

Wisdom

St Philip's Anglican Church
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost—9 July 2017
Revd Martin Johnson

Genesis 24.34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45.10-17; Romans 7.14-25; Matthew 11.15-19, 25-30.

'I am putting myself to the fullest possible use, which is all I think that any conscious entity can ever hope to do.' These are not human words! They were spoken by Hal, the computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The author Arthur C. Clarke was something of a prophet predicting the rise of AI. Hal's statement might well fit the category of intelligence, but it is very lacking in our Christian understanding of what it is to be human.

Prior to last week's Family Service, I asked for questions that we could air during the service ... and I got some! An interesting one concerned infant Baptism and the ability of a child to 'understand.' I have always claimed that being baptised was not a matter of understanding but of being incorporated into a body, much like being born, if I can use the phrase ... it is something that 'passes all understanding.' Being born made us human, being born in baptism makes us, as the creed says, truly human. Being born makes us an autonomous being, being reborn in baptism bestows upon us personhood. For the writers of the early church being a person was something that could only be achieved in communion, because we are made in the image of a God who is perfect communion.

If we put this in a secular context: in 2014, a group in New York came before a court and tried to establish the personhood of a Chimpanzee. He was a 26-year-old Chimp called Tommy. The legal argument revolved around what it meant to be a person. As it turned out, the five-judge panel confirmed that Tommy was indeed an autonomous creature, but also found that it was not possible for him to understand the social contract that binds humans together and therefore that personhood could not be bestowed upon him.

I have been reading this week about AI. We are told it will revolutionize every aspect of our lives, indeed it has already begun. Robots already have taken many jobs that required repetition and we are told they will in the future also take on roles which require thinking; accountants, lawyers, teachers—watch out! An awful thought was that they may even become companions taking on a role that formerly would require us to love or at least respect. The final straw came when I read that some theologians are questioning whether AI will be able to have faith. One writer said: 'There will be a point in the future when these free-willed beings that we've made will say to us, 'I believe in God. What do I do?'' At that point, we should have a response.'

Like much of the discussion that takes place in the domain of religion and science, I often wonder if we are talking a different language. Those who brought Tommy the chimpanzee to court did so because they believed that personhood was based on intelligence. If that is the case why not have persons who happen to be apes, dogs, whales, birds and yes even robots ...?' If intelligence is simply about understanding I can 'get' AI from that perspective; but what about wisdom? Now surely that's a different category altogether, can we ever have AW! Now this is our language and living as a member of a body, being in communion requires of us balance and balance calls for wisdom.

In our gospel reading today Jesus speaks of his generation and their inability to grasp what is necessary for their lives together in community. Two groups sitting apart calling out to each other across a market place. If I can paraphrase him he says to them: John the Baptist came among you and warned you that you will need to exercise a level of austerity, it was a message you rejected. I came among you to bring a balance; I said that you also needed to celebrate to gather together and enjoy each other's hospitality, you have rejected that idea too. Then he

says, 'Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.' It's a strange response, but I think that Jesus is trying to describe a life in a balance, it is a life lived truly in and for each other. It is a life lived in a way that is truly human it has nothing to do with intelligence or of being of 'use' it is a life of wisdom. A life lived in a spirit of moderation, restraint, repentance, forgiveness even mourning; but also one in which we gather as one to celebrate, dance, play together, be at one with one another; this was the life which Jesus, wisdom personified, did indeed demonstrate.

This balance is something that we never get quite right and surely this is what makes us human. We could hear a very human Paul in the reading from Romans this morning as he struggled to come to terms with doing the right thing. He struggles even to do what is right for his own benefit. Surely this is a profoundly and singularly human trait! But what makes us truly human is expressed in the last verse of that reading and into chapter eight: But thank be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. This is the Christ who knows and understands those struggles and says to us, 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

These are very familiar words for us Anglicans, they were incorporated by Thomas Cranmer into the Prayer Book of 1549 and they remain today in our current prayer book, one of four or five sentences of scripture that we call 'The Comfortable Words.' For those of us who remember the old Prayer Book, rite they were words that came after the general confession and absolution: 'Hear what comfortable words our Saviour saith unto all that truly turn to him.' I think in our modern rite they have been put in a better position, for Matthew these words were not about penitence, they were about the person of Jesus—the person whose life was one completely balanced. So these words are now placed during preparation to receive communion, wonderful words to hear as you step forward. 'Come to me' ... the yoke of Christ is one of perfect balance.

There is indeed deep wisdom in knowing our need of balance, there is wisdom in knowing that our true humanity lies in our communion, and there is wisdom in knowing the struggles that take place within us. Wisdom calls to both repentance and celebration; this is beyond understanding and intelligence. It is a call to prayer and a call to introspection. This self-awareness is part of our Christian tradition. It began with St Paul and we can see it played out in St Augustine's confessions, the first great autobiography, when he wrote: 'and I directed myself toward myself and I asked myself, "Who are you?"'

I cannot for one moment imagine a robot or supercomputer asking this question, not even Hal from *2001: A Space Odyssey*! And as for prayer ... next time you speak to a robotic voice on the phone ask it if it will pray for you and see what happens!

Amen.