Sermon HC with prayers for healing Sunday 18 Oct 2026 Isaiah 35.1-6, Luke 10.1-9

Can you hug a robot?

Our readings from the bible today are full of hope – the prophet Isaiah picturing a landscape perhaps devastated by war, once again being fertile, fruitful, and people likewise healed, restored to health. And Jesus, referring to a rich harvest and sending out a whole crowd of messengers to let people know that the kingdom of God was just around the corner; a kingdom where, as in Isaiah's vision, there would be healing.

This morning I'm going to focus on well being and health as an aspect of healing. I am told that there are three things that contribute to well being and health – safety, connection and purpose. **Safety, connection and purpose.** In order to thrive, we need to feel safe. Then connecting with our surroundings, especially nature and other people is vital. And having a purpose in life is what can get us up in the morning. All three for Christians are bound up with our faith. We believe in a good God who wants good things for us and creation as a whole. Today, I'm focussing on just one of those three things – **connection.**

First of all, I want to consider **connecting with nature**. Some years ago I worked in an office near London Bridge station. Nearby was a housing estate with these words inscribed over the entrance, 'The wilderness shall blossom like the rose' – a quotation from our first reading this morning from the book of Isaiah. ***Slide*** The estate is connected with a woman called Octavia Hill, probably best known as the founder of the National Trust. In that part of London, though, she was a pioneer in social housing. At the height of industrialisation, in the 19th century, housing for factory workers was what would later be seen as slums- back to back terraced houses, small back yard, no indoor washing or toilet facilities; an urban desert in London and other big cities. No green space. Octavia Hill saw the need for a healthier kind of housing, and in particular, she grasped the health giving properties of having a green space next to your home. She designed housing estates with this in mind, housing estates that are still lived in today. She knew, perhaps instinctively, that being able to connect with nature contributes to human well being. It's good for our physical and also mental health. I guess this was also part of her drive to set up the National Trust.

I was reminded of her when we moved into our retirement flat, next to Cintra Park. Every flat in the building can see some green, whether it's the park, the garden belonging to the building, or the trees along the road. Also, the park is designed to encourage exercise – the path around it is exactly 1 km- and people jog round it, run or walk round it, some for many kms. For those of maturer years 1km is a manageable slow walk! It's good for our physical health. And residents will tell you that just going into the park is good for their mental health too.

Human beings are an integral part of creation so it's not surprising that our health and well being are bound up with it. I'm glad that we're an eco church and that we have forest church where children and adults can worship together outdoors. This was inspired during Covid when so many of our interactions were indoors and online.

So, connecting with nature, even something like a cherished house plant or window box; and next, **connecting with each other.**

Slides The National gallery has an exhibition of paintings by Renoir at present. Renoir delights in human connectivity. The people he paints enjoy being together. Rather different from the paintings of Carel Weight, so many of which show people not connecting ***Slide.***

In our gospel we are reminded of how connected Jesus was. He had his 12 close friends, but also a wider group- the 72- whom we see being sent out here, and of course the crowds who came to listen

to him. He interacts with people, comes close to them, and in sending out the 72 he sends them in pairs, not alone; two people connected with each other. He also connects with people he probably didn't greatly warm to – often the religious leaders of his day – and interacts with them. Jesus is a reminder of how God is a God of connection. God longs to connect with each one of us.

Most of us will know people with whom we'd rather not connect, perhaps because we've fallen out with them or they don't seem to understand us. This quite often seems to happen in families, viz the painting by Carel Weight. Other human beings can be quite difficult! This is where AI is stepping in with the possibility of relationships where we are perfectly understood and all our needs met.

Slide of Ann Droid. I know some of us have enjoyed watching this serial on BBC. It concerns an elderly widow with a disfunctional adult son who buys a second hand robot to be her companion. Really she wants him to be her companion, but he is caught up in his own unhappy marriage. Although funny, the story line is also quite seductive. By the end of the series we may be almost persuaded that a robotic companion is a better friend than a real human being. Sue's robot in particular is more in tune with her need for understanding following bereavement than her female friend or her son. The AI bosses would be delighted! An AI robot inventor wants to persuade us that the robot is human, but conveniently much more user friendly than the real thing. Crucially it will do what we want.

Connecting with other people is so often how we encounter Christ. We can't experience this kind of encounter with a machine, a robot. It is not a human being made in God's image. It has no heart, no spirit, no divine spark. They are not huggable! In the Old Testament there are scornful references to nations that worshipped idols. In describing idols one of our psalms might have been referring to robots – Ps 115.4-8 . 'they are the work of human hands. They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes have they but cannot see, ears but cannot hear, noses have they, but cannot smell….those who make them shall become like them and so will all who put their trust in them.' A stark warning!

There is growing evidence that when children are diverted away from interacting with real human beings towards virtual reality on a screen, the part of their brain that is engaged when they relate to people in real life, does not fully develop, and it then becomes more difficult for them to grow in human connectivity. Our brains are wired to form relationships. We need practice in channelling that wiring towards other human beings rather than machines.

Connecting with nature, connecting with other people, and then, **connecting with God**. This is surely the hardest – we can't see, hear, feel, or touch God. Are we somehow connecting with something 'out there', rather like people walking in the dark with their eyes closed? Not entirely – as I've already suggested, we can encounter God in Nature and through other people. In café Communion this week one member referred to a 'God nudge' they had received from someone via an email, for example. We can be alert to such encounters, but we can't control them. Unlike an AI robot which can do what we want, having been fed with information we have generated, we have no means of controlling God. We can, though, be confident that God seeks to connect with us. We know this because God chose to become one of us in Jesus Christ. And every Sunday we celebrate and renew that connection as we gather for Holy Communion ***Slide***

When we pray for healing, then, we might consider those three areas for connectivity- nature, other people and God. Might there be one of them where we desire a healing touch, perhaps in relation to someone with whom we find it hard to connect? Our church offers opportunities to engage with all three of them. May our church also be a place - to go back to those 3 main conditions for human wellbeing and health – **safety, connection and purpose** – where people feel safe and where they might discover more of God's purpose for their lives.

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