching to a camera. I know we all hate doing this, but it is very important to watch yourself to analyse your content and delivery; and ask for feedback!

And finally...

The most important aspect in all of this, is prayer. Pray, pray and pray, and rely a lot on the Holy Spirit to work through you and through those who are listening and engaging with the sermon.

Setting Up to Film: Tech Tips

Most of us are learning from scratch about recording or filming ourselves, but the following points are extremely helpful and important in leading or preaching and making sure that our 'online' congregation can partake in worship, that they can engage with the conversation we're setting up in our preaching, and that they can feel part of a wider community.

Here is a brilliant and short video on how to present to the camera:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UyLeB6VtFVE&feature=youtu.be>

And the following are excellent points from our very own preaching community:

Setting up and Preparation

1. When filming yourself or others think about the background – a messy or grubby background can be just as distracting as poor video quality. Ideally, it's good to have a bit of contrast with face with some texture and difference but not overcomplicated or controversial.
2. Think about what the style is: (i) are you going for standing, sitting, bar stool? (ii) time of day – does the time of recording reflect the time of the preaching event – day/night; (iii) what you are wearing and what that might say. If you are filming in a house that you share with others, check that they are happy for you to film in a certain room – do they want everyone to know what the inside of your personal space looks like and comment on your choice of curtains and cushions?!
3. Film in the highest quality you can, make sure the image is clean and clear, ensure the camera is stable – use a tripod if you can, nothing worse than wobble.
4. AUDIO AUDIO AUDIO, cardinal rule of film is that audio makes half the picture, if the audio is bad viewers are just as turned off as if the picture is bad – make sure your audio is clean and clear. If you have a few pennies it might be worth buying a lavalier microphone.
5. Headroom and framing – we have to think about pictures in rules of three: take a rectangle (i.e. a tv screen) and divide it into thirds, you have to make sure that you place yourself in one of those thirds, left, right or centre. Make sure you are not a tiny person in the middle of the image, give yourself a couple of inches of head room (space between top of your head and the top of the screen). You don't want people straining to see you. One of the interesting things learnt in film is the closeness we can give the audience over stage (or church) therefore showing expression in our faces clearly, people are used to this and don't want to see a tiny person in the lower third of the screen. Make sure the camera is eye level, otherwise it can look like you have too many chins (if you look down the camera) or you get a crick in your neck if you have to look upwards. Film landscape rather than portrait.
6. Light – to get a clean and clear image you need light: don't shoot into a window (remember old film point and shoots – don't photograph indoors to the window), you end up with a dark image. There is no shame in putting the lights on if the room is dark – use some desk lamps if you want to give some more directed light.

7. Think about what to do with your notes. The general consensus is that if you're using a script, it is better to have it visible in your hand so that people know what you keep looking at – but make sure you don't read from this and that you use your script/notes as a prompt. If you are going to pin up headings behind the camera, just make sure that it doesn't look like your distracted when your eyes look away but your head stays still!
8. Turn off notifications on your phone and laptop before you film. You don't want an email pinging just as you nail your delivery.
9. Once you've set this up – practice and watch yourself back and you might need to tweak things a little bit. Check audio and visual; see if you are clear – are you too fast or too slow? Too quiet or too OTT? Don't be afraid to change some things. And don't be afraid to record it a few times if you are recording and not streaming – but also know when you just need to stop!
10. Trust in God and go for it. Then go and have a cup of tea.