

SERMON FOR EASTER 4 | 12.05.2019

Acts 9: 36-43, Revelation 7: 9-17; St John 10: 22-30

Because of the theme for the readings in all three years of our liturgical cycle, the third Sunday after Easter is often called ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’. Even this year when the Gospel reference is a bit briefer, we are reminded of the unlimited love that Jesus has for all of us: how he comes in search of all of us - in the hope of binding us into his family, into his sheepfold.

Today I want to draw on one life as an example of a good shepherd. It is that of the French Canadian philosopher, Jean Vanier who died on Tuesday at the age of 90.

Jean Vanier was a spiritual giant. Those who lived and worked with him spoke of his charismatic holiness; many indeed thought of him as a living saint. But his humility was such that none of this touched him. All he sought to do was to help people to know and to live in the presence of Jesus ‘as one might with a close friend’. And he did that through a life spent with the poorest and weakest in society – in particular with those who had mental disabilities.

Born with a silver spoon in his mouth, the son of very able and loving parents, Jean left his native Canada for Britain in the height of the war to train as a naval officer at Dartmouth. He met the Queen on one of his trips abroad. But it was on a visit with his mother to a centre for refugees who had survived Dachau, Belsen and Auschwitz concentration camps that he decided to leave the military in favour of a life committed to the care of the weak.

In 1963, after some years teaching philosophy in Paris, a good friend of his took Jean Vanier to the village of Trosly-Breuil and to an institution for 30 men with mental handicaps. Later on he recalled just how dreadful a place it was, with beds crammed up against one another, patients fighting and screaming all day long.

But instead of being repulsed by the place he felt strangely drawn to it and to the men he found there. He wrote later of how he felt the presence of God within those walls – and in the patients, not just anger and violence but also an amazing tenderness. But what really touched him was the unspoken questions: *why have we been abandoned here? Why am I not with my brothers and sisters who are married and living in nice houses? And Do you love me?*

For several months Vanier visited similar kinds of institutions - prisons, asylums, leper colonies. He said in an interview years later: *of course there was something frightening about these places – but also something mysterious and beautiful, a sense of wonderment. In their faces; so much pain but also a vulnerable warmth. And always at the end: ‘Veux-tu revenir?’: will you come back?* It didn't take long for Jean Vanier to conclude that it was people with mental disabilities who were among the most oppressed and humiliated in the world.

And so in the summer of 1964, without any idea of how the story would unfold, he invited two of the inmates at Troly-Breuil to come and live in his tumbledown cottage. To start with it had just one tap, no toilet and only a wood burning stove for warmth. But it was a start and for Raphael and Philippe it was the beginning of that family home they had so craved. *As Vanier reflected, All I could do was to take a risk and to see what happened.* From such small beginnings the 'l'Arche' movement was born, communities of those with special needs and the able bodied, living together.

And, as all of us know, while living in any kind of community provides us with a feeling to belonging which can be brilliant, living with other people can also be hard work. Lucien, one of the core members or helpers, working for what is little more than pocket money, admitted that living with those who exhibit challenging behaviours often drew those same attitudes out of him: *I was horrified to discover violence within my own self, and to find that in certain circumstances I might do harm to someone weaker than me.*

For Jean Vanier, that was a valuable lesson to learn. For him, those with disabilities (or 'diff-abilities' as our own Nicola Henderson expresses it when she is working on this topic with her children in school) are 'messengers from God', making real the plea of Jesus to Peter in the Gospels: *Do you love me?*, making real the words of Jesus *I was a stranger and you welcomed me.* Whenever Jean was saying goodbye he would invariably say to those he was leaving behind, *Stay close to Jesus. Be with the poor. Shepherding.*

Of course Vanier was much more than just a good friend to the disabled and host to thousands of l'Arche members the world over. His life was also given over to giving retreats and talks.

Diana Barran, a former hedge fund manager, was at one such event. She writes: *His core message was that we are healed by the most vulnerable people in society. This is because they reveal to us our own vulnerability and then go on to seek a relationship with us based - not on what we can do or what we have – but on our common humanity. This has helped me try to shape my life in an entirely different way.*

And again: *Everything I learned from him was rooted in Vanier’s humble intimacy with Jesus. It always felt like there was no distance between them at all.*

Diana remembers one talk in which he asked: *‘What is your deepest fear?’* He then went on to say that for most of us, the greatest fear is of loneliness, of being rejected by those we share our lives with, of being unlovable. She went on: *the challenge Jean Vanier left us with at the end of every retreat was this: that we learn to accept our own weaknesses, faults and failings - and to use them as the springboard for affirming others, telling them how we find them more beautiful, interesting and generous than they would ever dare to believe about themselves...*

Vanier’s philosophy was nothing if not realistic and unsentimental. In a letter to the many l’Arche members he wrote: *There is something intolerable about pain and suffering when we cannot cure that person. No one wants to be with people in pain, unless we can do something to alleviate it.*

When all is said and done, in l’Arche, there are no cures. What people need when all the therapies have been tried and failed, is a friend who is faithful, a friend who will stand by them, offering a loving environment where they are respected as full human beings.

Throughout this Mass we keep hearing the word sheepfold, a name coined from the very earlier days for the Church. Christ the Good Shepherd searches for his sheep so that we can be restored to our place within the fold which God has created for us.

To finish I was very moved by a short interview with Dawn Foster, a lapsed Catholic who was drawn back to the Church after the Grenfell Tower fire. She was asked why she felt, in her late 30s, that there was a value in being part of the Church now, today.

Her response went like this: *What did I find there? The biggest change for me was the way in which I was pulled into meeting people - from those locally who had very different political views and jobs I would never normally encounter, to far-flung friends, made online, who I felt a connection with, purely because of our common faith. It is so much easier to construct an echo chamber in your social circle of like-minded people than it is to make friends with people who are very different from you. The great thing about churches is that they force you to do just that - while also offering you unflinching support without being asked.*

All we share in common is our faith in Jesus and what we do for an hour each Sunday. Life still remains difficult, as it does for everyone, and certain periods and calamities make each day harder, but a small routine – a universal pattern of hymn singing, bible reading, praying, kneeling and sharing bread – has given me a framework to focus on and a regularity in an otherwise chaotic life.

Jesus was in the Temple at the time of the great Festival we called Hanukkah, the eight day celebration which recalled the time when the Greeks were finally expelled from the Temple in Jerusalem. But the city was still not free. Now the Roman were in charge and there was a renewed sense of defeat and hopelessness.

Just like the hopelessness in the hearts of Raphael and Philippe in that noisy, violent asylum in Trosly-Breuil. Jean Vanier met that hopelessness and fear just as Jesus did – not by changing the system but by giving dignity to those who had so much to put up with: loving and caring for them, holding their hands and sharing with them the love of God. As our Offertory Hymn at 10am says:

*I will hold the Christ-light for you in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.*

*I will weep when you are weeping; when you laugh I'll laugh with you.
I will share your joy and sorrow till we've seen this journey through.*

What is the role of the Church but to enable people to hear the voice of Jesus and to know how much they are respected and loved. And what is the point of our Masses? As Dawn Foster says, to give a framework to focus on and a regularity in our otherwise chaotic lives. And of course to support one another – whatever.

Today we give thanks for the long life of Jean Vanier who showed us so brilliantly well how to be shepherds - and why being a part of Christ's sheepfold is so vital to our life of faith.