

Total Immersion

As my 9 year old Godson and his 7 year old brother are both profoundly autistic, it's a condition in which I have more than a passing interest. So I was fascinated to learn of Tyler Doi, an 11 year old autistic boy living in Canada. Tyler is into windchimes, big time; into them in the kind of way that only an autistic child can be. He literally eats, sleeps and dreams windchimes. Put simply, it's just the way he's wired. And it's absolutely remarkable. His favourites are those made by the largest windchime manufacturer in the world, Woodstock, who specialise in musically-tuned chimes. The company was founded by a professional musician and instrument designer in 1979 and today sells over 160 varieties of chimes.

Three years ago when Woodstock learned about Tyler they invited the then 8 year old and his parents to their factory and were "knocked out" not only by how much Tyler knew about the company, but particularly by his extraordinary ability to identify individual products purely by their sound. Time and time again, in a head-to-head blind challenge, Tyler would listen to the sound of one of over 160 different chimes and name it correctly without hesitation. Founder Garry Kvistad explained, "Tyler can hear more than what most people hear in a sound, because he's inside of it."

When's the last time, I wonder, that you found yourself inside a sound? I suspect it's less likely to be with something as ethereal as a windchime, and much more likely to be the kind of sound where volume and vibration both played a large part – perhaps in the middle of a thunderstorm, or the ever present London construction and roadworks, or a piercing alarm.

Living in a large and sophisticated Western city, it's very easy to largely lose touch with our senses and become somewhat remote to our rootedness

in creation. This is very much a 24/7 environment in which our days and nights are obscured by electric light and easily blur into one another. Unless we choose otherwise, we probably cover more ground each day by wheel or track than foot. We have to strain and concentrate to hear the sounds of nature above the noise of the cityscape.

On a wider scale, we have developed remarkable technology that whilst making our lives easier to administrate, at the same time, diminishes our own capabilities. In a telling updated version of Maslow's famous hierarchy of human needs, the largest and most essential category at the bottom of the pyramid has a new and even larger category beneath it – labelled "wi-fi"! In a reality television series 13 British men were set to fend for themselves on a desert island for a month. Despite some preparatory training in survival skills, it took them over 24 hours to make the fire which was crucial to their survival, and not least their access to drinking water, during which time they became severely dehydrated in the searing heat. It was at least 48 hours before they came up with anything to eat.

Back on main lands the prevalence of 'satnav' has rendered many people incapable of reading a map. A common concern, ironically highlighted by a video that went viral on social media, is that up and coming generations are now so fully immersed in virtual reality that they are becoming immune, or simply unavailable, to real, living, embodied experiences. They're immersing themselves in games and gizmos which sharpen their reactions whilst deadening their senses. They can text at lightning speed, but are barely able to hold a conversation.

It's certainly a far cry from world of first century Palestine and the pastoral imagery in this morning's Gospel of Jesus as the shepherd and

the gate to the sheepfold. Perhaps the first thing to acknowledge is how difficult many of us find it to be compared to sheep. After all, sheep aren't usually portrayed as the brightest animals, and certainly not as independent free thinkers. We think of them as passive creatures, who come in flocks that need to be fed and watered and have to be herded to prevent individuals wandering off and getting lost. But when it comes to sheep, I speak from a point of almost total ignorance.

What is helpful to remember, is that Jesus is speaking in context to a people who would have been very familiar with the picture of God painted by the prophet Ezekiel. Throughout chapter 34 of Ezekiel God is portrayed as the shepherd of Israel who will protect the sheep - God's people Israel - and denounce false shepherds. David is praised as the true shepherd who will care for God's sheep. When seen through this lens, we realise that in portraying Jesus as the good shepherd, John is drawing on a rich legacy within the Old Testament in which the image of the shepherd is a symbol of leadership, providing both care and protection. This imagery is of course central to the best known psalm of all, Psalm 23, which we've just heard, and which we'll sing as our final hymn.

I know nothing of shepherding today. The closest I come is some distant memory of a few snippets of the TV show *One Man and his Dog* from 30 odd years ago: chiefly men with flat caps, whistles and a variety of sheep dogs (some seemingly with more enthusiasm than skill) herding flocks of sheep - from behind - into a pen. The game wasn't up until the last sheep was safely ensconced and the gate firmly shut. In the Middle East, contrary to Western practice, shepherds don't herd their flock from behind, but usually walk out in front calling to them repeatedly to keep them together. And yes, that does mean, contrary to our image of sheep being not terribly bright, sheep do recognise the distinctive call of their shepherd.

So what I want us to think about this morning, is not whether we are sheep, or even whether Jesus is, as we hear in this passage, either the shepherd or the gate to the sheepfold, but rather to focus

on two key themes at the very heart of this passage: recognizing the voice of the shepherd; and abundant life. I suspect we cannot have one without the other.

Despite my earlier musings, I'm a big fan of modern technology and am not entirely joking when I say that my mobile phone runs my life. It has many fantastically helpful functions and features to help me navigate my way through the demands of each week. I once used it to book a week's summer holiday in my favourite Greek bay, whilst sitting in the back of a number 68 bus on a particularly cold, wet November afternoon. So yes, my phone can do wondrous things, but it also has its limitations. There are some really important things that it simply can't do for me; things which are much more about being than doing. And hearing God's call is top of that list.

How do you hear God's call? I suspect there will be as many different answers as there are people here. For some of us, occasionally we may hear that divine voice break through and call us to attention, but I suspect more often than not, it's a much more subtle experience. Listening, tuning in to that still small voice within takes practice and presence. If we try too hard we can end up drowning it out with the sound of our own striving, as R S Thomas describes in his poem "In Church":

“. . . There is no other sound
In the darkness but the sound of a man
Breathing, testing his faith
On emptiness . . .”

I suspect that young Tyler and his windchimes can point us in the right direction. Speaking of the boy's extraordinary talent, Co-founder of the Center for Spectrum Services, Jamey Wolff, explains "People with autism are everywhere – and need to be appreciated for what they can contribute to society". Tyler has a real talent for immersing himself in a sound, something which for him, comes naturally. What might our lives look like if we were able to intuitively immerse ourselves in the still small voice within? If we were able to naturally orientate our lives within the love of God?

How do we do this? Well, there's a big clue in Jesus' words, for those with ears to hear. "I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly." Think for a moment. When do you feel most fully alive? When is life most abundant for you? What makes your heart burn? What makes your spirits soar and your soul sing? I'll bet it has little to do with material abundance and much more to do with experience and senses and engagement and relationship. I strongly suspect too, that your answer is focussed around a time when you're fully present, immersed in a particular experience or emotion or encounter.

For those of you who were here, think back to the utter joyousness of our Easter Day celebrations, when we were joined by the Mzansi Youth Choir from South Africa and the Boston's Children's Chorus. I'm not sure I'll ever experience another Easter quite like it, and if I do, I suspect it will take many years. I kid not, when I say that for me, it was a kind of religious experience. I felt, like young Tyler and his windchimes, that I was inside the sound. There was something so incredibly powerful in hearing those voices in praise of the risen Christ, and even though we didn't understand the African words, there was an extraordinary sense of presence and abundance, in a moment out of time.

Tyler finds an immense joy and a real abundance in his connection with the sound of windchimes – it's something amazingly pure and simple, and yet profound. It's just the way he's wired. How are you wired? What gives you your deepest sense of connection and connectedness? If, through practice and prayer, we are able to align ourselves to not only the voice, but the will and love of God, then it is very likely that sense of connection and connectedness will expand, just as we find in our reading from Acts this morning, where real abundance is found not in the amassing, but the sharing of wealth.

There is a well-known story of an anthropologist who proposed a game to children of an African tribe. He put a basket of fruit near a tree and told the kids that the first one to reach the fruit would win them all. When he told them to run they all

took each other's hands and ran together, then sat together enjoying the fruits. When asked why they ran like that, as one could have taken the fruit for oneself, they said, "Ubuntu, how can one of us be happy if all the others are sad?" Ubuntu is a philosophy of African tribes which can be summed up as "I am because we are." Or, were we to couch it in Christian terms, we could call it Kingdom living. I suspect that despite the dictionary definition, true abundance, or rather abundance in the Kingdom, is not where some have more than enough, but rather when everyone has sufficient.

As R S Thomas acknowledges, the Kingdom may seem a long way off from our Western ways, but it is possible, with patience, perseverance and practice; by making the effort and striving to switch off and tune in, to seek to immerse ourselves in the voice of the one who calls us and all God's children, to Ubuntu, to life in all its fullness. It doesn't mean spending hours in silent prayer, although some time in silence can indeed be fruitful. Many people with autism suffer from sensory overload, and so the sounds of everyday living, such as traffic, background music and even the hum of the fridge can be overwhelming, painful and distressing. But for those of us who can fine tune our eyes to see and ears to hear, the voice of God can be heard as much in the midst of the city as in the stillness of the forest or the silence of the chapel, as Godfrey Rust makes clear in his poem, *The word's out*:

The word's out

Sometimes
I listen for your word
and hear nothing.

In the quiet of my room
the only noise
is the thump of my heart
and voices arguing inside my head.

It's not that I don't give you a chance.
Sometimes I say nothing
for as long as five minutes.
Your silence is still deafening.

Then I open a book
and out tumbles your voice.
And when I try to shut that up I find
you can get a word in anywhere.

I've even heard you sometimes from the pulpit.

I hear you on the Nine O'Clock News
saying *What have you done
with the world I gave you?*

I hear you in the tabloids
saying *Whoever is without sin
cast the first stone.*

With the first burst of spring flowers
you say *Look—no hands!*

With the most extraordinary sunset
you say *Look, just relax.*

The shrunken face of hunger
is you saying *Feed me.*

The beggar on the underground
is you saying *House me.*

The dreaded diagnosis
is you saying *Heal me.*

The valium prescription
is you saying *Free me.*

The redundancy notice
is you saying *Value me.*

The scream of the torture victim
is you saying *Father, forgive.*

The priest staring down the barrel of a gun
is you saying *Love casts out fear.*

When I am late and hurrying
you are the face on the clock
saying *I am the beginning and the end.*

When I am greedy
you are the face on the banknote
saying *Treasure is in heaven.*

When I am proud
you drop your banana-skins in front of me
saying *Don't look down.*

When I am lonely
you are the stillness of the house
saying *I am with you, always.*

And when I am grieving
you are the voice at the graveside
saying *I am the Resurrection and the Life.*
Sometimes

I listen for your word
and hear nothing.

And sometimes
I hear nothing else.

Amen.
Lindsay Meader