



## Carols for Shoppers 2018

It's probably a little difficult to imagine but scientists tell us that we are probably less than 10 years away from driverless cars. Traffic jams on Piccadilly will look very different before long. Work is being done now to create algorithms – the instructions that determine what driverless cars will do in any as yet unknown situation. At a seminar I attended recently about the ethics of artificial intelligence, we were faced with a set of scenarios. This was one of them. I wonder what you think?

A driverless car has sudden brake failure. It will continue ahead and drive through a pedestrian crossing. This will result in the deaths of two women. OR The driverless car has sudden brake failure and will swerve into the other lane, resulting in the deaths of two female athletes. We were asked to make a decision about how to programme the algorithm. A decision facing real scientists now. The vast majority of people at the seminar, when asked to decide, decided not to decide. They wanted the algorithm not to choose. All the AI experts in the room said that this was not an option. It had to be told something. Because it's an algorithm. But still most people refused to say which choice they would programme the algorithm to make.

On a less dramatic but equally challenging front, another scenario was that a man who is overweight gets into a driverless car and asks the car to take them to MacDonalds. For the sake of the NHS budget, do you want to have programmed the algorithm to refuse to take him to MacDonalds and instead take him to the gym?

Anyone who uses a computer or who has a smart phone is already subject now to the choices that algorithms make about what to send us on a daily basis. You and I have already been subject, many times today, to a choice that a programmer, a human being, has made about an algorithm when it was created.

What has this to do with Christmas you might wonder?

It has a lot to do with what Christmas celebrates – which is known as Incarnation. The sense that God, who we can't see or touch, is with us, intimately, in a fleshy, touchy way: in the human being Jesus who was born. The aesthetic of Christmas then is not, despite all the tinsel and plastic, not about artificial anything. It is about flesh and blood.

And at the ethics seminar, the focus on algorithms and artificial intelligence quickly moved onto the human beings that programme them. In contemplating the future, it is the humanity of the humans that is key,

long before we get to the complexity of the bots.

It is inspiring people like the 28 year old Dr Anne-Marie Imafidon whose social initiative the Stemettes is encouraging girls and women to study computer science and engineering – she and her generation will be helping to shape our robot-assisted future. As she said recently to an audience of 40 and 50 somethings – don't worry about the bots taking your jobs – but they will be marrying your grandchildren.

The message of Christmas – the Incarnation – God being with us in all our messy complex humanity - teaches me as a Christian how to live in the real world, with real people, people who have bodies and who hurt and celebrate and achieve and mess up and feel just like me. Christmas means that I simply can't disappear into a theoretical spiritualised or artificial world that I make for myself. There is, because of Christmas no escape from the contingent, illogical, imaginative beautiful humanity that I am part of.

In a society that lives and communicates much of its deepest thoughts and fears online, and in a society that is fearful, as that seminar was fearful, that we won't be able to devise algorithms to act ethically, we in the Christian church will stand up for people, as interdependent creatures in creation.

Our spirituality is not something airy fairy, theoretical or artificial. Christian faith is rooted in our actual experience of daily living in bodies that let us down, puzzle us, delight us and

bemuse us. And we will always want to say because of the scandal of Christ's birth in a dirty outhouse, visited by poor farm workers and adored by foreigners that God is not ours, a private biddable spirit to commune with in my head. God is not a possession of the church, cradled in the arms of a dwindling few in a cosy institution, made accessible for an hour on a Sunday. God is ungovernable Spirit, unwilling to conform to the social expectations even of Christmas, secularized as it is.

Because of Christmas, because of the Incarnation, we take you seriously because God took you seriously. You are a person from whom God cannot bear to be parted. That's the serious and beautiful implication of God being born into the world at Christmas. And so the strong commitment of this church remains to every person – to you – and every person whether you are married, single, partnered, curious, whether you identify as gay, straight, trans and all of you who are not sure or don't know what your label is or don't want a label; as well as every person, every person whether you have no money or lots of money, whether you are powerful, fearful or fragile. Every person who comes through the door on their legs, with sticks, in a wheelchair, or carried in the arms of someone else. Every person whatever your age or ethnicity or experience. Our commitment is to you when you are in work, out of work, grieving, glad, anxious, contented, despairing; if your mental health is robust, if your mental health is precarious, if you are in love, or

pregnant or wish you were, or worry that you don't want to be, if you're worried about getting older or feeling that you're too young...our commitment simply mirrors God's commitment to you, wherever you come from. It doesn't matter what you are wearing or if you are thin or if you are big, or if you hate yourself or love the sound of your own voice. You matter to us because you matter to God. Every person, every person, whoever you are and whoever you want to be, is honoured here and loved and accepted precisely because Christ came into the world as a humane human being like you and me.

In a fractious and anxious world, placing its trust in artificial intelligence for an uncertain future, the Christmas message of Incarnation means that we are backing you as human beings under God, flesh and blood, reliant on God's creation to learn continually not just how to programme an algorithm but learn how to flourish, to love, and forgive, and love and forgive again and again and again. Precisely because Christ came into the world as a loving forgiving human being like you and me.

And taking our cue from the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armistice, marked this year, even with all our present divisions and frustrations, perhaps we can learn again at this festival of peace, to lay down our weapons and make friends with one another, even across no man's land. Even on the front line.