

On Wednesday of last week I had coffee with a friend who told me, without a hint of melodrama, that he had just had close and disturbing encounter with evil. He works as a policy advisor in the growing area of problem gambling. And in order to better “know the enemy” he attended the gambling industry annual trade convention at the ExCel Centre in London.

As well as being the most misogynistic event he had attended, with a completely normalised culture of sexually objectified women used to entice customers, he said that the exhibitors were shameless in promoting their ever more sophisticated techniques to draw gamblers into addictive and lucrative bets. Gambling is no longer a matter of walking into a betting shop for a flutter on the horses. Like so much of human existence today, the majority of gambling now takes places online. In 2018 there were 36.6 million online gambling customer accounts registered in the UK generating a revenue for the industry of £5.6bn. The same year the charity GamCare received 30,000 calls from people whose gambling was out of control and they attributed between 250-650 suicides in the UK to problems caused by gambling. Indeed the Bishop of St Albans is currently using his influence in the House of Lords to call on the government to formally register these deaths. So for my friend, listening to exhibitors wax lyrical about how the advent of 5G will enable the more effective, even covert targeting of vulnerable indebted customers, this reflected a disregard for the human that he could only describe as evil.

The Prophet Amos reminds us that exploitation of the vulnerable is not a new thing. Israel is admonished because:

“They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals,  
They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth.”

But I worry that the explosion of online gambling, and the problems it causes, is not just of a new form of financial exploitation but a symptom of a new

anthropology, driven by technological change and the sinister control it enables; a new way of viewing the human, quite at odds with what Christianity has taught us.

The exhibitors at the gambling trade fair will say that their customers are rational agents with the choice to enjoy their gambling sites or not as they wish. As such they find no problem in the growing technological infrastructure of algorithms and data collection designed to drain these economic units of their cash. But human beings are rarely rational decision makers and our participation in risk and chance can be fun and healthy or it can be reckless to the point of self-destruction. And these people are dads and mums, young people with their lives ahead of them. Their self-destruction has a deep cost, for those who love them and for all of us. They are not just economic units to be exploited.

Our second lesson from Mark's Gospel points us to a more authentic Christian anthropology because it describes a principal strand of Jesus' ministry which was healing. Christianity teaches that human beings are good and capable of greatness but they are all – we are all – in need of healing. Perhaps we associate that healing in the gospels with Jesus's more dramatic miracles, curing people of horrible diseases like leprosy or exorcising them from demonic possession. But these miracles are all signs of what Jesus came to do which was heal us all from sin in all its forms. Sin is not always a popular Christian idea but it is essentially the reminder that we are not rational agents. We do things that are not in our interest. We undermine our own flourishing.

And so we are given a choice about what anthropology we accept and what relationship we want to have with fellow humans. We can view other people as autonomous rational agents who can take care of their own interests and whom we are quite at liberty to exploit to further our own. Or we can accept that

everyone is a child of God in need of healing, and that we will draw closer to God and further our own ultimate happiness if we do what we can to contribute to the healing of others.

This will ultimately affect the career choices we make. Healing other people comes in many different forms. Medicine of course, but we can help heal people in teaching, in law, in social enterprise, in politics, and in many other professions. However this exploitative anthropology is now dominating many professions, particularly I'm afraid some of the most highly paid. So when you think about your career choices – what you are doing with the majority of your time and energy in life – you should ask yourself what anthropology underpins this job. Does it seek to heal beloved creatures or to exploit allegedly rational economic agents?

I was once invited to take part in a careers event at the Oxford and Cambridge Club in London. We were all asked to speak for 5 minutes about our jobs before taking questions from the young attendees. As it happened the other contributor who I was sat next to worked for an online gambling company.

“I suppose you don't think it's a morally defensible job,” she said. To which I replied that it was not me who had to morally defend it. She knew it was not a good thing to be doing with her life. I didn't need to tell her that.

So why was she still doing it, I wondered. The money of course. But, more than that I think she had simply accepted the rationalist anthropology and then refused to allow herself the time and space for the kind of moral reflection that would challenge it.

And as we battle this new dominant anthropology, one perpetuated by an all-consuming technological matrix of distraction and constant stimulation, it is our loss of time and space for meaningful self-examination that I most fear. In the midst of all his healing and teaching, Jesus got up early, while it was still very dark, he went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

So if you aspire to live a meaningful life, if you want to resist the dominant pressures to exploit others for financial gain, if you want to be an agent of healing, then make time to be still. Reflect on your life, on its purpose, on what you might do to bring healing for others. And if in that stillness you believe you are not alone but are in the presence of one who loves and guides and heals you, then you can call that stillness prayer. And as you hold before God all those exploited by the gambling industry and all forms of technocratic financial exploitation, then you will give meaning to the words of the Lord's prayer, "Deliver us from evil."