

A Christian Faith and Autism

By Ann Memmott, an autism adviser working with the Church of England and many other organisations



I'm Ann. I don't have 'mild' autism, but that hasn't stopped me from enjoying a lot of life and wanting to be part of the Christian faith.

So many people think that those on the autism spectrum cannot possibly understand God. Others think that surely we must be unable to attend church. For me, my Christian faith is hugely important, and being part of a church is a joy.

What do I believe? I'm a regular worshipper at a really lovely church which is part of the Church of England, although I also help to run a Methodist disability church group. I'm not a lot of good at the technical faith stuff, because my brain mostly works in pictures, not words. Unless I can imagine what something looks like, it's fairly meaningless. I get most of my meaning and emotions from images, textures, touch, rather than words.

My senses are very different to those of other people. I can see, hear, smell, taste and feel more detail than most other people, and can't filter it out. This is both good and bad. In worship I can find great meaning and beauty and mystery in images, music, the texture of something. But I can also be overwhelmed if there is too much detail for too long, and end up exhausted and confused. Balancing that can be a real challenge, but it's worthwhile for me.

What do I know about God and Jesus? For me, the gospels are the most important thing. Reading what Jesus told us to do and not do is important for me, though I'm very aware that all people make mistakes with it almost all the time. Jesus told us to love God and love one another, and for me that is the most important instruction of all. Being fair with others, helping them, supporting them when they need it – those are things that perhaps others don't think autistic people are good at. Many of us are very interested in social justice and fairness, and very keen to make sure that everyone has what they need. I have always felt that way, from the earliest memories of life when I wanted to give my pocket money to a charity and my parents were astonished.

I believe that everyone is created equal, and that when we look at someone, we're also looking at Jesus. Treating everyone with the respect we've give Him is something I try to do, and something I think is very important. Sometimes it's difficult, especially when we find a few people in any faith who are negative about autism and what we might bring to a church. But loving people and praying for them is so important.

Do I think that my autism stops me from experiencing religion 'the right way'? No, because I don't think there is a single 'right way'. God created each of us, and gave each of us our own way of learning and growing. I love teaching people how I experience my faith, and I love learning about how they experience theirs. There will always be things I can't understand as quickly as other people, but there are others where I can experience things that many people cannot. That chance to learn from each other is what helps make the world a great place to be. I work with groups that help explain our faith to children in schools and Junior Church, and it's so good to be able to talk with young people about these things.

How do I pray? I just chat to God. For me, he's a friend. Or I chat to Jesus. I've never been entirely sure what the Holy Spirit is, but that doesn't worry me too much. I'm sure the Holy Spirit is there anyway.

What can someone on the autism spectrum bring to a church? Exactly the same as anyone else, really. Worship. Prayer. Love. Friendship. Skills aplenty, if only people would look for them and allow us to use them more. I know of people on the autism spectrum who are marvellous Vicars and other church leaders, for example. We might be able to do any job in the church, and our ability to spot missing details and understand systems is useful for any organisation.

God is good. Even in the midst of dark times, He's got me through things and helped me find the support and love and care that I've needed, and I never want to let Him down.