

As we sat on the garden wall by the front of the church, after all the other Mass-goers had dispersed, the girl said to me, a little shyly, “I saw the film.” I knew that she was referring to Michael Whyte’s film, “Priest” which focused on my ministry in the parish and which was released last year. Seeing this film was one of the factors that had propelled this 16-year-old to come to the Vigil Mass by herself. She said that she was interested in being baptised. “There aren’t many people my age come to Mass, are there?” she said. “I can’t understand why.” I sat there in the warmth of the early evening sunshine happy as a priest can be, lost in admiration at my new young parishioner’s strength of character.

I remember when Michael Whyte came to see me to ask if I would help him with this film. Not a Catholic, he had already made two successful films about the Church – “No Greater Love” and “Relics and Roses” – and he wished to complete the trilogy, as he put it. He told me that I should take my time in deciding. I was both excited and apprehensive about the project and dithered for several months. Then I rang Eileen Cole, who was then working for the Catholic Media Office. She told me that the initiative was an independent one but that the Office was supporting it. She explained that it would contribute to changing the narrative about the priesthood, which had become associated in many people’s minds with child abuse. And now here I was, chatting with a child who had seen the film and who had been drawn towards Jesus and his Church as a result of it.

My favourite scene in the film is when I am teaching a new batch of altar servers how to genuflect together whilst keeping their hands joined and their backs straight, all the while being watched from behind by a teacher. Some of them manage it and others nearly fall flat on their faces. I laugh whenever I recall that episode. I never realised that I enjoy being with children as much as I do until I saw that scene and others when I am sharing their company. It was an enormous privilege to have my ministry reflected back to me on the screen: I found the experience freeing and affirming.

I wrote to a priest friend after the film had been released that I felt very at peace promoting the film in whatever way I could because it depicted me not as I would wish to be but as I am. He understood. In one scene, a niece with great justification lambasts me for being cruel to her aunt who had recently lost her husband; I had written a cold letter to the aunt trying to defend myself against the accusation that I had neglected him. On another occasion, I acknowledge on film that as a young priest I had become too close to women on two occasions and that that had caused confusion and pain. These and other moments in the film make it an authentic portrayal of an ordinary, flawed man who has been charged with a divine commission.

And that is its power. We see that the stumbling attempts of a parish priest to be present to those entrusted to his pastoral care are imbued with a startling significance. Nothing is more important than the placing of his hands on the head of a dying woman as he calls down the Holy Spirit upon her in her final hours. The film, which depicts the celebration of various sacraments, itself acquires a sacramental value: it shows forth God to the world and God, working through the film, transforms hearts. I say this because of the numerous comments that people have made to me after having seen it. The film tells us that God is always there for us.

Being part of this enterprise has borne in upon me something which is perhaps rather obvious: modern means of communication make it possible for us to evangelise in a full way those who are physically distant from us.

Physical proximity is a necessary part of faith formation but the work that God does through multiple and varied screens is not merely a preparation for the real thing; it is the real thing. God's self-communication takes many forms and all of them are efficacious.

This insight is something that resonates, I imagine, with the experience that many of us have had during the pandemic as we have sought to continue the mission of the Church remotely. Some memories stand out for me especially clearly. For example, several people have visibly moved through a threshold of faith as I have watched them on my screen during a conversation between Sycamore video clips: their faces have relaxed and they have emanated joy; they have spoken with new and surprising conviction; sometimes they have wept. I feel sure that the fact that they were physically removed from their interlocutors at these moment has created the conditions for them to have a more intense interaction with God, while simultaneously being supported by others' presence.

Or again, during the first lockdown I took to posting seven-minute video clips about an incident in my life and about how I understood God was speaking to me through it. They were well received. I realised that, sitting in my house talking to my phone, I was somehow better able to acknowledge my humanity than I have been able to do to date when preaching, and that that has lent to my words a persuasive force that is entirely new. "You let us find out about you," one parishioner told me.

Reflecting on this I have become aware that we who speak of God are in ourselves his message before ever we speak. We show forth how God has transformed us. Our fundamental task is to witness. We have nothing to offer the world other than our living relationship with Jesus. And it is precisely what we have that all people want.

Today's readings underline this truth. The apostolate of the Church, in which we all share, proceeds from her members' relationship in prayer and through the sacraments with their Risen Lord (First Reading). The Christian has personal experience of God's love (Second Reading) which, through the forgiveness of sin, is experienced as mercy (Responsorial Psalm), as adoption by the Father (Gospel Acclamation) and as being drawn into communion through Christ with the Blessed Trinity (Gospel). In other words, massive things happen to us and within us through the simple process of believing and this lends credibility to our words.

Authentic communication requires something more however. It is not sufficient for us to "show forth;" we have to "engage with," or, as Pope Francis expresses this in his Letter for Communications Sunday, to "encounter people as they are." Michael Whyte's film is so powerful because he came and stayed with us for an extended period and kept returning to capture particular moments. He was meticulous and very intentional.

And of course this "going out" to meet the other encapsulates Pope Francis' whole vision of evangelisation as well as communication. It is something that has deeply affected my pastoral practice. I have tried street evangelisation. I have knocked on doors and asked residents if they would like me to pray for them. I have engaged in detached youth work in one of the council estates in my parish. None of this has come easily to me.

But perhaps the most demanding act of outreach in which I have engaged was to go to a travellers' camp which had been set up temporarily in my parish. I had been moved by material produced for a recent Racial

Justice Sunday about the travellers and I felt that I needed to go and to minister to them. I was very nervous when I walked among the 20 or so caravans. Of course I was welcomed and was able to celebrate Mass and hear Confessions. Just before I got into my car I asked a couple of young women from the camp with babies in their arms if I might have a photo of them to post on our Parish Facebook Page. They readily agreed. Over the next few days this post was shared multiple times and more than 10,000 people engaged with it (our average engagement rate is about 200 per post). Lots of comments were forthcoming, from travellers in England and Ireland and from numerous people from the settled community. The majority expressed an overwhelming sense of relief that a priest had come alongside a marginalised community. When I look back on my visit, what I remember with the greatest pleasure is sitting with some of the ladies in the sunshine, having a cup of tea, chatting unhurriedly about their travels. We were, as Pope Francis would say, encountering each other.

Priest

Priest is a beautifully shot film chronicling life in the Bradford parish of 'Mary, Mother of God' in non-pandemic times from the beginning of Lent to Easter Sunday. It is produced and directed by filmmaker Michael Whyte.