

Beyond the Walls: A Reflection on the Theological Issues Associated with an Autistic Child's Experience at Buckfast Abbey

Gillian Carlisle

Introduction

The following theological reflection is a response to an incident experienced during a family day out at Buckfast Abbey. Our son, Zac, was nine at the time and had recently been diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The reflection is structured on the Salvation Army's Model for Faith Based Facilitation,¹ developed in collaboration with Judith Thompson and based on an adaptation of the Pastoral Cycle.² An evangelical perspective has informed and shaped this theological reflection, according to Busby's seven assumptions for evangelical leaders and church pastors.³

There are few disabilities as prevalent and yet as poorly understood as autism. As a report commissioned by the National Autistic Society in 2007⁴ has demonstrated, there are continuing, widespread misconceptions about the characteristics of autism. Public perception of the condition suffers both from negative reactions to the typical behaviour commonly associated with autism, and from the legacy of unrepresentative and misleading portrayals of the condition in the media. As Simons, the report's author, pithily suggests: '...the "Rainman myth" lives on'.⁵

If autism has been a condition marked by lack of understanding and unchallenged assumptions, it is perhaps no more so than in the perception that the experiences of autism and spirituality are incompatible; a position founded on extrapolation of current psychological theories of autism. For instance, Swinton and Trevett note the 'complicated and potentially problematic'⁶ relationship between religion and the experiences of those

¹ Salvation Army, *Building Deeper Relationships using Faith-Based Facilitation* (London: Salvation Army, 2010), p. 6.

² Judith Thompson, Stephen Pattison and Ross Thompson, *SCM Study Guide to Theological Reflection* (London: SCM, 2008), p. 56.

³ Daryl Busby, 'Reflections on Theological Reflection: How One Pastor Processed Ministry', *Common Ground Journal*, 6 (2008), 62-68.

⁴ Laura Simons, *Think Differently - Act Positively: Public Perceptions of Autism* (London: National Autistic Society, 2008).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ John Swinton and Laura Trevett, 'Religion and Autism: Initiating an Interdisciplinary Approach', *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 13 (2009), 2-6 (p. 2).

with autism, and maintain that: ‘The religious/spiritual remains a “forgotten” or at least overlooked dimension of the experience of autism.’⁷

Against this background, there are isolated notes of dissent. These are sounded by individuals with autism, whose autobiographical accounts reflect evidence of profound comfort, peace and strength in relationship with God. Barber, for instance, makes this assertion on the basis of his own experience: ‘People with autism make connection with God.’⁸ Similarly, Hall’s account of a childhood with ASD contains some fascinating glimpses of spiritual experience.⁹

Identifying the Event or Issue

Zac has a range of impairments associated with ASD. The difficulties, which include significant sensory integration issues, dyspraxia, poor core body strength and emotional volatility, preclude mainstream education. He attends a specialist unit for children with moderate learning difficulties.

The situation for reflection took place during a visit to Buckfast Abbey in Devon, England. The abbey forms part of an active Benedictine monastery which provides a variety of facilities open to the public. At the close of our visit, our family spent some time exploring the abbey church. Within the abbey, the Blessed Sacrament Chapel provides a place for private prayer and reflection away from visitors and features a stunning stained glass depiction of Christ at the Last Supper. A floor-to-ceiling glass wall affords privacy to the chapel, whilst allowing tourists a clear and uninterrupted view of the famous window.

Description of the Situation

Our family had spent the majority of the day at Buckfast and our children had enjoyed access to the extensive grounds and gardens. Prior to entering the abbey in the late afternoon, my husband Stephen and I knew that Zac was tired and overstimulated, and that our time in the church was likely to be limited. As we explored, I was aware that the sensory environment in the abbey would offer some particular challenges to Zac. He would struggle with the unfamiliar and distorted acoustics in the building. He also would find changes in temperature and brightness from outdoors to indoors unsettling.

⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸ Christopher Barber, ‘On Connectedness: Spirituality on the Autistic Spectrum’, *Practical Theology*, 13 (2009), 201-211 (p. 201). Barber continues: ‘Because we have particular challenges connecting with people and our environment, it is readily assumed that we cannot experience or express a sense of the spiritual.’

⁹ Kenneth Hall, *Asperger Syndrome, the Universe and Everything* (London: Jessica Kingsley Press, 2001), p. 44 and p. 92.

He had commented that the light from other windows in the abbey hurt his eyes.

We made our way to the far end of the church, where we stood together at the glass wall separating the chapel from the rest of the building. I felt a clammy hand on my arm and Zac whispered that he needed to leave. “This is a bad place,” he said, and started to cry. We took the family outside and waited with Zac while the others rolled down the grass banks. It took at least ten minutes for his emotion to subside. When it did, he got to his feet. “I have to show you why it’s bad there.”

Zac took his Dad’s hand and led us back into the abbey. His face was grey with anxiety. Back at the glass wall, he touched a finger to the wall and quietly dissolved into tears. We didn’t understand. Stephen scanned the wall for some clue to the distress and indicated a small sign at eye level. “It’s ok, Zac. The *No Photographs* sign is nothing to worry about. It’s there so that they can sell more postcards at the gift shop.”

“Not the sign, Dad. It’s the wall. It won’t let me in to see Jesus.”

Following our visit to Buckfast, Zac found it difficult to understand and to articulate the full range of emotions experienced in the abbey. At the time his tears and his desire to leave indicated a fear that he would have a full emotional crisis. He described how he felt sad, angry, and afraid because he felt that the place was “bad”. A few weeks afterwards, he explained his thoughts in this way: “It’s bad to stop people from seeing Jesus. I could see Him but I couldn’t get close. That’s wrong. A church shouldn’t be like that...*especially* a church.”

I struggled to make sense of Zac’s emotional outburst that day. Logic suggested that his behaviour was provoked by overstimulation, exhaustion, and a difficult sensory environment. Both my husband and I were, after all, prepared for some sort of emotional outburst before we entered the building. However, it was difficult to overlook the sense that something important had happened. I considered the nature of the connection Zac felt with the depiction of Jesus in the window: Was he drawn to Jesus in a deeper way than the rest of his family and the other visitors in the building? If this was the case, what did this say about his spirituality? Was this linked with his condition? Why did Zac protest so powerfully about the glass wall, when other visitors accepted it? I had a sense he had touched on a profound truth when he had identified the wall as “bad” and wondered if this assessment had significance beyond the physical structure of the building.

Underpinning these considerations was a sense of awe at the authenticity of Zac’s faith. As parents, we have consciously and deliberately encouraged our children to build relationships with Jesus. However, the

incident had destroyed my assumptions about how those relationships should work. I had completely underestimated the significance of Zac's faith and was forced to acknowledge that my assumptions about Zac's age and diagnosis had a part to play in my expectations.

Analysis

Autistic Spectrum Disorder is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to others, and how they experience the world around them.¹⁰ Autism is no longer a rare disorder.¹¹ According to research conducted by the NHS Information Centre, Community and Mental Health Team, the overall prevalence of autism in England is 1.1 percent of the population.¹²

Although the term 'autism' was first used by Kanner in 1943 to describe the unusual patterns of behaviour in a number of children referred to his clinic,¹³ writers such as Frith suggest that documented evidence of the disorder exists from as early as the thirteenth century.¹⁴ Historically, the disorder had been widely considered to be linked to poor parenting,¹⁵ a position rooted in the work of Bettleheim¹⁶ and Kanner¹⁷ but later discredited. A wealth of research evidence led to autism's formal recognition as a medical condition in 1987,¹⁸ although the behaviourally defined diagnostic criteria for the condition have evolved radically since then.¹⁹

The relationship between spirituality and ASD has been, and continues to be, an area of limited and, at times, conflicting research. This issue was highlighted in the results of a collaborative research project to survey the interface between religion and the experience of autism. Swinton

¹⁰ See the National Autistic Society's website: <<http://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is.aspx>> [accessed 26 August 2016]

¹¹ See Elizabeth Hill and Uta Frith, 'Understanding Autism: Insights from Mind and Brain', *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 358 (2003), 281-289 (p. 281).

¹² The NHS Information Centre, Community and Mental Health Team, Traolach Brugha et al., *Estimating the Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Conditions in Adults: Extending the 2007 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey* (Leeds: NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2012), p. 5.

¹³ Lorna Wing, *The Autistic Spectrum - A Guide for Parents and Professionals* (London: Robinson, 1996), p. 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁵ Lorna Wing, 'The History of Ideas on Autism', in *Autism* 1 (1997), 13-23 (pp. 16-17).

¹⁶ Bruno Bettleheim, *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), Google ebook.

¹⁷ Leo Kanner, 'Problems of Nosology and Psychodynamics of Early Infantile Autism', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 19 (1949), 416-426.

¹⁸ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 3rd edn. (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 1987).

¹⁹ The recent changes to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, for instance, include the removal of Asperger's syndrome as a separate category now subsumed under a single diagnosis of 'autism spectrum disorder'.

and Trevett's editorial for the project notes the dearth of literature addressing the issues of ASD and religious experience directly, describing the area as 'under-researched' and highlighting the 'notable lack of reflection' on autism within the field of disability studies.²⁰

It is difficult to detect spiritual awareness in children with ASD, particularly those with profound communication difficulties. It is therefore necessary to turn to psychological theories of autism and autobiographical materials from those with the condition in order to gain insight into the way children with ASD may perceive the world.²¹ Morris's work, together with that of Deeley,²² and Dubin and Graetz,²³ highlight the theories thought to account for cognitive differences in individuals with ASD and speculate on the implications these differences may mean for spiritual experience. Recent writing by those with ASD, particularly Barber²⁴ and Memmot,²⁵ has helped to illuminate this work from a Christian perspective. There is, however, much work to be done in order to gain a better understanding of the issues at play.

Whilst there is only a limited understanding of how ASD affects spirituality theoretically, there is little doubt that the condition affects individuals practically in expression of their faith at church. Ann Memmot is a member of the autistic community in the United Kingdom, working as an advisor and advocate for those with ASD in a variety of workplace contexts. Memmot, who also acts as Church Access Consultant, highlights several issues associated with church attendance for those with ASD. Recalling the early difficulties faced in a variety of churches, she describes how she was unable to cope with the noise, socialising, and sensory overload at Sunday School, retreating into a corner in 'absolute panic'.²⁶ Memmot's description of church in her early twenties is similarly disturbing. Her experiences indicate that it was easier to meet with God alone, rather than the sensory 'battleground' that church represented. She writes: 'Finding

²⁰ Swinton and Trevett, 2009, p. 3.

²¹ See Laura Morris, 'Autism and Childhood Spirituality', in *Spiritual Education: Religious, Cultural and Social Differences*, ed. by Clive Erricker, Cathy Ota and Jane Erricker (Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), pp. 234-247 (p. 236).

²² Quinton Deeley, 'Cognitive Style, Spirituality, and Religious Understanding: The Case of Autism', *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 13 (2009), 77-82.

²³ Nick Dubin and Janet E. Graetz, 'Through a Different Lens: Spirituality in the Lives of Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome', *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 13 (2009), 29-39.

²⁴ Christopher Barber, 'On Connectedness: Spirituality on the Autistic Spectrum', *Practical Theology*, 4 (2011), 201-211.

²⁵ Ann Memmot, 'A Christian Faith and Autism', 2008, <<http://annmommott.org.uk/files/A-Christian-Faith-and-Autism.pdf>> [accessed 27 August 2016]

²⁶ Chris Barston, 'Ann Memmot', *Positive About Autism Newsletter* (2014)

<http://www.positiveaboutautism.co.uk/attachments/Ann_Memmott.pdf> [accessed 31 August 2016]

peace, making space for prayer, was just impossible.’²⁷ Memmot also identifies the language of religion as ‘a huge problem’²⁸ for those whose cognitive styles are governed solely by concrete experience.

Historically, there appears to be a link between ASD and spirituality. Trevett notes that many religious groups have invested ASD-related ‘irregularities’ with meaning, both positive and negative, throughout history: ‘...whether the shaman or the shamed the idea has crossed many cultures that the person displaying autistic thinking and behaviour might be a conduit for the supernatural, either good or evil’.²⁹

There is no explicit reference to autism in Scripture. There is difficulty with the Christian tradition bringing Scripture to bear on this subject, when biblical authors had no knowledge of the condition as it is currently understood. Gillibrand affirms a belief that people with autism would have been known to the biblical writers.³⁰ Some of the symptoms described in the gospel healing narratives of demon possession are thought to be similar to those of severe autism, but this analysis is purely conjectural: the symptoms may equally correspond, for example, to epilepsy. However, as Gillibrand suggests, it is safe to assume that those displaying moderate to severe autistic tendencies would have been relegated to the margins of society in first-century Palestine.

Sadly, the church has played, and continues to play, a significant role in the marginalisation of those with disabilities. Hull argues: ‘Christian faith is a major source of the social and economic disadvantage that they suffer. Christian faith, to put it more bluntly, is not seen as part of the answer but part of the problem.’³¹ Disability theologians agree that interpretation and understanding of the Bible have a significant role to play within this. Harshaw identifies ‘a preponderance of prejudicial perceptions of disability within the biblical canon’.³² Reynolds notes ‘the uncomfortable relationship that exists between Christianity and disability’,³³ and argues that a problem within the faith is the ‘consistent patterns’ of characterising disability from

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. Memmot rightly suggests that this problem is not ‘always the case with all people with an ASD, but certainly for some of us’. She continues: ‘Words like “love” and “spirituality” have no meaning or emotional content for me in ways that others would understand.’

²⁹ Christine Trevett, ‘Asperger’s Syndrome and the Holy Fool: The Case of Brother Juniper’, *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 13 (2009), 129-150 (p. 130).

³⁰ John Gillibrand, *Disabled Church - Disabled Society: The Implications of Autism for Philosophy, Theology and Politics* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010), p. 107.

³¹ John Hull, ‘The Broken Body in a Broken World’, *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 7 (2004), 5-23 (p. 12).

³² Jill Harshaw, *God Beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experiences of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities (Studies in Religion and Theology)* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016), p. 28.

³³ Thomas Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion* (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2008), p. 24.

Hebrew and Christian Scriptures which are ‘invested with theological meaning and passed down through Christian traditions’.³⁴ Learning difficulties and mental illness seem to suffer from particular stigmatisation arising from hermeneutic assumptions. For instance, Gillibrand describes the ‘very long shadow’³⁵ cast by biblical association with demon possession which has led to the marginalisation and ill treatment of those concerned. Another significant issue in the Christian tradition is the tendency within theological thinking to assume models of normality and rationality. The theological assumption, in particular, that spirituality is cognitively based and demands intellectual assent to certain verbal formulations is especially problematic.

Churches have also attracted criticism from disability theologians for replicating isolating and disabling attitudes from culture. Reynolds argues, for example, that Christians commonly adopt the medical model of disability, a position tending to reduce the person to the function of their abilities.³⁶ Harshaw, who has also noted this position, describes how ‘... subtly the prevailing culture has infiltrated the consciousness of the church...’³⁷ The church has been required to address disability discrimination as a result of legislation,³⁸ but, as Gillibrand argues, the majority of improvements have focused on physical access, not the form and content of meetings.³⁹ These elements, as Harshaw argues, ‘can be equally exclusive to those whose capacities to understand and to adapt to what is taking place are limited’.⁴⁰ It seems that theological language presents a significant barrier to inclusion for those cognitive disabilities. This issue seems to be particularly problematic within the evangelical tradition.⁴¹

It is clear that both the environment and practices of churches require imaginative and informed reappraisal to accommodate better the challenges related to ASD, but there is more fundamental work involved in addressing attitudes, assumptions and lack of understanding regarding the condition.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 34, pp. 36-37.

³⁵ Gillibrand, 2010, p. 116.

³⁶ Reynolds, 2008, p. 25.

³⁷ Jill Harshaw, ‘Prophetic Voices, Silent Words: The Prophetic Role of Persons with Profound Intellectual Disabilities in Contemporary Christianity’, *Practical Theology*, 3 (2010), 311-329 (p. 319).

³⁸ In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 replaced the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995, bringing the rights of people with disabilities within wider equality policies on gender, race, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation. See HM Government, Equality Act 2010: Chapter 2 <<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/20>> [accessed 30 August 2016]

³⁹ Gillibrand, 2010, p. 131.

⁴⁰ Harshaw, 2010, p. 324.

⁴¹ Gillibrand, 2010, p. 103: ‘Within the Evangelical tradition, theologies of the Word of God make absolute demands upon us as Christians. Often we do not realise that our theological terminology... automatically excludes people with disabilities and/or their carers and prevents them from finding anything there for their comfort.’

Whilst there are some excellent ASD-specific initiatives designed to promote awareness and address issues of inclusion within faith communities,⁴² there is evidence of a lack of engagement with the nature and implications of the condition. Academic work in this area is, Harshaw argues, ‘rarely transmitted to those who live at the cutting edge of prejudicial assumptions and concomitant marginalisation, or to those whose inadequate understanding or benignly oppressive practices demonstrate that they really need to hear it’.⁴³ In the local church, these issues are exacerbated by the invisible nature of ASD. Many adults with the condition do not appear to be disabled, and those who can cope with church attendance do so unobtrusively by working hard to adapt to the environment. The condition is most likely to be visible in children’s ministry in the form of challenging behaviour. This, often misunderstood and misinterpreted, leads to further isolation and marginalisation of the children and the families affected.

In considering Zac’s experience, it is also useful to reflect on what Church tradition and scripture have to say about childhood and the spiritual experiences of the young. Whilst the Bible is ‘teeming’⁴⁴ with direct and indirect references to children and childhood, biblical scholars have attracted criticism in recent years for neglecting to reflect on these themes. Bunge suggests that ‘... issues related to children have tended to be marginal in almost every area of contemporary theology’. The neglect of building well developed and biblically informed teachings about children in theology is regarded to have negatively impacted church practice,⁴⁵ where a recurrent theme of marginalisation is also apparent. Nye argues: ‘in most of the literature about children in the churches, and about those who are called to minister among them, there is agreement that marginalisation is a key characteristic’.⁴⁶

Academic research in the area of children’s spirituality has been driven forward in response to education legislation, rather than by impetus

⁴² See, for example, the multi-faith work in collaboration with the Elizabeth M. Boggs Centre, *Autism and Faith: A Journey into Community* (New Jersey: UMJNJ, 2008) <http://www.djfiddlefoundation.org/userdocs/Autism_&_Faith_final-1.pdf> [accessed 30 August 2016], or Ann Memmot’s work in collaboration with the Diocese of Oxford: Ann Memmot, *Welcoming Autistic People in our Churches and Communities* (Oxford: Diocese of Oxford, 2015) <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/autism_guidelines.pdf> [accessed 29 August 2016]

⁴³ Harshaw, 2016, p. 188.

⁴⁴ Marcia Bunge, ‘Introduction’, in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. by Marcia Bunge (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008), xvi.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4. Bunge contends that this lack of engagement ‘helps explain why many churches struggle to create and sustain strong programs in religious education and in child-advocacy ministry’.

⁴⁶ Rebecca Nye, ‘Spirituality’, in *Through the Eyes of a Child: New Insights in Theology from a Child’s Perspective*, ed. by Anne Richards and Peter Privett (London: Church House Publishing, 2009a), pp. 68-84 (p. 82).

from the Church,⁴⁷ and there seems to be little engagement with academic developments within this field in theological colleges and in the majority of churches.⁴⁸ Nye proposes that many churches and faith communities still either focus solely on ‘helping children reach adult criteria of spirituality’, or ‘pay almost no attention whatsoever to the spiritual qualities and needs of children, and focus instead on other things’.⁴⁹

Scripture reveals that, counter to the social and cultural patterns of the time, Jesus’ welcome and acceptance of children was not predicated by age, ability, or status.⁵⁰ Access to Him was, however, subject to the misguided interventions of His adult followers. The gospel of Matthew⁵¹ records Jesus’ indignation when His disciples had attempted to prevent the children’s approach to Him. His response to counter and correct the disciples is framed in a dual command: ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them,’ and is followed by a powerful affirmation of blessing as He takes the children up in His arms and lays His hands on them. The significance of this action is underscored by Gundry-Volf’s commentary: ‘A more emphatic statement of children’s reception into the reign of God by Jesus could not be made.’⁵²

Jesus’ ministry within the gospels would seem to provide evidence that He held a ‘high view of children’s spiritual life’.⁵³ White suggests that there is a ‘special chemistry’⁵⁴ between children and the King of Heaven. Jesus’ ministry would also clearly indicate that spiritual revelation is not restricted to the educated, the experienced, and the wise. For example, the prayer recorded in Matthew 11.20-27, offered in a context of adult cynicism, arrogance and unrepentance, would imply that God is pleased to reveal heavenly wisdom or special insight to the very young and intellectually poor.

Matthew 18.1-14 and the parallel text in Mark 9.33-37 provide challenging teaching about childlikeness as an essential quality for greatness in the kingdom of heaven. The context of this teaching, Jesus’ intervention in His disciples’ discussion about rank and ascendancy in the reign of God, is significant. Considering the thrust of the verses immediately preceding this statement, it is possible to argue that Jesus has targeted the great in

⁴⁷ In the UK, for instance, the surge of empirical research in children’s spirituality has been strongly linked to the school education sector’s attempts in England and Wales to respond to the 1998 Education Act.

⁴⁸ Rebecca Nye, *Children’s Spirituality: What it is and Why it Matters* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009b), p. 9.

⁴⁹ Nye, 2009a, p. 77.

⁵⁰ See Klaus Issler, ‘Biblical Perspectives on Developmental Grace for Nurturing Spirituality’, in *Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications*, ed. by Donald Ratcliff (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2004), pp. 54-71 (p. 63).

⁵¹ See Matthew 19.13-15.

⁵² Judith Gundry-Volf, ‘The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament’, in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 29-60 (p. 38).

⁵³ Nye, 2009b, p. 78.

⁵⁴ White, 2008, p. 366.

particular because ‘they stand most in danger — on account of their status in the community — of thinking of themselves at the expense of others, especially those of low status’.⁵⁵ Jesus’ warning about the consequences for those who put a ‘stumbling block’ before one of these ‘little ones’⁵⁶ is stark. Gundry-Volf makes this assertion:

...whether this text refers explicitly or implicitly to children, its relation to the preceding is clear. Just as “little ones” are special objects of divine care and protection...to despise and mistreat them is to put oneself at cross-purposes with the God of the weak.⁵⁷

Zac’s age and vulnerabilities place him firmly in the realm of the ‘little ones’ to whom Jesus refers. A traditional understanding of the passage might interpret Jesus’ warning only to include temptation of little ones to sin. However, it is clear that the responsibilities of adults with power and influence have far wider scope than this perspective might suggest. Gundry-Volf articulates it in this way: ‘Matthew’s Jesus teaches childlikeness as *humility toward children* on the part of *church leaders* in particular and *for the sake of children* who are at the mercy of those greater than them in the community.’⁵⁸

In Mark 9, Jesus’ teaching emphasises the significance of receiving ‘one such little child in my name’. Here, the use of *dechomai*, to ‘receive’ or ‘welcome’, is used especially with reference to hospitality, or to serving guests. When Jesus takes the child in His arms, he demonstrates this service and how greatness in the reign of God is shown by love and service of children. However, the ultimate significance of welcoming the child is revealed in Mark 9.37: ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’ Serving and welcoming children is a way of welcoming Jesus, and the one who sent Him, and, conversely, failing to welcome children implies rejection of Jesus and of God. Gundry-Volf, who explores the significance of the child’s role in this passage in representing Jesus, suggests: ‘...the child is to be taken into the arms and welcomed, for the child is weak and needy. The child thus represents Jesus as a humble, suffering figure.’ She continues: ‘To welcome a child in Jesus’ name, I therefore propose, is to welcome Jesus himself ...’⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Gundry-Volf, 2001, p. 41.

⁵⁶ Matthew 18.6 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁵⁷ Gundry-Volf, 2001, p. 42

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Reflect and Evaluate

As I have reflected over time on our experiences at Buckfast Abbey, what seems unique about Zac's spirituality was his ability to see differently. He had identified the wall for what it represented when it had been missed, ignored or accepted by everyone else. What happened was an instinctive, emotional and typically autistic reaction to profoundly conflicting images: It was wrong to put a wall in front of a picture of Jesus who was obviously beckoning people, because it represented something that stopped people from getting to Him. There was something, too, that communicated cruelty in constructing the wall with glass, because people could see the promise of Jesus' beauty and His unconditional welcome, but were forced to stay at a distance. Zac's grasp of the purposes of church was sufficient to make a childlike but perceptive analysis of the abbey as a 'bad place'.

As the analysis section of this reflection suggests, children and those with disabilities have been relegated to the margins of religious thought, life, and ministry for millennia. In this context, Zac's assessment of his experience at Buckfast is poignant and powerful. When Zac says: 'a church shouldn't be like that ... especially a church', he reveals a kingdom-orientated sensibility that challenges religious tradition at a prophetic level. Zac's knowledge of Jesus and His people has led him to expect and to demand something better, something different to this experience. In Zac's mind, the church, if it is to *be* the church, needs to have open access. Its key purpose is to facilitate access to Jesus, not to prevent it. As I remember Zac's lone voice of protest in the vastness of the abbey, I am reminded of the following statement by Jean Vanier in a recent interview: 'The danger is to say that the church has all the knowledge it needs already and is not looking for any more prophets. But the prophets — they are the disabled people.'⁶⁰

Joseph Shapiro writes: 'there is no pity or tragedy in disability... it is society's myths, fears and stereotypes that make being disabled difficult'.⁶¹ Shapiro's comment suggests that it is external social and cultural forces, rather than the functionality of a condition or disability, that are most challenging. Perhaps this assessment holds especially true for the experiences of those with ASD and other such disabilities in the expression of their spirituality in churches and faith communities. Memmot's work, and similar initiatives, show that children with ASD, and their families, share a similar perspective to Zac. They are aware of some sense of welcome and acceptance in church but, in practice, full inclusion involves engagement with an exhausting array of hurdles. These hurdles might be represented by a challenging worship environment or inhospitable theology, inaccessible

⁶⁰ Roy McCloughry, *The Enabled Life: Christianity in a Disabling World* (London: SPCK, 2013), p. 118.

⁶¹ See Reynolds, 2008, p. 115.

teaching or disabling assumptions. There is a strong sense that, like the crowd at Buckfast Abbey, the majority of other churchgoers are unaware of these hurdles. They are missed, ignored or unthinkingly accepted. I am reminded of Swinton's observation that, in looking at our religious tradition through the eyes of people with disabilities, we begin to see things differently.⁶² In the same way that Zac's perspective brought new insight on the purposes of, and values inherent in, the physical architecture of one church, it is clear that the experiences of children with similar difficulties can ask similar questions of the architecture of Church tradition.

Literature on children's spirituality provides significant evidence of the damage admitted when the questions raised by children's experiences are silenced or are excluded from dialogue with Christian theology.⁶³ Isanon, who documents the struggles of one young man with ASD in this area, records the following indictment of Adam's church experience and its impact on his conception of God:

... his religious education had led him to see the God of Christianity as culturally a God of words, a God of walls, a God of abstractions, a God constructed and restricted by the static rationality of dogmatic conservatism, a God imprisoned by institutional and cultural bias...⁶⁴

Isanon proceeds to describe how Adam 'could not conceive of a God on these terms', and poignantly recounts how 'words and walls' had become symbols of his struggle against religiosity, religious institutions, religious dogma, and religious abstraction.

Tragically, church can be a 'bad place' for children like Zac and Adam. Perhaps the more hospitable are those, like Buckfast Abbey, where Jesus can be seen, but children like Zac cannot get close. Perhaps the less hospitable are like those experienced by Adam, where Jesus cannot be perceived at all. Regardless, the responsibilities and the consequences for those who lead, manage and attend church are profound. Jesus' warning to those who create stumbling blocks, those who build glass walls, and those who simply get in the way must ring out in our consciousness: 'Woe to the one by whom the stumbling-block comes.'⁶⁵

For Adam, Zac, and the others who have been considered in this reflection, it seems clear that a diagnosis of ASD is not the ultimate obstacle to relationship with God. Instead, it may be that it is ASD's interaction or lack of interaction with the structures of religion, and with those representing

⁶² John Swinton, *Is Theological Reflection a Technique or a Virtue? Listening to Hidden Voices* (BIAPT, 2010) <<http://www.biapt.org.uk/tr5.shtml>> [accessed 22 September 2016]

⁶³ See Nye, 2009a, p. 75.

⁶⁴ Abe Isanon, *Spirituality and the Autism Spectrum: Of Falling Sparrows* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001), p. 79.

⁶⁵ Matthew 18.7 (NRSV).

these structures, that is spiritually disabling. This position can be scripturally supported from Matthew 18. It is not aspects of age or ability that predicate access to and relationship with God. Jesus seems to suggest that the real limitations, glass walls or ‘stumbling blocks’ to this interaction are represented by the attitudes and interventions of others in positions of power and influence.

As I reflect on the spirituality displayed by Zac at Buckfast Abbey, what I observe is not a relationship with God that is enhanced or enabled somehow by a different cognitive or biochemical make up, but rather a spirituality that *seems unique* because it challenges and transcends the human and disabling boundaries that I, my faith community, and the Church at large have placed on it.

I have hesitated to ask Zac if he felt that Jesus was in some way present in the window at Buckfast. One thing seems clear, however, as I reflect on the vivid memory of my weeping child before a stained glass window. The Jesus that I know and love is more represented, more present, and more alive in a child railing at the frustrations of worshipping in an inhospitable place than in the impassive face in the grandeur of the glass. If this is the case, a more difficult question is posed by this proposition. Could it be that the inhospitable architecture of our churches is not just excluding people, but the presence of God?

There is clear theological room for this consideration. Harshaw’s analysis of Matthew 25 would suggest that God is ‘in some way mysteriously present to, in and with’⁶⁶ those with intellectual disabilities. Gundry-Volf’s appraisal of Mark 9.37 would also suggest that this could be the case. It is children like Zac whom we must welcome if we are to make space for the presence of God. Welcoming children has ultimate significance: ‘It is a way of receiving and serving Jesus and thus also the God who sent him. Conversely, failing to welcome children implies rejection of Jesus and God.’⁶⁷

For children with ASD and others with cognitive and intellectual disabilities, the barriers to inclusion in church are largely unseen, but impenetrable. They encounter glass walls that exclude on the basis of behaviour that is perceived to be disruptive or disturbing, on account of others’ ignorance, prejudice and fear, and in the face of cold and implacable theology. It is not enough to be interested and aware, or even to be sympathetic. If the Church persists on leaving our ‘little ones’ behind these

⁶⁶ Harshaw, 2010, p. 326.

⁶⁷ Gundry-Volf, 2001, p. 44.

walls, we risk also excluding the One whom we worship.⁶⁸ Without children like Zac in our midst, we render our buildings little more than draughty museums of religion and tradition, and our meetings dry memorials to what could, and should, have been.

Gillian Carlisle is a teacher who completed an MA in Theology at the Irish Baptist College in 2012 and now serves as a member of staff at Dromore Elim Church in County Down, Northern Ireland.

⁶⁸ Harshaw, 2010, p. 326, asks: 'If Christ is not present in His Church, His Body, in what sense can it be the Church at all?'