

Bishop Martin Seeley writes...

With the advances of artificial intelligence, AI, in so many areas of life, is this something that clergy could use to write their sermons?

Recently I attended a conference on preaching, since you can always learn more about this elusive art. One speaker explored the significance of AI sermons, sermons that have been composed by an Artificial Intelligence application like ChatGPT. You give the app instructions about what you want it to produce. So you provide some basic instructions like, "Write a 1000-word sermon on Noah's Ark" and within seconds, you have a sermon.

Some at the conference were quite open to the benefits of AI. One person pointed out that all the AI app does is take other people's work – countless sources that it has access to – and shape them into a sermon according to the preacher's instructions. So human beings are present first in generating the material the AI app uses, then in the instructions given to the app, and then in the person actually giving the sermon. So, some were arguing, isn't that just an extension of what happens now, where a preacher scours books and reads other people's sermons before shaping the sermon they go on to preach? The AI application just speeds this up so it takes only a matter of seconds.

For others though AI sermons are simply a step too far. A preacher is meant to have faith and integrity, and that needs to come across when they preach. How can an electronically constructed sermon, where the preacher has simply told the AI device what to write, convey the preacher's faith or integrity? After all, in preaching, the preacher themselves is a key part of the message.

The use of AI in many different fields is making many people feel uneasy, so what is really going on here?

We have become so reliant on technology that it is easy to forget this revolution began only just over forty years ago with the first home computers appearing in the early 1980s. The World Wide Web was only brought into existence in 1989. Facebook started in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter – now X – in 2006. Apple introduced the first iPhone in 2007.

This is to say, a lot that we may well take for granted today has emerged within the last twenty years, and development has moved very fast.

The field of artificial intelligence has been born out of human imagination that the process of human thought could be replicated. That dream began to take shape in the 1950s, and computer programmes were developed that could simulate simple human thought processes, in some sense 'thinking' for themselves.

The popular applications – like ChatGPT – have only been with us for less than a couple of years, and what is interesting is that people are increasingly aware of them, and indeed using them. With this surge of technological innovation, it can be hard, I think, to remember what it means to be a human being in all of this. We have been tempted to treat technology as substitutes for human beings - rather than agents for human connection.

Plenty of research has shown the growing disconnection between how people behave online and how they behave in real life. The number of 'friends' we have on Facebook rarely reflects the number of people we have a genuine human-to-human connection with.

ChatGPT may well produce a well-crafted sermon, but the best communicators are those who connect to their congregations on a deeper, human-to-human level.

In the early years of Christianity, St Paul wrote many letters to teach and encourage the new church communities that had just started. Those letters are still an inspiration to millions of people today. But St Paul knew that letters, like any two-dimensional communication, were no substitute for meeting face to face. He says this much in his letters, just as we know that there are many times when Zoom is no substitute for sitting in the same room together.

And an AI sermon is no substitute for a sermon preached directly from the heart. It may speed up the process of writing a sermon, an essay or whatever else but as the name suggests, it will always be 'artificial.'

As human beings we need another 'A' – authenticity. This we will only find in each other; in relationships, and in our shared experiences. We find it in discovering the uniqueness of each other and yet still being connected.

AI is the great tool, but we need to use it with authenticity, to make connections with each other, not as a too easy replacement for that that connection.

I asked ChatGPT if it liked my article. The answer was polite but diplomatic, "as an AI, I don't have personal preferences."