

SERMON FOR I b LENT | 19.02.2023

Exodus 24: 12-18; 2 Peter 1: 16-end; St Matthew 17: 1-9

If you drive – or, better still take a bus – down City Road towards Old Street roundabout, you will see on your left the national HQ for the Autism Society. Reading some of their stuff on line – and watching ‘Autumn Watch’ presenter Chris Packham’s moving documentary on BBC2 - I don’t know whether I was particularly shocked or not to learn of how many people are said to be affected by autism – or are euphemistically said to be ‘on the spectrum’. If people seem to be a bit overly self-absorbed in what they are doing – or just not very good at handling social situations - there is a kind of ‘wink, wink, nod, nod’ suggestion that perhaps they have autistic tendencies. People who are very intense about what they are doing – especially if they seem to be excluding other people around them - are particularly prone to these desperately excluding comments.

I played the short video clip at the beginning of today’s Mass because it showed, in less than two minutes, just what it must be like to constantly have to deal with ‘information overload’, where noises, smells, patterns and movement of every kind overwhelm the brain to the point where the autistic person either withdraws as far as possible away from the rest of the world – or learns to mask their feelings, pretending that they can cope.

One of the statistics that emerged from Chris’ documentary is that there are at least 700,000 people in the UK who have been diagnosed with autism but I get the feeling that is a massive underestimate. Similarly, research seems to be debunking the idea that autism is mostly a male condition and that perhaps between a third and a half of whatever total we come up with will be female – previously not identified because they are often much better at camouflaging what is going inside their heads than males and they devise better survival strategies.

At the root of autism is an inability to express what is going on inside. One of the people featured in the documentary was Murray Bruce, son of the hugely popular Radio 2 broadcaster, Ken Bruce. Murray is entirely non-verbal but recently, through the use of an ipad, he has been able – albeit painfully slowly – to reveal through typing how he had been pining, for years, for people to really listen to him: to have the patience and the insight to empathise with the problems Murray has of doing what we do quite naturally all the time: filtering out things that don’t matter, sounds and experiences that distract us from what we want to focus on. Realising how much was locked up inside Murray all the time – unable to be shared - was really distressing for all those of us watching from the outside.

I heartily recommend the programme if you can catch it on I-Player: “Inside out: autistic minds/Chris Packham”.

But why, you might ask, am I talking about autism today when our theme is the great revelation of Jesus on the mountain, the event we call the Transfiguration? The answer is because I think the story of Murray Bruce throws light on our problem with religious experiences like the visions that both Moses and Jesus had on the tops of those mountains.

As we heard in Exodus, Moses leaves his brother Aaron behind and climbs to the top of Sinai - and the cloud enveloped him there so that he was, literally, ‘in another world’. And if we had read on in this chapter, we would have read the description of Moses’ face which shone so brightly that when he came down to where his brother was waiting Moses had to put a veil or a mask over his face to prevent those who looked on from being blinded.

And the same was true in our Gospel story when Jesus takes Peter, James and John up another mountain: there his whole being ‘exploded with light’: *his face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white...* Here again these experiences were just too much to take in; as we say these days, there was just too much information..

As a result of overload we get a pile of nonsense from Peter about building permanent homes for Jesus, Elijah and Moses. Peter doesn’t know how to handle all that he has seen and so he just makes stuff up to cover his inadequacy and his embarrassment. He didn’t have the words to describe the vision he had just experienced and, wanting to say something, he is forced to clutch at down-to-earth stuff that made no sense at all.

I hope you can see the parallel: you and me, ordinary Church goers. When people come to us with vivid experiences of meeting with God, aren’t we likely to be a bit embarrassed too? When somebody says to us that they know exactly when they were converted – and they give us the exact day, time and place – aren’t we tempted to be pretty disbelieving and sceptical?

And yet our lives are full of events which take the wind out of our sails. When Kenneth Awoonor Renner rang me on Thursday with the sad news that Beatrice had died, I was completely shocked: it really wasn’t what we had expected and I was genuinely lost for something to say.

The Irish have an expression: *we are sorry for your trouble* and each of us, whatever our culture, has a similar form of words in our heads because we have to cope with bad news like this often enough and we want to be able to show those sharing their news that they have been properly heard.

Chris Packham's second autistic interviewee was Flo. In her early thirties, she knew she was 'different' from other people from about the age of 7. She remembers hating birthday parties with all the chaotic excitement and noise. She recalled teaching herself to keep hidden what she felt inside in case people rejected her and thought her odd. She said that throughout her life she hadn't been able to reveal her real self to anyone – except more recently her husband. Part of the programme was devoted to the film she made to show her Mum what she had gone through.

And of course her Mother was deeply upset that her daughter hadn't been able to just 'be herself' and tell her all the things that lay buried inside. Close though they were, Flo's said her autism meant that she had had to mask her feelings for about 90% of her life.

Like Moses. He also wore a mask when he came down from Mount Sinai.

Like the invisible mask we often wear – even with our nearest and dearest. We can also be afraid of sharing what is really going on inside ourselves. And we can often experience, as Murray Bruce said via his I-pad, a real longing for people to listen, seriously, to the real 'us' trying to express what we feel inside. So much of what passes for listening – in families, in our work places as well as in Church - can be so superficial.

We might almost say that we live in a kind of cultural autism.

Our lives are so busy that we become impatient with people who can't articulate their ideas and needs in clear – succinct – sentences. As Flo said, we get so impatient with people who don't conform to 'normal' patterns of behaviour and we so often misunderstand the needs of those who have to take time out because they find the standard ways people get along totally exhausting. As our video clip showed us, those with autism often feel simply overwhelmed by everything that is going on around them.

And just one more thing for us to ask ourselves today: when we are in Church, or reading the Bible on our own - or even just minding our own business in the course of an ordinary day - are we open to God showing us something really mind-blowing - without getting a sense of over-load?

Of course we aren't going to have Transfiguration experiences regularly; that would be too much! But when God has something to share with us, are we listening; are we open to those visions? Or do we do what Peter did on the Hill of Transfiguration and try and bring it down to our human level – God in majesty reduced to what we can fit into the Minutes of a Church Council meeting!

One of the great delights of the Confirmation programme has been the chance to listen to each other's stories. Can we, here at St James', help each other to share ourselves - without the need to wear a mask?

And if we are learning the need to listen better to those who find it hard to communicate, shouldn't we also be willing to listen to God who also wants to reveal himself as he really is – glorious, affirming, ever-loving, ever- faithful.

Will we, this Lent, give a bit more time to listening to his voice too?