

BEING AWARE OF THE GLASSES WE WEAR
Sermon preached at 10.00am Sung Eucharist
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
4 November 2018, All Saints Sunday

The new Johnny English film is great fun. Rowan Atkinson's third outing as the spoof English spy. It's more of the same from the first two films, with Johnny English striding the world believing he is like James Bond. In reality, he runs out of petrol chasing a villain or causes havoc wearing a virtual reality headset.

The scene with virtual reality training is beautifully done. Johnny puts on the big headset: like a diving mask. He is meant to stay in one room but of course the door is left open and before long he is outside in the real world creating mayhem. Through his virtual reality headset he thinks he is walking around the criminal's headquarters, fighting the baddies. In fact, he has wandered onto an open top London bus and throwing the hapless conductor over the side. It's brilliant slapstick.

Walking around in virtual reality is how we relate to the world much of the time. Most of the time we do it unaware. Some of the time we are conscious our virtual reality: acting as if what I'm doing at any moment is the only thing that's happening, or that other people are bit parts in the drama of my life in which I'm the central character.

Road rage is an example I've used before. This week, on the drag, heading for Stowmarket on A14, the car in front slowed down to let a lorry pull out. It slowed down to let a lorry out!! The lorry was indicating to overtake another container lorry. So there I sat as the lorry crawled past the other. It must have added a whole minute to my journey.

Blessed are those who can laugh at themselves for they shall never cease to be amused.

Or in our virtual reality we mishear what someone says and leap to our own defence. Only half way through our justification for whatever has happened, do we realise the person meant something else entirely. This happens on a near daily basis in my house as three teenagers joust verbally with each other, and their parents.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall never cease to be employed.

We wear other glasses too. My chemistry teacher at school was Mr Ward. His nickname was "spider" because of his enormously long limbs. A brilliant teacher, in the chemistry lab he was ultra-safety conscious. He was famous in school for his demonstration of dropping potassium in water. There's a great explosion as the metal hits the water, glass and water blown everywhere. But Mr Ward wasn't famous for the explosion. What made us laugh was him leaning across one end of the long desk at the front of the class, arm outstretched, holding a metre rule tied to the end of another metre rule, with a long metal spoon at the other. And to finish off the mad scientist look, those perspex safety glasses over his regular glasses.

The glasses of our scientific, rational education have a huge impact on how we perceive reality. Science enriches our lives immeasurably. Science and religion can both deepen our wonder at the world around us: deepen our "wow!" in response to space, the ocean depths, the microscopic.¹ But narrow materialistic thought can limit our perception and awareness. Its all surface and no depth. There are things outside the definitions of science, but which are still real and true.

¹ See Mark Vernon "There is one thing that unites science and faith", *Church Times* 4 November 2018

You'll be aware we wear other glasses too. Like the stylish, branded sunglasses of our consumer-driven society. That slight buzz we get from even the smallest purchase gives us away. I noticed it on Friday buying shower gel, of all things. "Tesco, ergo sum." "I shop, therefore I am."

So we come to this morning's readings and their wonderful vision of the reality beyond the immediate, the greater reality of which this world is a part, the reality beyond the physical, but which imbues the material, and is all around us.

The readings highlight the life beyond our short lives, the life beyond death. They remind us of the context for the suffering and pain we endure. How our short lives are a drop in the ocean of God's eternity. Our life and death are part of the whole abundant life that God wills for us. Isaiah declares "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast ... of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. ... he will swallow up death for ever."² Revelation joins the chorus. "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more".³ And in John's Gospel, there's a trailer of Easter with the resurrection of Lazarus. "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."⁴

Much of the time our society encourages us to wear glasses that block out our mortality. We are fed a virtual reality that discourages us from engaging with the certainty that defines our lives: death. You know from experience how these glasses of immortality are shattered by the death of someone we love. We remembered this at the All Souls Service on Friday. Our World War I remembrances (Crimson Glory, Eve of Peace) remind us how the glasses of immortality, as well as the glasses of jingoism and the glory of war, were cruelly ripped away by the reality of death and destruction in the trenches.

Blessed are those who mourn for they will never cease to remember the real world.

On this All Saints Sunday we remember, we celebrate that we can see beyond all the glasses that we wear. The Saints and mystics inspire us because they have learnt to be aware of the glasses that restrict their vision. They have allowed God to show them how our glasses prevent us living fully. "They know themselves as part of a much larger Story, a much larger Self."⁵

Notice that the Saints still wear the glasses of their age and culture. Oh yes, many of the Saints were famously difficult to live with. Sanctity does not mean the removal of personality, but the fulfilment of character. The Saints though are not conformed to their age and culture. They are formed by the reality of God.

The trick is to be aware of the glasses that we inevitably wear. It is inevitable that we see the world from our perspective. When we notice that our vision has narrowed, we can smile once more and remember the bigger picture. When we notice the glasses of our scientific world view, we can smile once more and remember there are other valid views. When we remember our mortality, we can smile once again and embrace how the brevity of life concentrates its sweetness. Each time we notice the glasses we wear, each time we remember is a moment of awakening, a moment to take a breath and remember God.

It's like the young monk learning to meditate. A wise nun is teaching him to focus on his breathing. "But it's hopeless, Sister. My mind wanders all the time. 10,000 times in the last

² Isaiah 25.6-9

³ Revelation 21.1-6

⁴ John 11.32-44

⁵ Richard Rohr in "Everything Belongs The Gift of Contemplative Prayer" p.24

half an hour!” “Ah”, replies the nun with a smile of recognition, “10,000 times to return to God. 10,000 times to remember God’s presence with you.”

Blessed are the wearers of glasses, for they will never cease to need God’s grace.

*Canon Matthew Vernon
Canon Pastor & Sub Dean*