

You're a one-off

Sunday 14th March 2010

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Readings:

Psalm 139: 13 – 16

1 Corinthians 12: 4 – 11

Matthew 26: 6 – 13

Today we live in a very technological society almost dominated by computers and computer controlled machines or robotics have replaced humans in many modern mass production assembly lines.

The reason for this is that they are more reliable than humans, can work faster and more accurately because they do not tire and make mistakes – well that's the theory!

One of the best examples of computer control is its use in modern aircraft. For many years now once an airplane is in the air the pilots can switch to autopilot for most of the flight.

But more recent airliners have extended this to 'fly-by-wire' technology where manual control of the aircraft is replaced with electronic interfaces and computer control. The cockpit of a 'fly-by-wire' plane (such as the Airbus A321) looks quite different to that of a conventional plane, as the traditional joystick is replaced with a simple controller similar to those used on modern trains.

You may remember last year a US airplane leaving NY airport hitting a flock of Canada geese just after take-off causing failure of the engines. The pilot decided to land on the Hudson River rather than return to the airport.

The pilot was rightly acclaimed a hero because all 150 passengers and five crew survived the crash – and subsequent computer simulation proved the plane would have crashed before reaching the airport.

The plane involved was a fly-by-wire Airbus A320 and it is now suggested that once the pilot decided his only option was to land on the river most of the crucial decisions, made to ensure a safe landing on the water, were actually done by the 'fly by wire' technology.

In some military and civil surveillance applications the pilot has been completely eliminated in remote controlled drones such as the US 'Reaper'. Probably the most amazing thing about this is that the controllers sit in a bunker in Nevada whilst flying the drone over places such as Iraq and Afghanistan!

The motor industry has been in the forefront in the use of robotics and now practically all assembly lines make use of computer controlled robotics. Most welding of car body assemblies is now done by robotics.

Many other stages in the production of a car are automated and you have all probably seen the Citroen commercial showing a robot 'misbehaving' by spraying a car whilst the staff are absent.

Cars, like most of the equipment, we now use are very complex and consist of many, many parts. Car engines are especially complex and all the component parts have to be produced to very high tolerances and assembled accurately E.g. a car engine has several cylinders within which slides a piston clearly these have to be very accurately made for this to work. Otherwise either the piston will not move or it will not be gas tight and the engine will lose power.

Most of the machined parts for such applications are made on very impressive computer controlled machines often with robotic arms feeding the machine with components.

But clearly things go wrong and usually results from the wrong parts being used or human error and the consequences can be very severe and costly to rectify. As Toyota has recently found out following a series of disastrous events, with brakes failing and sticking accelerators that cause the cars to continue accelerating even if the driver tried to brake.

Toyota had a great reputation for reliability but clearly something has gone drastically wrong with quality control of certain components. Globally over 8 million vehicles are involved – as well as law suits resulting from people being killed or injured in cars crashing because of the problems.

The use of robots though is now spreading to other areas; I have already referred to military Drones. But a life saving military application is in remote controlled detonation of explosive devices first developed for Northern Ireland.

But civil applications are spreading and a robot called da Vinci is being used to 'assist' in hernia operations in a Geneva hospital. An underwater robot, named "RoboLobster", has been developed to recognize changes in seawater and to locate and destroy underwater mines.

Robots are also being looked at to care for the elderly and those unable to feed themselves! How scary is that? Try telling the robot you don't like the food! None of these robots look remotely like a human being and the most advanced 'humanoid' robot is Asimo made by Honda. Asimo can even run (albeit not very fast) and even wait on you!

Toyota has even developed robots that can play music for what reason is beyond my comprehension! Wouldn't be the same replacing the music group with robots would it?

But one of the funniest robots is made from rubbish found on a rubbish tip and so is probably the cheapest of them all – built by a farmer in China to help him in his work on his farm.

All very interesting but I'm not sure that these robots will become popular in our homes even if they didn't cost millions! Aside from cost, the problem is all these

automated processes and robots have one thing in common. They can only do what their designer has programmed them to do, nothing more and nothing less!

The robot manufacturers can produce hundreds or thousands and thousands of them and they will all be identical, but if you want them to do something else then they will have to be re-programmed and possibly be redesigned.

Even the most sophisticated robot designed is nowhere near as complex or as versatile as a human; they don't have the freedom to think for themselves and unlike us they can't just do as they wish!

This is in stark contrast to how God, our designer, made mankind for He programmed us as individuals to do as we wish and not just as we were programmed! Every single one of us are 'one-offs' look around you - we are all different! We look different, we are different sizes and shapes, we dress differently, we talk differently, we have different interests, different tastes, different likes and dislikes!

God has programmed us as individuals given us different gifts, but as Paul said in the reading we had from 1 Corinthians:

'There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.' V4 - 6

And later he tells us:

'All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.' V11

And if we were to read the rest of the chapter Paul goes on to say that the church is one body made up of many parts (i.e. us) but there is just one body. Our 'one-offness,' our uniqueness, is in fact essential for the completeness of the whole body of the family, the family we are born into and the church family.

Brian earlier spoke about attributes of mothers and motherhood, the gift of caring, is a God given gift. It is a good job, I hear mothers saying, that unlike those robots God enabled them to multi-task! Hence the appropriateness of the comment Brian quoted that 'any mother could perform the jobs of air traffic controllers with ease!' No two mums are the same - our mum's are one-offs and we should be proud of them - after all where would we be without them?

From the very youngest to the oldest we are all one-offs we are all God's creation and he loves us all. God created us perfect but every one of us is a sinner and we all fall short of God's standards. Sin entered the world through the serpent in the Garden of Eden tempting Adam and Eve. And it rapidly spread corrupting the whole of mankind like a computer virus can spread and corrupt files on everyone's computers in next to no time!

Computer programmers have designed anti-virus software to protect our computers and, of course, this is particularly important for those computers controlling automated processes to ensure their safe operation. So usually corruption of files is prevented from the very beginning.

But if we are silly enough not to use anti-virus protection and our PC's become infected and files corrupted then usually we can get other software to remove it and repair the damage before it is too late.

When God created mankind he could have done the same – he could have designed us to automatically reject sin to stop it from spreading at its origin. But he didn't for God created us in his likeness with the freedom to do as we please – even knowing that we would fail him.

But, like that software that cleanses our computers from the file corrupting viruses, God provided a recovery option in the form of Jesus Christ to cleanse us from our sins and restore us to God's presence.

Yes we are 'one-offs' but we all have one thing in common we are all sinners and we all need to accept the cleansing power of our Lord Jesus Christ, for that is the only way we can be freed from our sin.

It is important that we all realise we are 'one-offs' that's the way God deliberately created and programmed us and that's the way we should be! So we shouldn't try to become like someone else instead we should accept:

- who we are
- the gifts God gave us, and
- his grace in forgiving our sins

accepting we are 'one-offs' whilst simply trying to become more Christ-like!