Technology and our Church (past, present, and future).

Written by Steve Finnie, delivered by Ann Kader

Order of Service.

Opening music (about 3.17 minutes)

That was called **a common humanity** – it was composed by AIVA (Artificial Intelligence Virtual Artist), an AI composing soundtrack music tool.

In other words, a computer and not a human composition.

https://youtu.be/hmRzBVOF23M?si=xsnY-ObmOUACL44d

Welcome and Introduction

Today's theme is technology and our church, past present and future.

This service was written by Steve. Steve doesn't like speaking in public, so I offered to deliver it.

When I say I in this service, I mean Steve, as they are his words.

Chalice is lit.

Technology has had a profound impact on nearly every aspect of our lives including our religious one.

For many senior members of our congregation, we have seen technological advances that were unimaginable in our youth become a reality.

Remember the mobile phones in the 1980s? They were the size of bricks. Look at them now, they are tiny, can even fold in half and fit in your back pocket.

It is said our mobile phones have more computing power than NASA used to go to the moon in the 1960s.

Most of us would be lost without our mobile or what we now call smart phones. Look around the next time you are on a bus, train, or plane. The majority will be on their phones. It is has become their digital god.

And with the advent of the internet, we can now access a wealth of information on almost any topic at our fingertips within seconds.

It is however important to use technology responsibly and not become overly reliant on it to maintain a healthy balance in our lives.

Look at the chaos that happens when a computer system fails, for example air traffic control. Thousands of flights are cancelled or delayed, and it can cause misery for travellers.

In 2022 in the Shetland Islands, a deep-sea cable was damaged, and the population lost all phone and internet connectivity cutting them off from the world for days.

Imagine if this happened across Britain? It would cripple us.

Technology can also lead to a divide between generations as older members may struggle to adapt to technological advancements that younger generations embrace readily.

Are we in danger of becoming like Icarus and flying too close to the sun?

Are we becoming techno-junkies or techno-zombies?

Readings

The following are two readings warning us of the dangers of technology.

The first reading is from the Hebrew Bible. It is the Tower of Babel from GENESIS 11. Verses 1-9.

This well-known biblical tale is often quoted as a warning of the consequences of man trying to become like God.

The people of Babel sought to build a tower to elevate themselves to the level of God. However, God intervenes and disrupts their plans.

It is a story of the danger of human pride and the consequences of trying to reach beyond our limitations.

The second reading is the story of the Greek god Prometheus.

The Tower of Babel

"Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.

As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly."

They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar.

Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.

The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language, they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.

Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

So, the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.

That is why it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world.

From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth."

The myth of Prometheus.

This tale is a warning from Greek mythology of the consequences of man interfering in the realm of the gods.

Prometheus in Greek mythology was one of the Titans, and his attempts to better the lives of mortal man placed him into direct conflict with Zeus, King of Olympus, and head of the Greek pantheon.

Zeus refused to give mortal man the gift of fire. 'Not a spark will I give. If men had fire, they might become strong and wise like us, and drive us out of our kingdom.'

Fire represents knowledge, technology, and progress.

Prometheus defies Zeus and steals fire from the workshop of the god Hephaestus on Mount Olympus.

For this disobedience both Prometheus and man are punished.

Prometheus is chained to a mountain where each day his liver is pecked out and eaten by an eagle, the sacred symbol of Zeus.

As a god, his liver regenerates. This cycle of the eagle pecking out his liver continues daily, day after day, after day for 30,000 years, until he is finally rescued by Heracles.

Man is punished for the gift of fire with the creation of Pandora.

Not the jewellery chain in Drake Circus, but the first mortal woman, the Greek mythology version of Eve.

Pandora is extraordinarily beautiful, but on the instructions of Zeus has also been made extremely curious.

Like Eve, Pandora has a forbidden fruit never to be eaten, but it is in the shape of a box, or what most scholars now believe to be the correct translation from the Greek, a jar.

This jar must never, ever, under any circumstances be opened.

Pandora's curiosity is her biblical serpent. Unable to resist, she opens the jar, as Zeus knew she would, and all manner of evils and curses are released upon the world.

Her actions like Eve's result in the end of Eden, our earthly paradise is forever changed.

This myth shows that technology has consequences for man. There is a price to pay to become like the gods.

The story of Pandora and Eve is also proof that misogyny is indeed the world's oldest prejudice.

1st **Hymn 1 no. 128 – 'Our world is one world' (purple).**

Our world is one world in many ways due to technology, which is why Steve chose that as a hymn.

Part A. Technology in the past which has helped shape our church.

It was the printing press, credited with being invented by Johannes Gutenberg that made it possible to produce books and pamphlets on a massive scale.

Before that, books were painstakingly handwritten and expensive. Only the church and nobility could afford them.

Books were primarily produced by monasteries in a room called a scriptorium.

The word literally means a place for writing. Monks devoted their entire lives to the writing, copying, and illuminating of manuscripts.

Their work became a religious act for the monks, one of meditation and prayer.

If you watch the 1986 movie The Name of the Rose starring Sean Connery and based on the novel by Umberto Eco, many of the scenes are in a medieval abbey scriptorium and library.

The printing press led to an information revolution; it was the internet of its day.

It is said the renaissance, reformation and humanist movements would all have been unthinkable without Gutenberg's invention, and I would say it is the technological invention from the past that has had the most impact for us as a church and denomination.

Let's now fast forward to the next technological marvel that impacted on our religious lives.

The 1920s and 30s were the golden age of radio. One of the most famous Christian evangelists who was known for her innovative use of radio to reach a wider audience was Aimee Semple McPherson.

She was a pioneer in the use of modern media for evangelical purposes and her legacy as a female preacher and religious leader remains influential to this day.

Billy Graham, the renowned American evangelist also used his radio program called THE HOUR OF DECISION to speak to millions across America and the world.

And then came the 1950s, the decade of the bible movie.

The bible was brought to the big screen in an epic scale mainly in response to the rise of television which posed a threat to the film industry.

Some of the blockbusters of this era include Samson and Delilah starring Hedy LAMARR as the Philistine femme-fatale.

LAMARR was not only a beautiful and talented actress, but an inventor as well. The technology she pioneered forms the basis for today's Wi-Fi, GPS, and Bluetooth technology.

Other notable biblical epics include Quo Vadis, The Robe, The Ten Commandments, and Salome.

But it was BEN HUR: a tale of the Christ starring Charlton Heston that is widely considered the best bible epic of that era, winning a record 11 Oscars.

The chariot race is considered one of the most exciting scenes in cinematic history, and it would be 40 years later until another movie, Titanic matched its Oscar record.

Religious movies continue to provide a rich source of inspiration for filmmakers and generate both controversy and profit.

Remember the scandal of Monty Python's Life of Brian? It was considered blasphemous.

Or The Last Temptation of Christ?

Or The Passion of the Christ which generated both controversy and staggering box office receipts.

And finally, television.

It was in 1961 that Songs of Praise was first broadcast on television, and it still runs to this day.

Several American televangelists in the 1980s were brought down by sex and financial mismanagement scandals, a real-life religious soap opera that the tabloid press had a field day over.

Despite these scandals, the impact of televangelism on American Christianity and popular culture remains a significant chapter in the history of religious broadcasting.

Other significant religious TV shows include the mini-series Jesus of Nazareth, The Vicar of Dibley, and more recently, The Chosen, which was recommended to us by Myron.

And now we have a short prayer which was written by a computer.

Prayer

This prayer was written by a prayer generator using the latest AI computer technology.

The website is called writemeaprayer.com.

There are three fields to generate your prayer:

1. What is the topic of the prayer? Steve typed in technology.
2. Who is this prayer for? Steve typed in the words my church.
3. What language do you want the prayer in? English

You then click on a generate prayer button and the prayer is produced in about 15 seconds.

Please note the prayer is more religious than our normal prayers and uses the word, Lord.

"Lord, you have blessed us with technology that reduces the boundaries between us.

Through technology, we can connect in meaningful ways to share our joy and our sorrow. For this, we thank you with all our hearts.

We seek your guidance as we use technology to bring Glory to your Name. Show us how we can use technology to serve You and our community by connecting us to those near and far.

Help us to be aware of the potential risks of technology so that we can use it judiciously.

Strengthen our convictions to use technology responsibly, and protect us from harm, both physical and spiritual.

Finally, help us to remain open to the way technology can challenge our thinking, so that we can be a witness to Your Grace and Love in the digital world.

Amen."

Part B. Technology in the present which has helped shape our church.

Technology has enhanced and will continue to enhance your religious experience and life.

We can access information in seconds via the internet.

The rise of eBooks and audio books has made reading and learning more accessible and convenient than ever before, as we can carry entire libraries in our phones. These include online bibles and other religious texts.

Do any of you listen to podcasts? You can pretty much find any spiritual or religious subject for an app or podcast online.

One of the most noticeable ways technology impacts on our church has been how we now conduct religious services.

This is a legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic when religious gatherings were restricted.

Live streaming and video conferencing tools allows most churches to offer virtual services and then upload these services to a YouTube channel.

People can join us in person in the church, or online, regardless of geographical differences.

Jennifer, our trainee minister even delivered a service from her Hastings home, and sometimes we have other Unitarian churches join us online.

Our website is our online bulletin board, how we promote ourselves, how we receive online donations, and usually how people initially contact us.

The social media platforms we use also enable us to advertise our church, share our experiences, and connect with like-minded individuals creating a sense of community and support online across the world.

Churches are also starting to use technology to analyse data on their followers and understand their current and future needs and interests.

I recently attended a tour of the Plymouth Catholic cathedral in Stonehouse.

One of the priests said his mother watches their YouTube channel from Nigeria whenever he gives a mass, just to make sure he looks well and hear his voice. I thought that was so sweet.

I watch a YouTube channel called Virtual Jerusalem. It has over 250,000 followers across the world.

A cameraman walks around biblical sites in Jerusalem with a video recorder and then uploads his walks onto the channel.

It is almost as if you are walking in Jerusalem due to the video camera angle. They're wonderful to watch.

As a non-Muslim I will never be able to visit Mecca. I have however completed a virtual walk using YouTube. It looks amazing.

Many people now work on a Sunday. It is no longer considered a special holy day.

Technology has enabled us to worship when we want, whether that is on a Sunday in person, on Zoom, or watching a recorded service on our YouTube channel at two in the morning in another country.

Like online banking and shopping, you now have access to religion 24/7, 365 days a year.

2nd Hymn no. 40 – 'The depths of inner space' (green book).

We now have a short AI video clip which leads us into the final part of the service.

https://youtu.be/JTK68I2BHtE?si=IgsSgiVxs-N-2akU

Part C. Technology in the future which will shape our church.

Can you imagine trying to explain the internet, or YouTube to someone from the 16th century? It would be difficult, likely impossible.

The same will be for us, and there will be technology in the future we would have difficulty comprehending.

Hybrid church is likely to be the norm in the future. Over the next few decades, it may involve an online minister that does not reside in Plymouth and delivers services online from another part of the UK, even another country.

Due to growing secularisation and the closing of churches, we may have multiple denominations sharing a single sacred space to save costs.

For example, each denomination gets one Sunday a month in the church building, and the rest of the month the separate denominations meet online for services.

Virtual reality (VR) technology in the future will greatly enhance your religious life.

VR could be used over the next few decades to create a virtual online sacred space for religious connection.

We could all be connected and projected into an online VR church, all sitting together as a congregation listening to our minister who lives in another country deliver a service.

It will be as realistic as if we were in the church in person, your physical presence in a virtual environment.

VR church does exist now, but it is in its infancy, particularly in terms of the graphics.

A completely immersive VR world will also enable you to explore and interact with digital representations of sacred sites both past and present.

Imagine being able to walk around biblical Jerusalem and Bethlehem at the time of Jesus, or Rome and Ephesus at the time of Peter and Paul.

It will eventually happen using VR. You will be able to experience the sights, sounds, rituals, even smells!

You could even meet and interact with a digitally created VR Jesus!!

I can guarantee, it is going to happen.

And finally, how do you fancy an AI robot Minister? You've heard of ROBO-COP, how about ROBO-KATE?

AI has been a theme in movies and TV shows for decades, and often seen as a menacing and destructive force to humanity.

However, the portrayal of AI on screen is often exaggerated for dramatic effect, and all new forms of technology are initially met with hostility or reluctance to use.

AI is likely to be of great benefit to humanity, and in a 100+ years will be the new normal.

I am however uncertain if AI would be suitable for a religious role such as a minister, as this role remains a deeply human and, for many a personal and spiritual calling.

One thing we can all be certain of though, it is that technology in the future will be weirder than any of us can ever conceive in our wildest imagination, or is it nightmares?

Thank you for listening.

Conclusion.

Instead of closing words this week, it is a closing pledge.

Why don't you try a technology-free evening once a week or even once a month?

No outbound calls, no checking your emails, no social media, TV, or radio. Instead relax with a book (paper, not eBook), a game or hobby that does not require technology.

Music. Our closing music is an AI composed piece performed by human players.

The software, an AI music composition system was fed a few measures of composer Franz Schubert and composed a piece of music based on this initial musical idea.

Chalice extinguished.

Music is played

"Deep Space: AI-composed music, performed by humans"

https://youtu.be/BTLONBQiYFs?si=KOm7RO_8-f5x5HuR