

Present in the Mystery of God: C Gangemi MA

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Mystery is a word that is used to describe something that is difficult or impossible to understand. I, for example put my keys on the side every day and it is always a mystery to me why I can never find them when I want them! A mystery that goes with my age I feel!

However, for me, one of the greatest mysteries within my own life has been that a God, whom I have never met physically, has called me to follow and serve him. I have also been mystified as to how I have been *enabled* to respond to that call by believing in and following the words and actions of Christ. But what is this call to be a disciple of Christ, whom I worship and seek to enter into a daily relationship with. What is it about Jesus that calls me forth? it's a mystery!

In this interview with Jean Vanier we are drawn into his own journey as a disciple and his lived vocation with people who have been disabled. Jean tells Zach Dukes of how he has shared his life with disabled people and how this became a call to 'mutual relationships of friendship' (Badetti 2016:158). Through these experiences Jean reveals an opportunity to meet, touch and feel the 'presence of God' (Vanier interview) in each other's life where all involved enter into a place of mystery. This language of mutual transformation and relationship is often a common experience, when sharing lives with disabled people it has certainly been a personal experience (focus Swinton 2001). We have added to each other's story and coloured each other's lives through the joys and challenges of life. It has been a mutual living out and 'celebration of diversity'(Pope Francis 2016).

The quest to understand what it means to be human has been at the forefront of human discovery and conversation for thousands of years. It was the subject matter of classical philosophers such as Plato, and Aristotle and has been continually discussed (based on JONES: 6 2004) throughout time. Is a person a person because of their intellect? Or because of their body? What should intellect do? Is a human person a body *and* a spirit or is it a fusion of body with spirit ? How should a body look? Who decides how the body should look? What life is valuable and what life is not? These questions have sought to define and unravel the experience of being human. However, more often than not, they have served only to imprison and disable bodies, creating hierarchies of abilities where some are deemed better than others. I would like to call this a 'culture of them and us'. The question is therefore, within such a culture who is *them* and who is *us*? Within this confusing conversation therefore, how do we search for

and discover an image of an all-embracing God in which the culture of 'Them and us' would, it itself prove mysterious!

In this interview with Jean Vanier there is a sense that he seeks to explain this transformative the power of relationship, that I have suggested occurs. Jean speaks, throughout the interview, of the mission of Jesus, reminding us that Jesus entered into the real-life stories of people offering them friendship and authentic love. Story after story in the Gospels sees Jesus as a meeting point, where he encouraged people to recognise the worth in each other. He seemed however, to have a particular focus on meeting people **who some had decided** were not as valuable as others. Here we see the 'culture of them and us' being challenged by Jesus. In the conciliar documents of the second Vatican Council the document on 'Divine Word' (Dei Verbum) teaches that the very purpose of Christ's Body and mission was to invite us into the mystery and purpose of the incarnation.

*'Christ established on earth the Kingdom of God, revealing His father and himself through words and deeds (...) The invisible God from the fullness of his love, addresses humankind as friends in order to invite them into his own company'.
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Therefore, the words and actions of Jesus and his call to friendship become a lens into the very mystery of God, humanness and how we should love and value each other as equals. Persons, who have been disabled, are much like any other person they have stories, experiences, ideas, knowledge and emotions to share. However, sometimes disabled people are in danger of being 'objects of pity and opportunities to grow in sanctification'(Masters 2016) . I was once with a person who told me that she often found 'being named as a person who helped others touch their vulnerability' tiring, she shared 'it's hard knowing that I am valuable because I help other people to *know themselves*. I do have ideas but people feel I am only here to show love, I can do much more than that! I just wish people would see me for who I am. I like sharing in other people's life it helps me as much as I help them, we do it together' (conversation at Summer Institute 2011)

So, thinking of any one person as 'people only of the heart and not of the head'(Vanier interview) or only of the head and not of the heart, may in itself, set up another division, unwittingly continuing the 'culture of them and us' within the human story. In our research, we found that, persons who have been intellectually disabled were indeed people of the head and heart with valuable observations of the world. Ideas and desires were expressed through symbols and body language and 'horizons of mystery' were 'enabled by the grace of God'(Matthews 2013: 242). Within the interview, the division between the

'people of the head and the heart' has been a tension for me. However, it has not diminished the very powerful witness that Jean gives to his experiences of relationship, discipleship and human transformation.

My own story of sharing my life with people who have been intellectually disabled has been filled with similar experiences and mutual moments of transformation. It has been touched by the joys and vulnerabilities that we all face. I have noted that the lives and stories of disabled people 'are as variable as any one person's is from another'(Masters 2016). Together, our stories and human experiences have provided a window into the a mystery that St. John Paul II explored in his Theology of the Body. Himself a man who experienced disabilities, St. John witnessed to the reality that each and 'EveryBody' (Gangemi, Tobanelli, Vincenzi, Swinton: 2010), no matter *its form or way of processing* information is 'capable of making visible the invisible: the spiritual and the divine'. St John Paul II gives us a lens into an accessible way to understanding Mystery, just as Jean Vanier has in the interview. They both remind us that each and every person is 'created to transfer (...) the mystery hidden since time immemorial of God' and that 'they are a sign'(JPII TB19 in Hogan 2006), in the world of that very Mystery and covenant of God (based on Matthews 2003:92) 'I will be your God and you my People' This is a promise for any one person as it is for another'(Masters 2016). It is the source of revelation.

Returning now, to the fact that the words and actions of Jesus draws all people into friendship with God, we can begin to unpack a little of the Mystery of God's presence in our lives. What might these word and actions reveal?

- Jesus did not reject, indeed he assigned dignity and importance to the very people society and the religious leaders rejected.
- He sought to encounter and understand God's creation, choosing to meet the person before the disability or life situation. This was on offer to everyone, no matter their ability.
- He ensured that everyone had access to his words, actions, ministry and mission and that no one person was excluded.
- He embraced people's stories and life situation, assuring them of their call into the mystery and love of the father.
- He was 'God's self-communication to humanity'(Masson 1984)
- Jesus is God's revelation, human and divine united and walking among us (Jn 1:14)
- He broke down barriers and showed that God's promise of belonging was real and for everyBody; He was our God and we his people.

The truth is that God is more mysterious and unpredictable than (*we are*) comfortable with imagining (Swinton 2001: 28).

In an essay in honour of Jean Vanier; 'Transforming friendship' (Reinders 2015) Professor Hans Reinders takes us on a journey through the words and actions of Jean. He tells the stories of his encounters, with people who had been disabled, as he entered friendship and built homes together. The essay relays how, for Jean friendship with the people he shared his life with was a 'gift from God' and not 'a moral task that we are asked to make'(Reinders 2015). Jean, Reinders tells us, is 'overwhelmingly attuned to human beings' and that 'L'Arche exists because of his belief in the presence of God'. L'Arche therefore is, in contemporary Christian History, a sign of Mystery and presence in the world. It invites people to 'read what happens to people (...) in the light of God's presence in their lives'(Reinders 2015) rather than act out of a *culture of them and us*.

Mystery then becomes an invitation to be ever, 'closer' (Vanier interview 19.33:23.33) and present to God. If each and every person is a sign of that mystery, *being* with others and *activating mutual dignity*, leads us into the promise of belonging. Within this, we are all important together and there are no divisions of ability. As Professor Reinders encourages us to discover in his foundational work on disability, theology, ethics, we are invited into 'receiving the gift of friendship'(Reinders 2008) with God and with each other, where being present to one another is Holy ground.

In the Interview Jean speaks powerfully about the journey of the person as they seek to be drawn ever more 'into the reality of God'. He parallels this with the Church's journey of discovery into God's act of revelation. Jean suggests that there has been a deeper penetration into the heart of God, into questions about the mystery of the incarnation and very identity of God. To continue this journey, at this point in Christian history, it seems to me that there is an urgent need to ask, at a deeper level, 'what it means to be human'. The lives of disabled people ask for an exploration into how God is 'always and everywhere present at the heart of Human existence' (Rahner: TI:19:143 in Masson 1984). It is time to ensure that people, of all abilities, are present, active and welcomed within the practices, communities and theological reflections of the Church today.

At the start of this paper I spoke of how the quest for what it meant to be human has been a long-debated issue. For persons who have been disabled this conversation has an important role to play in the living out of their lives. Culture and language hold a powerful place in presenting information about people's lives. All too often, history has consigned persons with disabilities to a 'culture of poverty, disadvantage, suffering and vulnerability'(Gangemi 2016:174). This is in stark contradiction to the approach of Christ, which I have suggested in this paper. It also contradicts the importance and place of belonging, for all people,

within God's heart and covenant. However, as with the ever-deepening journey of the church 'the field of disability and theological studies have provided a remembering of Christ's celebration of all people' and provides the opportunity to undertake theological reflection on 'accounts of disability that lay in wait for rediscovery.'(Romero 2016 : 204) This suggests Miguel Romero, a theologian and brother of a person with disability, must be a very 'ordinary' part of the Church's journey of discovery.

Parallel to this, it is also true to say that there has been an explosion of awareness, educational methods and approaches to communication, which have seen an increase in creativity and an *enablement* of people who have been disabled. Modern technology, legislation, person centred awareness of disability issues and symbolic forms of communication, has meant that both church and society have been, ever more, drawn into the stories and expressions of intellectually disabled people. As a result, some barriers of intellect have begun to be removed and replaced with creative and accessible possibilities. Relationship, presence and the gift of friendship is slowly becoming a creative possibility. However, there is still a long way to go before persons 'Living with a disability (along with their families and carers)' can feel as though they belong in a faith community'(Dukes 2016). The exciting thought is that, as a generation of Christians we are each and every one, called to discover the mysterious call of our individual vocation. Disabled people, as with all people have an important 'part to play in God's plan of salvation'(Matthews 2013:236). Activating this '*ordinary*' place of reflection, on disability in the church (Romero, 2016: 204), will require *all* people to enter into the mystery and sharing of authentic and respectful love. This will happen ordinarily 'through the gradual discovery' of new and creative ways of ***being together*** as the Body of Christ.

This ordinary journey will require both anticipating and receiving the gift of friendship. Entering into a relationship always holds an element of mystery because you become part of another person's story. In this you often find that you are guided more by the heart, something that many people who have been disabled seemed to be able to share naturally. What has always proved to be mysterious to me is that, even in the face of stories where people and families have been rejected and disabled by the church, their relationship with God has not diminished. Indeed it has grown in spite of the inaccessible structures, resources and practices. For God's mysterious love knows no boundaries 'for God is *in love* with'(Vanier interview) his creation and has a particular attention for those who have been rejected or disabled. Creative relationships between people of all abilities, especially 'when they are lonely, isolated' (Waldron 2016: 194) encourages away of coming *to know God*. Loving encounters remove experiences of rejection. Let me share a story of one such creative journey. Darren is a young man who had been denied access to the Eucharist out of a

mistaken understanding that he was not able to learn and that he had a *learning difficulty!*

As a disability adviser, I worked in many parishes. One day a new priest to a parish called me to meet a family whose son, Darren, was on the spectrum of autism. He was thirteen and his mother shared how every Sunday he would ask her to go to communion. The previous priest and catechist had felt that Darren would not be able to engage in a complicated programme for he was not a 'typical learner' (Henley 2016:201) The catechetical programme was used in the parish was inaccessible to Darren, for it was designed only a certain way of processing information. For years, he was excluded from the parish groups, for years he would attend mass and ask for the Eucharist. The new pastor noticed that every Sunday Darren would say 'Why not me?'. Asking for support, he felt that Darren was being denied his place in Christ's body and that his story was an issue of justice and belonging. After a short and creative programme of catechesis Darren was two weeks away from entering into the mystery of the Eucharistic celebration, when the bishop came to visit. Darren went up for his usual blessing, but as he came to the bishop he could wait no longer. His hands outstretched he approached the bishop, who had been asked to bless Darren and reassure him that it was not today he would receive, but soon. Darren responded by telling the bishop 'You are very greedy, you have all of those Jesus' and you won't even give me one!'. The day came for him to receive communion and he waited patiently for his turn, something that can prove very challenging for a person on the spectrum. Again with his hands outstretched he approached his parish priest who this time offered him 'Darren, this is the body of Christ', to which Darren replied, Amen, thank goodness no more pretending'.

Following the events, we asked if Darren, had been longing each week to respond to the 'presence of God's grace at the heart of his human existence' (Masson 1984) pretending to receive Christ each week? Were his words 'why not me' a sign to the community about the very mystery of the Eucharist? The church, that day was enriched for without Darren, the Body of Christ was incomplete and impoverished. As the church, therefore, journeys towards a deeper understanding of the abilities of disabled people, we are all encouraged to *do as Jesus did* embracing each other with 'the same spirit in which God embraces' (Reinders 2016: 182) persons all people of all abilities .

In conclusion :

The person who has been disabled cannot exist only to make ME a better person. We exist together and are held in that mysterious truth that relationship and friendship brings about the authentic and loving presence of God. A deeper exploration of Disability, mystery and community, within the human and Christian story, will lead us into a journey of mutual discovery and the

awesomeness of God's creative acts. This I feel is summed up in an invitation from Sarah Long, a theologian with a Disability '*This is me,' Sarah shares' I belong, accept me as I am. This is my God who understands me, befriends me and Guides me, I am his reflection (Long 2016:193)*

What is the mystery revealed by people who have been disabled?

God makes no division and desires no division within his creation for, as my esteemed director Fr Joh O'Toole once said in a homily about disability and the faith community 'there is no them and us, for there is only an us'(O'Toole 2010) We are *all*, therefore, present within the Mystery of God.

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