Earlier this year a New York rabbi told his congregation that he was reading a “plagiarised” sermon. Apparently, the congregation applauded after he had preached! He then revealed it was written by ChatGPT and joked: “ I thought truck drivers were going to go long before the rabbi, in terms of losing our positions to artificial intelligence.”

Reflecting afterwards, Rabbi Franklin said: “While ChatGPT may be intelligent, it cannot be compassionate and it cannot love — and so, cannot create the things that bring us together… the spiritual experiences that we have in life, are often what we'd call ineffable, unexplainable by words.”

He is correct. Tempted as I was, to turn to ChatGPT to write a sermon for a fairly intelligent and committed congregation attending a national church convention, these are all my own words!

We are incarnational Christians. In John’s Gospel we are reminded that the Word became flesh, not that flesh became word. We are meeting physically today and tomorrow, and thanks to the power of technology, our agenda will be completed remotely over one or two evenings next week. We begin here and now by gathering around the Lord’s Table to experience the presence of the Risen Christ as we receive bread and wine. We meet physically to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in all that lies ahead of us in the General Synod.

In our first reading from Isaiah, the prophet proclaims: ‘In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple.’ (Isaiah 6.1). By citing the year of his vision in terms of temporal history, Isaiah makes the clear connection between God and the world we inhabit. The prophet had a vision of God in the Temple at a time of political transition after the peaceful, prosperous and long rule of Uzziah. It was a time of uncertainty. He received fresh vision and a new perspective to energise him for what lay ahead.

The readings at this service speak of God’s presence to and within the historical process but this presence is only discerned through action. To speak of the Spirit is to speak of the openness of history, to deny that it is controlled by what people say is the inevitable. Instead, it is to assert that the future may be infinitely better than the present – precisely because the God who loves in freedom is the beginning and end of all things.

This church of St Iberius occupies an ancient site in the heart of Wexford town, and it was wonderful to have a procession of bishops, clergy and others walk a short distance from Rowe Street Church to get here. When this Eucharist is over, we will spill out onto a busy street. You will pass shops, offices, and homes. Wexford is distinctive in some ways but also no different than the parishes and towns from which you have come. Here, like elsewhere, there are the issues of accommodation and homelessness as we all struggle to provide a welcome for the refugee and asylum seeker fleeing conflict and disaster, while also caring for all those struggling with rents, mortgages and other bills. The mental health of those who are feeling vulnerable will not be solved by a clever computer algorithm that churns out words, but by the empathy of physical presence, a listening ear and a helping hand.

Over these two days, we meet, not as a conference or for a social event or a reunion, though we should use the occasion to enjoy ourselves and renew friendships. We meet as a Synod, a purposeful meeting under God seeking the guidance of the Spirit for the church. The priority for us all as we debate, deliberate and vote over the next few days must be to ask ourselves: “What vision do we have of God today? How do we lift our eyes from our immediate concerns to catch a fresh vision of God and his will for humanity?” Isaiah proclaims: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.! How is God using us to bring earth and heaven closer together? The petition in the Lord’s Prayer, “thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven,” should be the yardstick for everything we do.

Unlike the world of artificial intelligence, this requires real intelligence, empathy, commitment and most of all faith in the living God and his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. We are here, not for the sake of the Synod, or for the Church of Ireland, but in the power of the Spirit to be a church in the world, of the world and for the world. That is what God asks of us and nothing less will do.