

So, on Wednesday evening I did my first comedy gig since the lockdown began – don't worry; this wasn't an illegal gathering. It was, of course, an online gig, via Zoom. And it was great fun. At least, *I* thought it was. I couldn't really tell what the audience thought because they were all on mute and I could only see three of them. But *they* appeared to be laughing and I *could* hear the host and lots of people told me they enjoyed it afterwards. But the highlight for me was this magic moment that happened in the Q and A at the end...

Now, I don't know how many of you have actually *been* to one of my gigs but there's a bit where I talk about the problem of living in a place called Wye, which is compounded in my case because I trained at the theological college in *Ware* in Hertfordshire – although of course that's not actually true! I trained in *Bristol* but that's not as funny and there *is* a college for *missionaries* in Ware; and several of the people that Wye church supports *overseas* trained there: Ian and Anne-Marie Prescott, Margi and David Whitehorn and more recently Linda's daughter Hannah who met her husband Tim there; and Ali Poole informs me that that's where Sam-Linghe and Andrew Dorward met as well.

Anyway, I do this Abbot and Costello-style routine in which someone asks me where I live and I say 'Why?' So they say 'Well, there's no need to be like that!' So I explain that it's a place *called* Wye. They say 'Ah, right. So where were you before that?' I say 'Ware' They say 'Yes, Where?' I say 'No, Ware'. They say 'What?!' And I say 'Well

that's the one place I haven't been. Adding that I've just heard that they're looking for a new vicar in Hoo at the moment and that I'm wondering if I should apply for that. (Again, neither of those things is actually *true* but it makes for a good joke).

Anyway, when we threw it open for questions at the end, a man called Paul introduced himself and said that he'd particularly enjoyed my set because he's a vicar himself. I asked him where his parish was and he said 'Well, you're never gonna believe this but I actually *am* the vicar of Hoo!' Which absolutely brought the house down and definitely made my evening.

But it was great to perform again after a more than two-month break and doing it online wasn't as weird or as awkward as I'd feared it might be and I think that the fact that I've been doing *this*, online church, for the last seven weeks made a real difference. I've got used to speaking to an invisible audience, so without the feedback – visual and aural – that preachers, like comedians, normally rely on to gauge how what they're saying is going down.

But there are advantages too. Because this was online, it wasn't just for *local* members but the whole district; so Rotarians from Kent, East Sussex and even Gibraltar which amounted to, I think, 130 people; which is a big gig in comedy terms and maybe 4 times as many as were at the Christmas party I did for Strood Rotary last year. And we've seen something similar with this Virtual church...

Now, I'm not sure it would be true to say that we've had *more* people in our online congregations than we used to get in our normal Sunday services. I think we've been averaging about 150 over the last few weeks and that's probably slightly *fewer* than would be in our eight church *buildings* on a typical Sunday. But that's still pretty amazing: at worst, our numbers have remained stable even though the churches are shut and when you consider how many of our *regular* and less tech-savvy members aren't online, that means that we've successfully attracted lots of new members – which is what we've all been hoping and praying for for years! So there's a couple of things I'd like to say about that [this morning].

Firstly, I know that some things that I've said about mission and evangelism and the fact that I'm uncomfortable with trying to convert people to Christianity might have been *misinterpreted* in the past. You know, thinking of the All Nations Bible College which I mentioned earlier, didn't Jesus *unambiguously* tell us in the last chapter of Matthew's Gospel to 'Go and make disciples of all nations'? What we call the great commission.

Well, yes, but we're in a very different context now, a multi-faith society or rather a multi-*viewpoint* one cos lots of people today have no 'faith'; they might think of themselves as spiritual not religious, agnostic or even full-on atheist but then many atheists actually prefer to think of themselves as *humanists*, defining themselves by what they

*do* believe in rather than what they don't. So what's the appropriate way to share our faith with others in such a context?

Well, as I've said before, I think that *boundaries* are key here. I'm sure you all understand what I mean by people's *physical* boundaries? The concept of personal space. Which it's impolite and downright inappropriate to invade. But the fact is there are mental and emotional boundaries too and most people don't want anyone else telling them what to think, feel or believe.

So the 'Changed lives, changing lives' initiative in our diocese at the moment is encouraging all of us to talk about what God has done – and *is* doing – in our lives; to each other and, more significantly, to our friends and neighbours *outside* the household of faith. And this, it's hoped, is how we'll reverse the decades-long decline in church attendance. And clearly many (possibly most) of the churches with the biggest congregations are precisely those that are most actively seeking new recruits. Which stands to reason, I guess.

But for others, that kind of approach can have the exact opposite effect and as I've shared before, a couple of times people have told me that they feel comfortable with me precisely because they know that I'm *not* trying to convert them! Which is true. And I stand by what I've said before: we should only talk to our neighbours about *our* religion – or relationship with God – to the same extent and in the same way that we'd be happy to hear *them* talk about Islam or atheism

or why it's great to be vegan! But how do we reconcile that with the Great Commission?

Well, personally, I think I did a reasonable job of that 2 weeks ago when I gave a talk live on my personal Facebook page about how I first encountered God 32 years ago that day, how that encounter helped me to give up drugs and alcohol (which I'd had a huge problem with until then) and how subsequent encounters with God and answered prayers led to me becoming a vicar and now doing work with survivors of child abuse and trauma through the Heal For Life foundation. So, I can't see how I could have *been* any more on message with Changed Lives, Changing Lives than I was there cos I was talking explicitly about what God's done in my life to – 50 people in the moment and the video's been viewed 500 times in total.

Obviously some of those views will have been people who logged on and thought 'Oh, no, he's talking about *God!*' and switched straight off but then that's my whole point: I hadn't gone onto *their* turf and started preaching *at* them, they'd come onto mine and on my turf, I can – and will – say what I want!

So that helped *clarify* something for me: how you can proudly proclaim what's important to you but in a way that *honours* others people's boundaries and autonomy. And I think that's one of the reasons why online church has been so successful – not just in the Wye benefice but throughout the country and globally...

Imagine you'd never been to church before and you're thinking you might like to. It's quite a daunting prospect. Walking into a strange building, where there's lots of strange people – very strange people in some cases – and you don't really know what's going to happen. And what if you decide you don't like it? How would you escape – without giving offence; which is the one thing that most English people would rather die than do? So you can see why so many people simply don't bother and stay at home.

But online church isn't like that. It's non-threatening. You can log in, unseen and log out, unnoticed. *You're* in control of your boundaries. Plus it works for people who can't leave the house for whatever reason or live elsewhere or have other commitments on Sunday morning at 10 am cos you can tune in later and still feel connected.

So that's why even when this lockdown ends and we're allowed back into our church buildings I intend to keep this Virtual Church going indefinitely. I don't want to lose any of the people that we've gained in the last few months and I want to keep reaching new ones. So I anticipate that I'll start each service in Wye as I normally do by welcoming everyone who's physically sitting in front of me and then turning to my phone and saying 'And hello to all those joining us from home' and maybe I'll still read out their names and comments so we'll be one giant hybrid community of virtual and physical members. That, it seems, is the church of the future.

Of course, in the short term they'll be some older folk who won't feel safe coming into church even when we're allowed to again and some of them might also be uncomfortable with newfangled things like Facebook and Zoom and a challenge for us at the moment is to work out how to cater for *them*. But I do think that this Virtual Church is a great thing and as a natural-born evangelist, it excites me to reach out to people in new and creative ways. I'm aware that not everyone's as happy talking about their faith as I am but for me that's not a problem. We all have different gifts. And ultimately actions speak louder than words. So as we move into a time of prayer now I invite each one of you to think about the ways that other people have made God seem real to you and about how *you* might pass that on...