

Who am I preaching to online?

The recent document from the *Dicastery for Communication* on engagement with social media takes as its starting point the parable of the Good Samaritan. The question posed there by the scribe, “*Who is my neighbour?*” (Lk 10:29), is an important one to ask in the context of a digital apostolate. This is because it is a difficult question to answer.

Preachers of the Gospel must imitate the Trinitarian God that we preach, a God who invites us to share in his own communal life. Preaching is inseparable from building community. It seeks to remove all limits to ‘neighbourliness’. As Vincent McNabb, a Dominican of the English Province, once said: “*Love the people to whom you preach. If you do not, don’t preach. Preach to yourself.*”

When I ask “*Who is my neighbour?*” in the context of any ordinary preaching, the obvious answer is that my neighbour is whomever it is with whom I share the Gospel in that moment. But what if I do not know who I am preaching to? Can I still love them? This seems to be a challenge that is particular to preaching in a digital age, and why the question ‘*who is my neighbour*’ is so difficult to answer.

The great Spanish Dominican of the late 14th and early 15th century, St Vincent Ferrer, was renowned for his supernatural gifts. Among the many hundreds of miracles recognised during his canonisation process, one of the most well known was that his voice could be heard by vast crowds, numbering upwards of 10,000, without any form of amplification. As the psalmist says of creation so too it could be said of St Vincent’s preaching: “*their span extends through all the earth, their words to the utmost bounds of the world*” (Ps 19:5).

The supernatural amplification that accompanied St Vincent’s preaching would not be quite so extraordinary in our own day. A single homily might be heard not just by 1000s but indeed by millions. I experienced the latter quite literally on Copacabana beach at World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro in 2013, when Pope Francis preached to more than 3 million young people gathered for the celebration.

A Pope preaching at World Youth Day may be an infrequent event, but the possibility of preaching to vast crowds is a peculiar characteristic of preaching in the modern, digital age. The words of the preacher can very easily reach a number far greater than those that could be heard by any natural projection of the voice. Through the internet and various social media channels, a single homily can quite literally be carried “*to the utmost bounds of the world*”.

Of course, few have built up a social media presence that will automatically reach vast crowds. For most who seek to preach the Gospel online that is precisely the task in hand. However, this mere possibility highlights an important aspect of preaching in a digital age, regardless of numbers: you can never be sure who will hear what you have to say.

This is why the question ‘*who is my neighbour*’ is a challenging one when posed in the context of digital preaching. St Thomas tells us that you cannot love what you do not know. So can I still preach if I do not know to whom I am speaking? What kind of preaching takes place when one casts a video into the void of YouTube?

This is certainly a question that arises for our digital apostolate at Blackfriars in Oxford, which largely centres on the live-streaming of daily Mass and posting other videos on the same YouTube page. The project grew organically out of the necessities of the COVID lockdowns, and has continued to attract a regular audience ever since. Each day 100s tune in for our daily Mass, primarily from the UK, but many come from all over the world. There are occasional comments, and we know some of the regular viewers, but the mode of communication is very one-directional. The majority of those 'present' each day are entirely unknown to us. How can we make sense of this kind of preaching, which seems so anonymous? Surely anonymity is antithetical to a preaching that seeks to build community?

Early Dominicans imagined preachers to be like pipes: they only receive God's grace in the measure that they are willing to pour it out for others. This means that our preaching is not simply an overflow of a life of contemplation, as if allowing others to overhear a private conversation between ourselves and God. Rather, our contemplation grows in the measure that we preach, as the Word of God flows through us to others by means of our own words. The Word of God shapes us just as a river carves through the land.

From this perspective, we must remember that any preaching of the Gospel must be a moment of sanctification for the preacher. If the pipe stops giving, it stops receiving too. In extending the invitation of the Trinitarian God, the preacher's heart is expanded and receives that same divine love all the more. The psalmist sings: "*When I run the way of your commands, you enlarge my heart*" (Ps 119: 32).

Although one might prepare differently for a homily or talk that will be posted online, its effect in one's own life cannot be any different. Authentic preaching of the Gospel remains a holy event regardless of its context. This then prompts an important examination of conscience for those regularly involved in preaching online: is my preaching bearing fruits in my own life?

There still remains, however, the challenge of loving one's neighbour as a preacher in a digital age. Can I still love those to whom I preach, even if I do not know them?

To love every single individual on earth is of course impossible, and belongs to God alone. However, just as one loves one's enemies because they are loved by God, so too the more one loves God, the more one shares in God's truly universal love for every individual. In this sense you can certainly still love and preach to those you do not know.

Perhaps there is more consonance here with St Vincent Ferrer and his supernaturally amplified voice than we might realise. Just as for St Vincent it was beyond his natural powers to control who might hear his preaching, so too online we cannot control who might hear our words. In both cases, albeit in different ways, it is by the grace of God alone that his Word takes root in the hearts of his people.

It is precisely in this respect that preaching online can still be a means of building the Christian community, even though it is limited by both anonymity and immateriality. The digital sphere is no substitute for the sacramental and incarnational dimensions of the Christian life, and in this respect will always remain deficient and pose possible threats. However, it is still a space in which God's grace can operate, transmitted through the preacher.

“God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Tim 2:4) If, as a preacher, my neighbour is the one with whom God desires to share His own life, then there can be no one excluded from that list. In this regard, a digital apostolate offers an invaluable opportunity.