

# STREAMING THE SUNDAY SERVICE 1

**The Revd. Fraser Penny**

## **Introduction**

Like many others, I found myself doing online worship out of necessity rather than by choice. We have talked for a long time about new methods of communication and 'Church without Walls', never for a minute thinking that a pandemic would force us into doing something about it. I've been asked to speak today, not so much from the theological angle, but the practical angle of what we faced, the difficulties and the opportunities.

I still remember that first Sunday after lockdown. Well, the second actually because on the first I didn't know what on earth to do with myself. Then someone who had his son baptised a month before it all kicked off, phoned me and said he had a go-pro camera I could use and if I wanted to record something he would put it up and distribute the link. Our organist recorded some music too and the words of hymns were put on the screen.

There was no viewfinder on the camera so it was pure guess work that you were getting a reasonable picture. I remember getting through the address without stumbling only to realise I hadn't plugged the microphone in. But things developed in surprising and exciting ways. People, I think, appreciated the effort and, in fact, were so gobsmacked that it was possible at all, that they thought everything was amazing – you could get away with a lot more than on a Sunday morning!

Attitudes have certainly changed over our life time about the kind of things that you can do and what is acceptable and this accelerated that process.

There is a well known story about the heated debate there was when it was first suggested broadcasting services on the Radio. In fact it may have been a Coronation in the early days of radio. A bishop objected to worship being broadcast in this way because 'a man may be listening in a public house with his hat on.' Two false assumptions there – that a man in a pub would be in the least bit interested about a church service and that wearing a hat would disqualify one from proper prayer.

We know only too well that large swathes of society simply don't relate to what we do and that brings me to the first question.

## **Why did we do this?**

To begin with, the motivation was:

- to offer some point of contact to keep the worshipping community together
- to provide a space for prayer, whenever it suited people to watch
- to reflect on the events that were happening. I probably broke some of the rules at the time because I went into the church building to record! Quite a few people remarked that they found that meaningful – to see the place where they would have been and could link with normal life. (Of course, no one else was in the building with me!)

It soon became clear, however, that something else was happening. There was a different congregation out there.

When we started in-person worship again we decided to continue doing a recorded service as well. Viewing numbers did not decline, in fact probably grew. We are not talking huge numbers but (they vary between 300/400 to 2,000.) Let's put it this way. If we were to get that number at a church service we would be over the moon. YouTube figures show too that about 80% of those watching were in the 25-45 age bracket. Again, if you were to get that on a Sunday we would be jumping up and down rejoicing.

Last year we employed someone part-time to edit and produce recordings and that developed into songs, short reflective videos, Youth Group and Messy Church things. But, for the time being we have stopped. Actually I always felt, all through lockdown, the real difficulty would be what to do about this when things went back to normal. And so it proved. We found it very difficult to stop doing. So why did we?

- Workload. The person we employed was for 10 hours a week. She probably did more like 30. For me personally I could not sustain it any longer. It just became a huge burden, which I actually enjoyed doing but not along with what was already a full-time job.
- Finance. The Kirk Session could not commit to this indefinitely and we were reticent about finding a way to monetise it – apart from me having to get dental work and a snazzy suit like some TV evangelist!



We could have simply live streamed the Sunday service but that is something quite different. We did that once, a year ago at Christmas. The viewing figures were half, and when watching it, it just feels like being an observer. What I always aimed at was direct communication through the camera so that the viewer is being addressed – not watching a congregation being addressed. (And Safeguarding issues are involved too when children are visible and named.) We do provide a weekly audio

recording which is the successor of the good old days when tapes were passed around the parish. These are really only appealing to people who would normally be in church but can't for some reason.

We haven't given up on this entirely. We just need a bit of a break to take stock and decide what to do. We have a few shorter videos along the lines of 'evening prayer' which have good viewing figures and we would like to do perhaps a 'text for the week' five minute kind of thing.

So, the reasons for doing it shifted from holding the community together through a difficult time to

- Mission
- Teaching Avenue
- Worship & Prayer.

### **What came from it for us?**

I remember a few months into it, my daughter who is a nurse ended up really unwell thinking she had Covid. They were staying with us at the time (long story) and we all had to stay in. I didn't go outside to record but instead did the service from our living room. I hadn't organised the light very well and where I sat made me look really pallid! A few days later I got a lovely hamper delivered from a very kind member who thought I looked so ghastly I needed some cheering up! I still haven't told him the truth!

1. It makes variety in worship so much easier. The use of imagery, the countryside and familiar places, significant sites. In Dunkeld it is true to say, that we are blessed with a very photogenic place and we were able to use

that. Is that not the kind of technique Jesus used? Look at that, look at what's around you and learn a lesson about the Kingdom. Sower, shepherd, farmer, woman making bread. It is visual and immediate.

2. It brought to the fore so many gifts. Music was an amazing gift. Our organist is wonderful and she stepped up to the plate big style. Accompaniments were sent out round people who then could record their part and Hazel welded it altogether (and turned the volume down on bum notes). The choir doubled. The repertoire grew. People contributed who would never have dreamt of doing so.

We (nearly) had a premier of a piece, a setting of Hardy's poem 'The Oxen' by a member who is a saxophonist. (It had been performed once before in her native Yorkshire!) One member who is dyslexic and would never read in church could record the readings because, if it went wrong, he just started again.

3. We were able to unite congregations across the Atlantic. Dunkeld & Birnam are twinned with Asheville, N.C. and I did an exchange with a minister there 5 years ago. So the bloke who gave me the Go-pro camera suggested we try a joint service. We did two of them and brought together two communities who were greatly encouraged by the experience.

4. For me the really interesting thing is the crossover between these services and what we do on Sunday. So from it we have developed a writing group to produce elements for worship and our repertoire of songs has grown.

5. It has involved people not of the church. Local musicians and others who offered their gifts.

6. Different styles are much easier. Occasionally we did 'interview style' services rather than addresses. These are high risk because they can be really cringe inducing, but they can also be really moving as you hear people's stories.

### **What does all this say about worship?**

I mentioned that I wondered how we would stop this. Probably the bigger concern for me was how could we go back to what we always did? Surely this was a good way to communicate?

I think this raises huge questions about what we do in worship and I haven't worked it all out yet. I mentioned a moment ago that we haven't gone down

the live-streaming route. Some have pushed for that but I and others have resisted because I feel this is something different.

Live-streaming is fine for folk who are familiar and at ease with a church setting but who are at home with a broken leg. But as a tool for mission, I would seriously question that. This asks lots of questions about what we do.

- The Internet reflects a change people have gone through. People watch for 4 or 5 minutes at a time. Short chunks and we Presbyterian ministers are not good at that! I would usually split the address up into smaller sections and while I have always done that from time to time in Sunday services I now do it practically every time. We know full well that nowhere else in contemporary society do people go and listen passively for 20 minutes (except conferences!)
- It is visual with imagery and it helps when you live in a picturesque place.
- There is variety – music, prayer, teaching, reflection.
- There is participation in the sense that many people contribute to the finished article. It is not all one person up front.
- It allows for teaching in a way that is not so easy in-person and this is one area I would like to develop more. I think it allows us to address questions in a non-threatening way which church members are uncertain about but because they have been around for so long they feel they ought to know and would be afraid to ask. A person can listen to something when perhaps they would never darken the door of a Bible study (even with a hat on!).
- It gives a way in to church by opening up people's eyes to what the church really is. We have gained a member or two through it, two of whom have been confirmed in the past year. One person who has got involved in children's things and the Youth Group we have, said in conversation about the service she had watched – she watched every week. She never felt able to come near the building though.
- It allows people to participate when they are free – not at 11am on a Sunday morning.

- It truly is 'Church without Walls.' The internet is by definition worldwide and we drew in some of the Dunkeld diaspora, but I think it has to be local too, in the sense that it offers a distinctive voice. This is what we are. We didn't import people and gifts. They were there, in the community, and they contributed. That gives it a particular slant which I think is important. It does help when you live in a place like Dunkeld where you can't really take a bad photo.

It asks questions about our structures too.

- Parish boundaries are even more meaningless. One man emailed me from Brighton. His wife had died and he asked if they could be mentioned in a prayer. There was a community of sorts.
- How do we use our resources? We employed someone to produce these for a year. It took a bit of money to do that, but a lot less than most of the building work we do on churches.
- We didn't open up any interaction with people (except for the two American services) because it would require a lot of time and effort to deal with what might come in and there was a strong feeling that our task was primarily to minister in our area. It is back to that problem again that it could be a full-time job and I simply could not take on more.
- Unless we resource such things it just isn't possible.

### **What do I think we have done and is it worship? Is it worth doing?**

While we didn't open up interaction we did occasional zoom coffees after services. We timed them to go live at 11am on a Sunday so that there was a sense of community and doing something together, but folk were free to watch whenever they wanted. But that is what is lacking for my money. The sense of community.

I chose not to do an online communion which is probably easier for my tradition than for more Sacramental traditions, but I felt that communion was the community of Christ sharing together in God's presence. It just didn't do anything for me.

But in what sense are we worshipping when watching something with our baffies on and a cup of coffee? I would like to finish with a couple of clips which for me, sum up the sense of worship that can be generated. A year ago,

when the Ukraine War started we held a prayer vigil outside our Church Hall. A large number of people (many non-church folk) turned up because they wanted to express something. It was a very moving occasion and Karen, our expert, put elements together for an online production. Aided by the words of one John Bell, this, for me, evokes prayer.

There was also, through the pandemic, a strong sense that people wanted to get their heads around what was happening, express their grief and fear, hear a word of encouragement and hope.

That first week when we put something together, I was at the Church gate putting a notice up and met the manager of the local care home. Not only were they very fearful, someone had broken into their office and stolen residents money which they keep under lock and key. The same group, I presume, had also broken into the local Post Office, run by a young woman who had just set up a café and was growing the business. The lectionary reading was part of the story of Lazarus. With the shortest verse in the Bible – Jesus wept. That week, like never before, I felt like weeping for our community and it felt so important to address that, through a story of resurrection.

At one point during the Pandemic, our 'editor', Karen, put together a video as 'a Blessing for Dunkeld & Birnam' which expresses the feelings many of us had far better than words can. Can we talk about this kind of online offering as worship? Not in the conventional sense, but whether watching alone or in a group, those kinds of prayers and songs help prayer and worship in a real and meaningful way.

The pandemic, undoubtedly, has unlocked a resource which we have spoken about for a long time, but only now, are beginning to use creatively. It seems that offerings on the internet are often dominated by conservative, right wing theology. While it is, by nature, a worldwide offering there is need for a local accent which reflects the broader vision of the wider church in Scotland and creates a space where people may reflect and pray through the rich resources and traditions we have at our disposal.

*Fraser Penny*

was born in Perth. After serving parishes in Orkney and Airdrie, he has been for the last 23 years at Dunkeld Cathedral, Little Dunkeld, and Amulree and Strathbraan. During Lockdown, he pioneered a style of the streaming of worship which made use of the natural landscape, the local culture, and the talent within the congregations.