

“Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without the Father’s knowledge. Even the hairs on your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” When I read Jesus’ words this week I thought about the way modern companies advertise to us on-line. When I went to Amazon last week to look for a book, up popped a whole list of suggested titles – a book by G. K. Chesterton, Tolkien’s latest posthumous work, a mystery of Dorothy Sayers. Of course, I know why each of those was suggested. They know my past purchases so well that they know what I’m interested in and can push new potential sales. A couple of weeks ago I received a message telling me there is a new non-stop flight to Indianapolis. I regularly visit a priest friend in Indiana. I have to say, I was intrigued and interested. A non-stop flight would be great for me! But then, the algorithms already knew that.

My point is that it’s getting to where it’s not only God who knows about the death of each bird and the number of hairs on my head. We

live an age of Big Data. We're all increasingly treated as a myriad of data points possessed by, and on, an internet that is growing god-like.

A couple of weeks ago I read a book entitled Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow, by Yuval Noah Harari. He's an historian who also writes about the future of humanity. Christ's words made me think of Harari's book. Now, Harari has little use for Jesus or any religion. In his eyes monotheism is just a stage in human evolution, in between the pagan nature religions of our ancestors and the liberal humanism of today. God is a myth and God is dead, at least for thinking people. There is no mind or meaning behind the universe.

Not surprisingly, I believe Harari gets Christianity wrong. (His disdain is such that he doesn't really engage its ideas. For instance, he asserts that since doctors haven't found souls in our bodies, they must not exist). But his predictions about the trajectory we're on as a species is thought-provoking. "Homo Deus" means "Man-God" in Latin. Harari thinks that after liberal humanism, in which the will of the individual

person is the ultimate authority, comes evolutionary humanism, when we as a species break free from the forces of evolution to become something more and less. He believes that through technology humans will eventually become, literally, god-like – immortal, etc., but then will eventually be absorbed into the one, great “Internet of Everything,” as he calls it. After all, we are all just matter that can be broken down and maneuvered by algorithms. There is no unique self in each of us. There is no free-will. Those are illusions. We’re just data, and eventually, as artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology take off the individual human person will dissolve into this greater connectedness that will spread through the universe as its new god.

That all sounds pretty far out, but Harari is no crank. Barak Obama and Bill Gates have written blurbs for him. I don’t buy everything Harari writes, of course, but his book made me think about the sparrows and the hairs on my head. On the one hand, the growing interconnectedness that we all feel happening around us can be

powerful and helpful in so many ways. (I never would have known about that non-stop flight to Indianapolis). But Harari's new god, while it may be useful and helpful, can't really care or love me.

Harari admits that consciousness and the mind (as opposed to intelligence) are still unexplained. The internet knows all kinds of things about me. But it can't give its attention to me in the conscious way that another person who exists beyond the algorithms does. This growing false god watches me all the time and can predict my desires, and increasingly can fulfill them, but it can't ease my fears that I am alone or unlovable (although we sometimes act as if it can).

We experience love as human beings when our Beloved looks at us, gazes at us, with an conscious attention, not to use us, or sell to us, not even to satisfy our desires, but simply to pay attention to us as a unique, lovable person. It's in just such a gaze that we can discover the Mind and meaning behind our lives, and believe that we're worth many sparrows, that God even finds us eternally precious.

This homily is not a rant against using your smart phones too much. It's bigger than that. Jesus tells us, "Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father. But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father." Today we need to ask which G(g)od we acknowledge and live for: our Heavenly Father or the real, but false, god of Homo Deus. Honestly now, which G(g)od is more real to us? Which G(g)od do we really trust to solve our problems? Which has more power to motivate and change our behavior? In the coming Technology Age if we are to remain followers of Christ, if we're even to remain human, we'll have to be people who seek out and value God's gaze upon us. Which means we'll have to be persons of sustained prayer.

We often don't know what to do in our prayer time. It drags. But one thing we can always do is simply sit and think of the mind of the all-knowing, all-loving God gazing upon us. And then look back. To God we

are each more than a collection of data. Our faith tells us that deep under all the data the internet has about you, beyond what your family and friends know about you, even deeper than what you know about yourself – is a mysterious, immortal “You” known to God alone. That claim will be at the center of this century’s great battle. The question is whether we Catholics will continue to acknowledge the God of that truth. Under the pressures from Homo Deus that will only happen if we can experience the reality of God in prayer. His loving gaze and attention are on us. To remain who we are, and to become who we’re meant to be, we must also let our attention turn to Him regularly.