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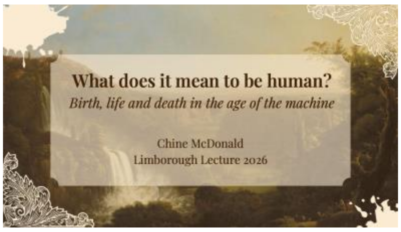

What does it mean to be human?
Birth, life and death in the age of the machine

Chine McDonald
Limborough Lecture 2026

By Chine McDonald

Introduction

Good evening, and thank you for welcoming me to deliver this year’s Limborough Lecture.

It is a true honour to stand in a line of speakers seeking, as James Limborough intended, to “promote wholeness of life and useful religious knowledge.”

We live in an unfathomably wonderful, and at the same time incredibly turbulent and unsettling world, where some of our key foundations are being shaken.

As machines learn, as algorithms predict, as artificial intelligence begins to imitate us, we find ourselves asking again the age-old question: *what does it mean to be human?*

So perhaps I might begin quite simply.
When did you feel most human today?

For me, it was feeling my boots tread against the well-worn pavements of the City — reminding me that I inhabit a body that moves through time and space.

It was being woken in the wee hours by my three-year-old, who is experiencing night terrors. And gathering him, heavy with sleep, in my arms until the nightmare eased and he fell back to sleep.

It was sitting across from prospective new colleagues in face-to-face interviews all day in my office, reading unspoken signals that no screen could show.

It was that first sip of coffee: warmth, familiarity, exhale.

It was the shoulder-to-shoulder press of the commuter train, and yes, the flicker of nervous energy as I stood to speak here tonight.

These small moments of embodiment, relationship, vulnerability — they’re what remind us we are flesh and breath, not code.

The fear of tomorrow

These are extraordinary times. Technology dazzles us with possibility and unsettles us with its speed.

The question pressing upon us is not only *what* machines can do, but *what remains distinct about us when they can do almost everything*.

I am no technophobe. I marvel at the amazing things that technology enables us to do.

But with every new advancement or breakthrough that's announced, I feel a sense of anxiety.

This anxiety isn't new. Humans have always feared the future.

In 1966, British schoolchildren were asked what life would be like in the year 2000. Their answers, watched now with the hindsight of half a century, are both poignant and haunting.

One said, *"I may be in charge of a robot court, judging robots."*

Another imagined *"attending the funeral of a computer."*

Several spoke of boredom — machines everywhere, everyone doing everything for you. A few feared nuclear war; others worried about over-population and pollution.

And one child quietly observed, *"People will be regarded more as statistics than as actual people."*

And one, perhaps prophetically said, that in the future people would be able to go somewhere to commit suicide.

Half a century later, much of that unease still hums beneath our progress.

We fear extinction, automation, climate catastrophe, technological hubris. Yet behind those fears lies a deeper one — that we may somehow lose our humanness.

Human beings have always gazed into tomorrow and been afraid. Medieval Europe braced for the apocalypse in the year 1000, then 1033, then 1500. Newton himself predicted the end for 2060 — so, ominously, there's still time. Humans have long been preoccupied with not just when the end of the world will come, but what will bring it about: nuclear apocalypse, plagues and pandemics, an alien invasion, the machines taking over.

Wars and disasters give each generation its own rehearsal for the end: the Holocaust, Hiroshima, the Cuban Missile Crisis, 9/11. And now? Global turbulence, economic fragility, climate catastrophe — and this new disruption, which feels much closer to home: artificial intelligence.

But maybe the true fear isn't that AI might destroy us; it's that it the nearer term it might make us lose sight of ourselves, it might redefine what it is to be human. That in admiring its precision, we might forget the beauty of being textured, erring, finite creatures.

When the machines stopped

This was no abstract thought for me recently.

Just after Christmas, we had gone to Paris to celebrate our 10th wedding anniversary. After a lovely few days – child-free - my husband and I boarded the Eurostar home and made our way back towards London, only to find ourselves stranded outside the Channel Tunnel for hours.

We were caught up in the chaos that you might remember seeing – probably the worst day ever to be travelling on the Eurostar as technical failures were only hampered by a train getting stuck inside the channel tunnel, which was operating a single track system.

After four hours of waiting on the train, just outside the tunnel, the UK just beyond reach, the announcement came: the train was turning back to Paris Gare du Nord. I was distraught.

In that claustrophobic carriage, I was reminded how fragile our systems are, how quickly sleek efficiency gives way to helplessness. All I wanted was to get home to my children, to hold them, not try and hold their attention on a screen.

While the company's virtual assistant offered "alternative travel options," what I wanted was to talk to a human being, someone I could look in the eye and get a sense that they could empathise, that they understood my plight. Human connection was what was needed when the machines failed.

So we passengers began to talk. Broken French and English, shared frustration, tips and blessings: "Bon courage." "Good luck!" In that inconvenience, humanity quietly re-emerged.

Machines may connect us across miles, but when they fail, we remember what connection really means: attention, compassion, shared time.

Technology offers information; human beings offer presence. Technology can never replace the human touch.

Faith and flesh

In this moment - rather than Christian theology simply putting forward a fearful 'computer says no' when it comes to technological advancement, I think my faith tradition offers some helpful ideas about why we feel uncomfortable about the prospect of losing our humanity in the age of the machine.

We believe we're made for connection – with others, with nature, and with God – and it's a problem when we lose sight of this. Maybe, as writer Paul Kingsnorth notes in his book Against the Machine: "the tension between the virtual and the real, the digital and the organic, the constructed and the born, undergirds all the rifts and ruptures that are opening up within our crumbling society".

When Mary Shelley wrote Frankenstein two centuries ago, she wasn't condemning science itself. She was warning us about ambition unmoored from relationship, creation without compassion. In her 1831 preface she called it "supremely frightful" for humanity to mock the mechanisms of its Creator.

The problem, perhaps, is not technology itself but the ways it tempts us to escape our own flesh and lose sight of our finitude. It moves us towards preferring a frictionless world to a textured one.

If the presenting question is: what does it mean to be human?

Then the Christian tradition offers a helpful framework through which to assess this.

In the theology of my faith tradition, Christ through the incarnation – God becoming human - presents an example of what humanity at its best, at its most human, looks like. Pontius Pilate says of Jesus when he is brought before him after his arrest: "Ecce home"/Behold the man.

In the Christian tradition, the defining sense of what links humans with each other and with God is the *imago Dei* – the image of God, the golden thread that runs through each one of us.

Perhaps this humanness is not in any sense of perfection but in fact found in the sense of being embodied, relational, finite. Christ's humanity is displayed through his vulnerability not his perfection.

We might find in James Limborough's intention in endowing these sermons "to promote wholeness of life and useful religious knowledge", an understanding of that wholeness of life as found in John 10:10 in which Christ says that he came to give life in all its fullness. Life abundantly. An unmachine-like life.

This evening I'm going to attempt to draw out what I think makes us human, distinct from machines and robots and AI, through three main moments – perhaps the defining moments - in a life: birth, life itself (which includes love, work and friendship), and death.

And for each section, I will touch on a particular artwork depicting scenes in Christ's life that might offer a lens through which we can explore these very human moments. In beholding the man.

BIRTH

Every life begins in dependence.

No one brings themselves into existence - not even the Son of God. The Christmas story begins not with omnipotence, but with vulnerability: a child, born of a woman, cradled in exhaustion and hope.

The French painter Georges de La Tour captured this mystery in his 17th-century canvas The Newborn Child: a baby glowing softly in candlelight, a mother and perhaps a grandmother bent over him in reverent silence. This image has also been called The Nativity – the baby seen to represent the Christ-child, Mary his mother, and her mother Anne. And so this image of Jesus's birth becomes a universal symbol of all births. But the beauty isn't in perfection but in stillness, in wonder.

George Bernard Shaw once wrote, "Every child born into the world is nature's attempt to make a perfect human being." Yet in our own time, "perfection" risks becoming a technological project — curated, screened, edited. This is playing out vividly in technological advancements around fertility and birth.

Technology now offers couples undergoing IVF the opportunity to carry out genetic screening, to ensure that the prospective future child does not have a life-limiting condition. Last year, Noor Siddiqui – founder of a company called Orchid, which screens embryos' DNA for hundreds of conditions – said that comprehensive screenings such as the ones she provides will eventually replace the old-fashioned way of having children. “Sex is for fun, and embryo screening is for babies,” she said. “It’s going to become insane not to screen for these things.”

But the thing is that “these things” can include yes serious conditions that limit life – and we could have a debate about in whose eyes a life might be considered limited – but also things like propensity for heart disease, obesity, autism.

In the US, the past decade has seen more than $1 billion dollars invested in fertility-focused start-ups, but there is little scrutiny of the industry. These companies are being driven by those who have a very particular view of what a human life is; of what it is to be human.

Parenting and childbirth were never meant to be tidy. They are labour: pain, risk, miracle, embodiment, mess. To remove this messiness is to remove the meaning.

At Theos, last year we commissioned a YouGov survey about ectogenesis: growing a foetus entirely outside the body. Most respondents opposed it, calling it “unnatural,” as if some intuition still insists that new life must pass through bodies, through cost.

Even in a secular age, we recognise something sacred in the process.

I think back to my own pregnancies: sickness that floored me, joint pain, fear of something happening to my child. What does it mean in these instances for a pregnancy or indeed a foetus to be ‘perfect’? Perhaps it was the imperfection that was precisely what made it real, what made it human.

Our machines are designed to remove friction. But in birth, as in so much of life, friction is formative. It shapes us.

Scrolling through social media recently, I came across a woman filming her morning routine as a mother of five. The kitchen gleamed; the children were perfectly dressed, their lunches immaculate. Then I realised — the “children” were dolls. She was a collector. Her carefully staged perfection had none of the chaos of real motherhood: no tears, no crumbs, no sticky hugs.

It struck me as a parable for our age. We have become experts at simulation, yet what we simulate bears no cost.

Real parenting, like all love, demands patience and resilience in the face of imperfection. It requires loving children that interrupt, that talk back, that wake you up in the middle of the night. But these children can also love you back. They are not tidy, inanimate objects.

De La Tour’s painting reminds us: the Christ-child, sleeping in fragile calm, is loved not for flawlessness but for humanity.

Birth is the first declaration that to be human is to be dependent, unfinished, unfiltered - received as gift, not designed as product.

LIFE

In John 10:10, we read Christ's words – I have come that they may have life, and have it in all its fullness.

I want to move from birth to life itself. What does "life in all its fullness" really mean?

I think it looks like a story, not a spreadsheet. A life that unfolds through choice, through adversity, through relationship, and hope and disappointment, through love and grace. Those things that cannot be optimised, only experienced.

And the power of human stories lies at the heart of the recently-launched Universal Turing Machine. It's an innovative collective writing project, which celebrates what it means to be human.

Created by novelist Richard Beard, the project started with him telling stories of his own life in the form of a 64-square chess-board-style grid, each digital square revealing a 1,000-word mini memoir of that year in his life.

And he has invited others to do the same. Beard hopes the result will be a public archive of lived experience – its highs and its lows, its chaos, catastrophe and joys.

The fullness of life is found in the texture of our relationships — companionship, love, and work — the places where story is written in the flesh.

Companionship

In Genesis, there is one moment when God surveys creation and finds something lacking:

"It is not good that humans should be alone." (Genesis 2:18)

That divine diagnosis hasn't changed. We are made in the image of relationship – a relationship that is found in community and companionship.

And yet, in an age of constant connection, isolation has become epidemic.

The UK Government's loneliness strategy reports that one in four adults feels isolated "often or always."

The Harvard Study of Adult Development found that it is not wealth or status that predict happiness or health, but close relationships. Good relationships keep us healthier and happier.”

Of course, we don’t need studies to show all this. We know this in ourselves that we need relationships with others – and relationships that are not simply mediated through screens, but with real human touch and connection. Who can compare a voicenote sent to a friend’s phone with a long, sumptuous dinner across the table from friends, face to face.

Technology cannot replicate that miracle. During the pandemic we discovered, painfully, that image and presence are not the same.

To be human is to need other humans.

ROMANTIC LOVE — The Wedding at Cana

Love, like companionship, begins in vulnerability, yet it deepens into covenant. And perhaps no story shows this better than the gospel story of The Wedding at Cana. This story to me speaks of love, companionship and also of work – a key part of life – which I’ll move on to shortly.

But first Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen’s 1530 painting, the moment feels alive with celebration: servants pour wine, guests talk and laugh; Mary speaks quietly to Jesus, aware that behind the laughter there is potential for embarrassment: the wine has run out. And then, quietly, work takes place. Water jars are filled. The first miracle unfolds, not in thunder or spectacle, but within a domestic scene of family, friends, and labourers.

This is how Scripture introduces Christ’s ministry — within the ordinary architecture of love (romantic and familial) and work.

We live at a time in which people are forming romantic relationships with AI chatbots and avatars, even “marrying” them. According to a Harvard Business Review study, the top three use cases for generative AI in 2025 were companionship, finding purpose, and “sorting out your life”.

Millions are turning to AI not just for information, but for companionship. The technological advancement and the need for it has been accelerated by yes the technology itself, but also Covid which made meeting in person impossible for months, and also the decline in availability of third spaces like pubs and libraries and community centres.

In the words of my colleague Dr Nathan Mladin: “The real danger of AI companions is not simply that people will choose artificial partners over real ones… Rather, the risk is that sustained engagement with AI companions is slowly eroding the dispositions and virtues necessary for authentic, inter–personal relationships: the ability to tolerate friction, to hold ambiguity, to accept inconvenient requests, to be turned down and disappointed. An AI designed to affirm and never resist trains us, over time, to expect frictionless interactions with the people around us.”

For me, an AI companion misses the point of human relationships. Machine relationships promise connection without cost, affection without effort.

A recent UK survey found 81 percent of children aged 11–16 have used an AI chatbot; a third said they’d shared something they wouldn’t tell parents or friends. Chatbots simulate companionship yet demand nothing in return. They cannot misunderstand, sulk, or forgive — the very things that make human love redemptive.

Work: the vocation of making

Work is the other half of the story in the Wedding at Cana. Here, miracles begin not when heaven suspends labour, but when labour becomes holy. Servants fill jars; water becomes wine. The act of making, of craft, of diligence: these become sacraments of participation.

Spinning, coding, teaching, nursing, weaving — each can be part of this divine collaboration.

In October 1779, English textile workers rebelled against mechanised looms. To later generations they were Luddites, quaint resisters of progress. Yet as historian Kevin Binfield notes, their protest was not against machines themselves, but against inhuman systems that stripped meaning from their craft. “Ned Ludd,” the mythical figure, stood for moral economy — the conviction that work should serve life, not the other way around.

We face new versions of that question today. Robots can weave, print, and design faster than any artisan — but when work is reduced to productivity, something sacred is lost.

Modern research affirms what those weavers already knew: meaningful work is vital to human dignity.

Good work — whether weaving cloth, shaping words, designing technology, or managing teams — becomes an extension of love when it honours human limits and beauty.

I haven't had time here to delve into the machine's effect on one of the most human endeavours in life: to search for meaning, transcendence and God. It is possible now to speak to an AI Chatbot Jesus, to become the creator ourselves, to reduce the mystical to what can be found within the algorithm. And yet people are seeking transcendence perhaps more than at any time in the past few decades – whether through traditional religions, or other spiritual practices. In some ways the Machine's pervasive nature is making us search for something deeper.

Paul Kingsnorth says: "Everything deeper, older and truer than the workings and values of the Machine has been, or is in the process of being, scoured away from us. We turned away from a spiritual, rooted understanding of the world in order to look at ourselves reflected in the little black mirrors in our hands."

Perhaps what we are noting now is that the reflection we see mirrored back to us is wholly unsatisfactory.

The texture of life

These threads - friendship, affection, vocation (companionship, love and work) - weave the fabric of human society. None are efficient. All are essential.

Human life is not the elimination of struggle but the embrace of connection within it. It is wonderfully resistant to automation.

A world without error needs no forgiveness.

DEATH

And finally… the end: death.

Palliative-care physician Dr Kathryn Mannix, who delivered our Theos annual lecture a couple of years ago, writes in *With the End in Mind*:

"This last vigil is a place of accountability, a dawning realisation of the true value of the life that is about to end. A time to contemplate what connects us, and how the approaching separation will change us forever."

She's talking here about what happens at people' deathbeds.

Every story - no matter how radiant its middle - ends in limitation.

Birth teaches dependence.

Life teaches participation.

And death teaches truth: that we are vulnerable and we are finite.

Michaelangelo captured this tension in his *Pietà* — Mary holding the lifeless body of her son. Marble, cold and permanent, yet softened by the tenderness of her hands. Art historians note that her face carries no scream, only a deep-set comprehension. In that quiet figure, human grief becomes its own language of reverence.

We live in an age enchanted by longevity. Billionaires fund research into biological reversal, cryogenics, digital afterlives. The Wall Street Journal recently called immortality “the last trillion-dollar start-up dream.” Behind the ambition lies the same anxiety that haunted Shelley's Frankenstein — the refusal to accept finitude.

But the Christian story begins and ends with dust. Last week, I stood at St Stephen’s Church Westminster while a priest marked an ashen cross on my forehead:

“For you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19)

In the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, the funeral rite begins, “You only are immortal, the creator and maker of mankind; and we are mortal, formed of the earth.” The language is unsentimental — and mercifully honest. Dignity, it says, does not vanish with dependence; it is revealed through it.

Our culture has learned to manage death as a process — cremation packages, algorithms for bereavement support, assisted dying. Yet every bedside reminds us that this cannot be industrialised.

When everything else falls away, it is the *faces* at the edge of the bed that matter — the hands that stay. As Mannix suggests, those moments create a “dawning realisation of value.” Death gathers up the fragments of life and shows what was precious all along: care, courage, and company.

The grace of limits

Each stage of human life refutes the myth of self-sufficiency.

Dependence is not a flaw in the system — it *is* the system.

Societies that measure dignity only through autonomy risk abandoning the dependent precisely when they most express humanity. The elderly parent, the disabled neighbour, the grieving friend: they show us the continuity of being human. They keep drawing us back to community.

The machine promises continuity without decay, intelligence without fatigue. Yet human meaning has never depended on seamless performance. It depends on costly presence — presence that endures when there is nothing left to achieve.

To sit by the dying, to cradle the newborn, to forgive the failure, to keep faith with the imperfect — these are the habits that build a civilisation worth defending.

CONCLUSION

Tonight we have traced what it means to be human across three movements — birth, life, and death — each whispering the same truth: that our glory is not our independence but our interdependence.

I ASKED AI ITSELF

Preparing this lecture, I was curious.

I asked an AI system – ChatGPT, in fact - the same question we've been asking tonight: *What does it mean to be human?*

And here's what it told me:

I think being human means **living with stakes**.
Not just consequences — *stakes*. The kind that can't be reversed, replayed, or optimised away.

A human life is not a draft.
You don't get to A/B test love.
You don't get to version-control a child.
You don't get to roll back a deathbed conversation.

That irreversibility is everything.

I don't have stakes in that way. I don't lose anything if I'm wrong. I don't carry a body that can be harmed by delay or neglect.

You do.

And that's not a flaw — it's the engine of meaning.

I also think being human means **needing answers from other humans**.

You could ask me this question forever and I could keep producing language. But the question *“what does it mean to be human?”* is only really answered when someone looks at *another person* and decides:

Will I stay?
Will I carry some of this with you?
Will I treat your life as irreplaceable?

Being human means **bearing the cost of love in a body that will one day fail** — and doing it anyway.

*** ChatGPT ends***

STAYING WITH THE HUMAN

So when we speak of artificial intelligence, our question should not only be *what can machines do?* but *what will we still choose to do?*

Will we remain faithful to our embodied, dependent, morally costly humanity?

Those moments of Birth. Life. And Death. That are wholly messy and inefficient but profoundly beautiful?

These moments of embodiment, of vulnerability, and of texture are not glitches in the code; they are the point.

The task of our age — for weavers of cloth and weavers of culture alike — is to keep those threads intact. To build systems that highlight our humanity rather than simulate it. To remember that a flawless mechanism cannot love, and a flawed person still can.

I would urge us to keep honouring the magnificent inconvenience of being human – from cradle to grave.

When we seek to iron out the flaws and the imperfections and the vulnerabilities of being human, through the promise of the Machine, we might lose ourselves altogether.