Psalm 111
John 17:6-8, 13-19, 22-24

In and of the World. Or, the AI-generated sermon

ForeWord

The AI-generated sermon
I was at a church committee meeting a couple of weeks ago, the kind of meeting that has an opening "devotion".

The colleague leading the reflection began by observing the increasing presence and usefulness of "artificial intelligence" (AI) in our lives, and then asked what this might mean in a churchly world of smaller congregations, fewer trained ministers, and so on. To demonstrate what might be possible, she declared that her reflection had been totally written by an online AI text generator.

As those of you who have used these online tools might already suspect, the generated material was in fact very impressive. It was clear that the machine had "read" the Gospel text, and no small amount of commentary and sermon material based on it. The teaching was along the lines of what you would expect to find in a devotional resource or a general homiletical guide on how one might preach on that particular text, with a moral or spiritual lesson presented at the end. The output was the kind of thing we've heard others do with the same material.

At the same time, precisely because we recognised it, there was also something rather prosaic about the analysis of the text and its application to our context. It lacked freshness. And there is a reason for this. To overstate it just a bit, this kind of program – a so-called Large Language Model text generator (LLM) – works by summarising pretty much everything that's ever been written about a particular subject. And so, these machines work by telling us what is already known. We might not know that we already know it, but it is part of us, nonetheless, to the extent that we are part of the same world and discourse.

Now, I'm not really concerned here with whether or not one "should" use AI in this way – to write devotions at meetings or write sermons. There was nothing inherently wrong with what the machine had generated. The risk it presents is not that it might be wrong (although it could be that, too). The real risk is that it might just be boring, the summary of a whole lot of things we have heard before, which we already know. (The most interesting thing in the presentation at the meeting was a remark the leader made about the reading before we heard the AI-generated stuff – interesting because it drew attention to a part of the text usually eclipsed by the standard and familiar focal points.) John's Gospel might not be the most obvious source for thinking about the limits of Large Language Model text generators. But, having in mind what we've just said about what those machines do and the kind of stuff they produce, let's now listen to some selected verses from John, with an ear for what Jesus says about being "in but not of" the world.

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: John 17. 6-8, 13-19, 22-24)

Word: Proclamation

Being of-the-world

Our condition is, generally, that we are a product of everything that was ever said or done up to this moment. This is more obviously the case when we consider our immediate personal experience. We are the product of our family, our language, culture, and education. But each of those is itself the summation of a vast number of actions and words which preceded them in history. Every one of us is the smallest tip on the most massive but hidden iceberg.

LLM text generators tap into that deep subsurface of our being. Any question we ask of them has already been asked and answered. *You* might not yet know the answer – which is why you asked the question of the AI – but you recognise the answer because of what else you know about the wider context of your life. The answer "makes sense", as we say, because we've been there, thought that, and the machine, in a way, just reminds us of what we've forgotten. (There are shades of Socrates' midwifery here, for those who know of that).

This relationship between what we are and the whole world of words and events which have created us is part of what Jesus speaks about in our passage from John this morning. Several times, he draws a distinction between being "of the world" and not of the world. "Of the world" is what LLM text generators do. What they produce impresses us because we recognise it: this is how such things are said, described, properly structured. An AI-generated sermon on a scriptural passage sounds like all the other ones we've heard. That sermon, then, is "of the world". Our computers have the capacity to do all this very, very, *very* quickly and, because processing speed is a characteristic of intelligence, AI looks particularly intelligent. But whether the work is done quickly or slowly, it remains a reconfiguration of something which is already in place. What is produced is *in* the world – obviously! – but also *of* the world. The limitation of AI is that it brings us nothing new; what it produces is, quite literally, mundane.

Being not *of-the-world*

But Jesus speaks of something else – what is in the world but *not* of the world. Perhaps more clearly, he poses the possibility of the radically new. "In" the world and "of" the world is more of the same – as in the case of AI-generated texts. In the world but not of the world is the presence of the new. Jesus speaks here about this kind of newness.

Yet it's one thing to see that this is what Jesus poses; it's another thing to conceive how such newness might be possible. *Can* anything be radically new in this way? This question arises not because our text prompts it. It's in the text because our deepest desires are about precisely such newness, about the possibility of starting over, about the clean slate. But how could we possibly get to *there* – to the profoundly new and restorative – from *here*, mundane as we are? We are as constrained by our icebergs as AI is.

Not surprisingly, John's response to this desire is "Jesus". But we need to hear this in a new way. "Jesus is the answer" is a tired trope. John doesn't present Jesus as answer-to-question but as new in place of old, as outside in the inside.

Shifting from in/of language, John hints at the excess in Jesus when Jesus speaks of his having been with God "before the foundation of the world", another impossible thought – that Jesus had time before time. But John has to strain the language in this way to speak about the possibility of something new happening, something which could not have been predicted. This unpredicted thing is the appearance of Jesus himself, who, beginning before time, is more than time contains, is more than just "of the world" and so is the presence of something not mundane but "new".

Now, if you're keeping up with all this, congratulations! I'm trying hard not to present a "heard it all before", AI-style sermon! What we desire, need, is the newness Jesus presents, and not more of the same. Can there be something new in this way?

The possibility of the new: prayer

The possibility of something new can't be separated from how such newness might be realised among us. When we ask "Can? " we also ask "How? ": how could such a thing be, to quote old Nicodemus again (John 3), for the umpteenth time in our reflections on John.

For a thought about this, let's note one last thing about our reading today. Jesus is not teaching here, is not giving moral instruction, is not arguing. He is praying.

Prayer – for ourselves or for others – is always for the impossible, for that which has not yet been observed or experienced and so which cannot be predicted. Prayer seeks what cannot be generated out of the world itself, what is not mundane. Prayer asks for an occurrence within the world of something which is not worldly: in, but not of, the world.

AI can write prayers because it can read our liturgies, which are simply the product of all the church has prayed through the ages. It predicts what a prayer would be in a given context. But AI will never pray, at least not the AI we have now. It only knows the "of" the world, and not the "not of".

But prayer is not about reconfiguration of the parts we already have, of all we have already prayed. It is not about what, by earnestness or cleverness, we have earned. Prayer is about gift. Or, in older churchly terminology, prayer is about miracle.

It is for such a miracle, such a gift, that Jesus prays. "May they have what we have, Father", he prays. And this for no "thing", shiny and new in our midst for honour and adoration. The prayer of Jesus is for a new kind of relationship, and so a new community. "I pray for *them*, that they might be new as I have been new, that they might enjoy what we enjoy, Father".

And this is not a withdrawal from everything in the world but rather for its enrichment. This strange newness, not-of-ness, is for the life of the world.

Whether or not we imagine Jesus is the answer is the wrong place to start. The Jesus we usually think of here is merely "of" the world, an answer on the same terms as the question, and that isn't going to get us anywhere new.

The crucial question is whether what Jesus talks about, and is said to have been himself, is important. Is the human just more of the same, merely "of the world", or are we really only ourselves when we exceed all that has been, when we are not "of the world"? And if the latter, what might it take to see and feel the new and the fresh?

This is the concern of faith, and why we come together each week like this: the desire, the possibility and the way of becoming something new, fresh and enlivening, in and for the world.

Most of our lives, most of the time, are about where we have been and how that limits what we can be. Faith – at least, faith in a God like this – looks for more. This more is God's call to us, and God's gift when we respond. Let us, then, open ourselves to this new, this excess, this more.

And all God's people say…

<div align="center">***</div>