

Genesis 1:1-3

Psalm 107

John 20:11-18

Being human etsi homo non daretur

Sermon (Part the First)

Artificial intelligence has been the subject of a couple of seminars in our church over the last couple of weeks, which have provoked my thinking in relation to the scripture texts we'll hear in a little while.

There seem to be two basic concerns prompted by artificial intelligence technology. The first arises with all technology. As useful as it might be, to what extent does our technology threaten us, particularly given that it is handled by people we are not sure we trust? Yet AI presents nothing new here; it just poses again a question with which we've long wrestled: who has the monopoly on power and violence? This matters, of course, but it's an old question in a new form.

The second concern is more interesting: that AI might become a kind of "alien equivalent" to us. By this I mean that AI might develop to threaten us in a way not unlike Little (and not so little) Green Men threaten us in science fiction stories. Or, more positively, perhaps AI will develop into something so like us that we don't know anymore how we should relate to it. Would moral responsibility arise with respect to our machines, which are now possibly no longer "technology", no longer objects but subjects?

These latter possibilities raise the question of what it means to be human, and this will be our focus this morning. What would we look for as an indicator that our responsibilities to each other as natural-born human beings should be extended to some other reality in the world – to an artificial intelligence, for instance? What makes us human? What is our unique thing? What would AI have to achieve or manifest for us to see ourselves in it, requiring that we relate to it as we relate to each other?

To think about this, we'll start by noting what happens when we try to think what *God* is.

We have all wondered at some time, *What is God?* Or *why* is there a god, or why should God *matter* to us? We have each found answers to these kinds of questions, for better or worse. And yet, a problem quickly arises with answers to the God question. To find a "reason" for God amounts to finding something God does which we don't already have other things to do. We find some *necessity* for God. The problem for a God so proven is that other gap-filers eventually come along. And so this kind of God – the god who fills the gaps in our world – has a habit of getting smaller and smaller as we fill those gaps with clever new discoveries. Thinking ahead, it seems inevitable that God will eventually disappear as our self-confidence grows. And indeed, many have drawn that conclusion: why bother with an ice-box God when you've got a refrigerator and, indeed, a refrigerator which lets you sleep in on Sundays?

This is *enormously* important. If once, with no other recourse, we prayed for healing, now we have penicillin. If once we prayed for safety in the dark of the night, now we have security lighting. Who needs a God, given our ever-developing technological skill?

Our empty churches have much to do with this way of thinking, not least because the churches themselves have leaned heavily on the purported usefulness of God.

But the God of Christian faith is not a god of the gaps, is not a soon-to-be-superseded *technology* to meet some presently felt need. To put it most strongly, the Jewish-Christian God is properly “useless”, neither an answer to a question, nor a solution to a problem. In his prison reflections on the problem of the stopgap god 80 years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer borrowed a Latin expression to propose that we need to live *etsi deus non daretur*: “as if God were not there”. This was not to say that God does not *matter* but that God does not have a “thereness” like the thereness of everything else in the world. God does not “fit” into the world because God is a kind of “thing” different from the other things in the world, having a different “there-ness”.

Now, imagining living *with* God as if God *were not there* is hardly straightforward. But it gets *worse*.

When AI prompts the thought that our machines might become too much like us, we search for what makes us *us*, in order to mark the distinction between ourselves and the human-looking things AI might become.

But, shifting now from thinking what God is to thinking what we are, we find the problem of locating God is a problem we have even for ourselves. Whenever we identify something about ourselves that seems uniquely human, we find it elsewhere. If it is our capacity to laugh, we discover that other animals also do something like laughter. If we think it might be tool-making, we find other non-human tool makers. If it is our capacity for grammatical language, we discover that other animals have something similar. If it’s our capacity to mourn or deceive, we find sad tricksters with fur or feathers.

All our attempts to find a specialness about ourselves end up in much the same way as our efforts to find the thing which makes God special and, so, useful. What is distinctly human shrinks in the same way that failed proofs of God see God contract. In the end, we find that there’s nothing unique about us. We differ from other things in the world only in quantity, not quality; being human is a spectrum condition.

So, in order to save ourselves from just being clever apes, do we not have to do the same for the human as we do for God? If we are to live in the world as if God were not there, *etsi deus non daretur*, do we also live as if the human were not there: *etsi homo non daretur*? Are we to live as if we were not quite “there”?

The short answer, from the Christian perspective, is Yes: to be properly human is to be not quite “there”, in the way that God is not quite there.

And surely we now want to recall old Nicodemus again, from Chapter 3: How can such things be? (See [the July 20 sermon](#)).

Now, if you’ve been able to keep up with me to this point, you’ve probably been working too hard to notice how long it has taken me to get to our biblical texts for today. It has taken this long because the text itself is not quite “there” in a helpful way until we’ve done some of this kind of work.

Let’s now see what the beginning of the old creation narratives and John’s account of the empty tomb and the resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene tell us about human thereness. As we hear the text, listen for how there-ness – and not-there-ness – lurks behind the action and exchanges.

(→ *Genesis 1.1-3 and John 20. 11-18*)

Sermon (Part the Second)

The other disciples have been and gone, but Mary peers once more into the tomb. She sees “two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.” That is, these angelic figures mark something of an absence: this is where the head and the feet of Jesus “were”. But what kind of absence, what kind of not-there-ness, is this?

A hint is given in what happens next. The angels ask Mary a seemingly stupid question: “Why are you weeping?”, as if that weren’t obvious. She replies, “They have taken away my Lord”. And we see now that the angels’ question invites her to speak her truth – her *wrong* truth: she equates the there-ness Jesus’ dead body should have had with what she thought was the thereness of living Jesus she had loved. The poignancy is not just her very real grief but her mistaken grasp of what has been at play in Jesus.

Mary then turns and sees Jesus standing in the garden, but *doesn’t* see him, either: “...she did not know that it was him”. We’re accustomed here to psychologising the drama, imagining that she is blind with grief. But the Gospel-writer John doesn’t do psychology. Mary can’t see Jesus when he is *not* there (in the ordinary sense, in the tomb), but she *also* can’t see him when he *is* there in the ordinary sense, standing in front of her.

This is to say that *there-ness* – tangibility, measurability, probe-ability, objectivity – is not the appropriate way to think about Jesus. And this is not a special characteristic of the resurrection moment. We’ve noted before how John’s Jesus often seems to answer the questions that should have been asked rather than those that actually were. It’s as if those who engage him have mis-taken what he is, his peculiar there-ness, and so approached him from the wrong direction. They see him, but wrongly, because he’s not quite there in the way they think. This is has been the case long before Jesus meets Mary outside the tomb.

But if Jesus is the fullness of human being, and they cannot see him as he truly is, then they have mistaken even their own humanity. Looking for the wrong thing in Jesus, Mary shows herself to *be* the wrong thing. Jesus cannot properly appear until Mary herself does.

And Mary doesn’t properly appear – even to herself – until she is properly *seen*, and it is Jesus whose seeing of her is marked with the utterance of her name: “Mary”.

And *now* Mary sees him.

This recognition is from neither a familiar friendliness she hears in the tone of his voice nor the invocation of a special intimacy they might have shared. Jesus doesn’t catch Mary’s grief-distracted attention. He *calls her into being*. And God said, Let there be...*Mary*! And there *was* Mary.

And so she responds not with a familiar “Jesus!” or even “Lord”, but with Rabbouni, “Teacher”, because now she truly sees.

And *what* does she see? Not the *risen* Jesus as a special event. It is what he has *always* been that now appears. Jesus never quite fits the expectations or questions of those around him in John’s Gospel because he is not “there” in the way everyone else is. They look for the wrong thing, for something that is there as they expect it to be.

But here in the garden, something else happens. Mary now knows that her being seen makes possible her own seeing. The “Lord” who, she laments, was taken from the tomb, is then not the one she proclaims to the disciples. She announces not “I have seen the Lord” as if he had not been visible before, but “I have *finally* seen the Lord,” as he was

always there to be seen, but we did not see: as the one who sees us into being, the one by whose seeing we finally come to be “there”.

To say that God is not quite there, after the mode of Bonhoeffer, is to say that God is not a gap-filling thing we can take up, not a tool, not an object we can manipulate but, so to speak, is rather always just out of our reach. This is not yet the gospel; it’s just a clear thought about what the word “God” could sensibly mean.

But the gospel is that if God is always just out of our reach, *we* are always within *God’s* reach. God is, as it were, always just ahead of us, calling us, drawing us, *dragging* us forward. We can’t reach forward to grasp God, but God reaches back to grasp us. God’s not-thereness is the kind of not-thereness of arriving-in-just-a-moment.

But because the arriving-in-just-a-moment God is not quite here, so also are we not quite here, but *become* properly here, there, when we lean forward into God’s call to the future. The uniqueness of the human is that we are not quite there, but always becoming. To be human – to be properly there as God creates us to be – is always to be on the *cusp* of being.

To think about the humanity of our machines requires that we understand our proper, cusping existence. But AI is not our most pressing problem. What presses in on us most is not our machines but that we ourselves don’t live on the cusp of God’s call into being.

We live, rather, in the shadowlands of what seems to be so, of everything we have done and that has been done to us, of the limits of what we can see and touch, of what we imagine to be there. And so we have our wars and our deteriorating natural environment, our political confusions and our domestic violence, our selfishness and our insecurities, our walls and our genocides.

All of this arises out of the quiet – and not so quiet – chaos of living out of the wrong kind of thereness, the chaos which arises when we mis-take ourselves.

But into this void, this darkness, this deep, God speaks to create once again:

Let there be...Mary

Let there be... (name)

Let there be... (name)

Let there be... (name)

Let there be ... light.
