

There's the most marvellous programme on iPlayer at the moment exploring autism and more specifically how an autistic person relates to the world: or better still 'feels' the world, often as a threat because unable to communicate their feelings and thoughts to others. Each autistic person experiences this phenomenon in a unique way but something of this dilemma and the uniqueness of it can I think be applied to everyone in our attempts to get to grips with the 'spiritual' world or better the world and language of God's Spirit. It's the story of humanity encapsulated here in this most beautiful story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well, a Samaritan woman at that to emphasize the universal degree of difference between our normal material take on the world and the take on it Jesus is introducing us to through the presence and work of his holy spirit. Interestingly, Chris Packham, the presenter of the programme on autism, is autistic himself and describes how for him walking in a wood, or perhaps anywhere, can be an overwhelming experience because his mind is processing everything he sees all of the time – every leaf matters, and more than that, any change to the wood – a fallen branch for example, becomes deeply disturbing on subsequent visits. It's like God bringing order out of chaos only for the chaos to persist. Now I'd like to suggest that something of this battle goes on in all of us, the battle that is, with what we see and experience 'out there' and how we integrate it with what goes on 'in here' and it's not dissimilar to living in a world where the Spirit is opening our eyes to the full reality of creation, to the creative impulse which is life. This is how Jesus sees the Samaritan woman – in her completeness, including her lack of full awareness, and the amazing thing is that this awareness by Jesus of her true state enables her to also accept who she really is – like an autistic person learning to accept their autism through the loving acceptance of another. Perhaps we are all on the autistic spectrum to one degree or another, as we are all on the sinful spectrum of the Samaritan woman, but our coming to full awareness of this through Jesus doesn't diminish Jesus' sense of who we are in any way but rather enhances it, makes us realise with joy something of the uniqueness we all share in being different, which may enable us, like the Samaritan woman, to share our new joy at being both found and found out by Jesus to others. This is Adam and Eve in the wilderness being found once again by God. It can only be done through love.

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour