

I've been thinking a lot recently about artificial intelligence – AI.

One AI tool – called Chat-GPT – can create text – that seems like the kind of thing that a person might write.

I asked Chat-GPT to write me an 8-line poem on the subject of St Albans Cathedral.

This is what it came up with:

St Albans Cathedral, a sacred delight,
Its spires reach for heavens, a heavenly sight.
Whispers of prayers in ancient stone walls,
Echo through time, where serenity calls.

Stained glass windows, vibrant and grand,
Tell tales of devotion in hues that expand.
A beacon of faith, standing strong and tall,
St Albans Cathedral, a divine enthrall.

What d'you think? — It's not brilliant.

But it's not totally terrible, either ... even though there are some definite inaccuracies – or you could say “*untruths*”.

I mean ... we don't have *any* spires.

Three years ago – at the beginning of the pandemic – I was shocked by something I read on social media.

It was a statistic that had been forwarded by a friend of mine – someone I greatly respect.

He reported that since the start of lockdown – the suicide rate had gone up –
not just by a bit ...

No. The suicide rate had doubled.

This was so disturbing that I shared the information with my own social media followers.

The problem was – as I discovered later – that statistic was completely false –
a fabricated – so-called “fact” –
a piece of disinformation –
fake news.

When I look at politics – or at the media – in recent years – but perhaps it's always been the case –

I see example after example of –
half-truths and equivocations –

elusive language and –
misrepresentations designed to mislead the unsuspecting.

Wherever they're they come from – whether it's –
deliberate deception –
the inadvertent sharing of falsehoods –
or the synthetic manufacture of text by the latest artificial intelligence systems –
we seem to be enveloped in a fog of troublesome words and misleading
language.

The reason for this isn't hard to fathom.

It's because words have power.

With just a few words you can ...

declare your love –
start a war –
win a contract –
lose your reputation.

Words can change the course of history:

"I have a dream ..."
"This was their finest hour ..."

Words have the power to build somebody up:

"Thank you. That was great."

Words have the power to wreck a life:

"You're useless. – You realise you'll never succeed."

And if words are powerful – then the most powerful words of all – are the words spoken by
God.

The prophet Isaiah – in our first lesson – describes how the word of God is – an active –
dynamic – force in the world.

Isaiah compares God's word to the rain and snow that makes the earth fruitful ...

"... so shall God's word be that goes out from His mouth,
it shall not return empty,
but it shall accomplish that which God purposes, and succeed in the thing for
which God sends it ..."

Anyone who's ever spent any time reading the stories of the Bible will have noticed what an
important part God's word plays.

Before the origin of the cosmos, we read:

In the beginning was the Word ...

God forms all of creation through speaking:

And God said, "Let there be light!"

Lives are changed when God speaks:

The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country ... to a land that I will show you."

When God's people have gone astray – it's by speaking through the prophets – that God calls them back:

Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: "Say to them, 'Thus says the Lord...'"

And when Jesus teaches the people – he does so in parables – using words:

Jesus told them a parable, saying: "Listen! A Sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path..."

As we listen to this last parable – the one we heard read to us this morning – we realise that Jesus isn't just *speaking* words ...

He is speaking *about the* Word – the Word of God.

When the disciples ask Jesus about the parable, he explains:

"Hear then the parable of the Sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom ..."

Jesus is telling us about what happens when we hear the word of the kingdom.

In Mark and Luke's Gospel – the meaning is even clearer:

"The Sower sows the word ..."

"Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God ..."

The parable is telling us what might happen when we hear God's word ...

not the misleading words of the politicians of the media –

not the accidental falsehoods of social media –

not the random ramblings of the AI ...

... but the words of God – that are full of truth and power.

What Jesus says about hearing God's words – is quite true – at least in my own experience.

Sometimes we're like the path.

We hear God's word – but we don't understand it – so it never takes root and grows.

This was my experience as a teenager, first trying for the first time to read the Bible in a systematic way ...

I began with the book of Job –

reading in the King James authorised version –

with no kind of helpful notes to guide me.

So – unsurprisingly – I gave up.

A few years later – as a young adult – I tried again –

and this time everything started to make sense.

Why? ... Because –

I'd got hold of modern translation that used clearer language.

I started my reading with the Gospels – which was a much more sensible place to begin.

And while I was reading the Bible – I had beside me a simple one-volume Bible handbook – which explained what I was reading ...

even with maps and pictures.

Without these things to help me ...

... Otherwise, the word of God might as well have fallen on a barren path.

Then sometimes we're like the rocky ground or the thorny ground.

Everything looks great at first ...

we're touched – even excited – about God's words ...

but this enthusiasm quickly gets choked or snatched away.

That's so often my experience hearing sermons!

I listen to the preacher speak wise – sensible – inspiring words about the Christian faith – and I'm determined to follow their advice and guidance.

Only to discover a few days later – that my life is really not so very different at all.

If we're going to benefit from hearing God's word – of truth and power – then we need to ...

clear away all those distractions –

all those temptations – very possibly good and noble things ...

You know what they are!

We need to clear away everything ...

that gets in the way – and make us lose heart ...

... Otherwise, the word of God might as well have fallen on among thorns – or been scorched by the sun.

We live in a world – of words that are –

untrue –

misleading –

random concatenations of arbitrary vocabulary.

And – as I discovered – it's easy to be taken in by them.

So, we need to be careful.

We need to be wise and discerning in the words we listen to.

Most of all – we need to seek words of truth ...

God's word –

that goes forth from His mouth –

not returning empty,

but accomplishing all that God desires.

The question is:

Will we listen? – Will we understand?

Will we allow ourselves to be shaped by God's word?

Somewhere near here – around 1,700 years ago – the priest, Amphibalus, spoke words to a young man named Alban.

We don't know precisely what he said.

But whatever it was, he spoke words of God.

Alban listened.

These words took root – and bore fruit.

So that over the centuries – many, many more people came to know the truth and love of God.

For the seed that falls on good soil – bears fruit and yields – in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.

That was true for Alban.

And if we pay attention to God's word –

and not to the misleading babble of the world around us –

and if we hear God's word – and understand it – and live it out –

then we, too, will be those whose lives are richly fruitful.