

Sermon for Sunday 26.5.19 Week of Reconciliation. Rev'd Jenny Simson

Today is the 6th Sunday of Easter and we continue to bask in the great fifty 50 days of Eastertide. Each Sunday during the Easter season the gospel readings taken from the lectionary pattern, that is, the three year cycle of A, B and C, mainly come from John's gospel, and specifically from chapters 13 till the end of chapter 17.

These chapters capture the meaning of Jesus servanthood in the washing of the feet before his crucifixion, his betrayal by Judas, and his farewell discourse and prayer to the father.

In these chapters we specifically hear the intimacy of his love and communion with God and his love and communion with us. The chapters speak into our hearts Jesus teachings and give us direction about how we are to respond as his disciples in the world.

Now at this point, I would like to say something about a recently departed great theologian, author, philosopher and humanitarian who wrote a commentary on the gospel of John that I have read and refer to often.

Some of you may well have heard of him - his name is Jean Vanier. He was a Canadian catholic. Jean died nearly 3 weeks ago on the 7th May, age 90. Vanier is more widely known as the founder of L'Arche communities with and for people with mental disabilities.

The path to this mission began for Vanier when in the 1950's he resigned his commission in the Navy to follow Jesus more closely. At that time he met Pere Thomas Phippe O.P. who became his spiritual father and encouraged him to let himself be drawn into the mystery of Jesus through the gospel of John.

Vanier's understanding of the gospel deepened over the years through reflection, study and prayer and he once described the gospel like a mine of precious stones, from which he has extracted but a few.

His commentary on John's gospel by the same name as his experience "Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John", sparkles with the language of love that reflects deep wisdom about communion with God in Christ and with each other.

At the beginning of his lifelong mission of caring for the disadvantaged, Vanier began visiting French asylums in the early 1960s. The horror of what he saw helped shape his mission for the rest of his life. In 1964, he invited two men with developmental disabilities to live with him in a small house he had bought in a village north of Paris. He called the house L'Arche — after Noah's Ark. The shared home with the two men grew into the international organization L'Arche, which works to provide homes and workplaces for people with disabilities.

There are now over 150 communities in 38 countries.

Vanier continued to live as a member of the original L'Arche community in France, until his recent death.

Some knew Vanier as a living saint. At his recent funeral service Vanier was reported as saying that people said that he was the founder of L'Arche, when in reality he was just the first to arrive.

For his funeral Mass, Vanier had chosen the John's Gospel reading of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. Of this passage the Presiding Archbishop said, "Bending down to wash his disciples' feet, Jesus makes himself weak before us. To touch our hearts and heal them, he uses no other means but presenting himself as weak, as the least of the servants. Jesus is 'master and lord,' but he lowered himself out of love. He is 'master' because of his tenderness and unending forgiveness, which raises us up and sets us back on our feet with trust and joy."¹

Vanier, the Archbishop said, was a "herald" of Jesus' love, humility and service. He reminded people of the infinite beauty of each person. Whether we are disabled, marginalised, isolated or belong to a majority or a minority each person is infinitely precious. As Christ disciples we must always remember this, because Jesus never forgot it.

For the last stretch of his life, Vanier could no longer speak, but he continued to communicate by developing clear gestures with his hands. His last "words" were: "Everything is given". Everything is grace.

And what is given in John's gospel today is the Holy Spirit and peace.

The Greek translation for the Holy Spirit is Paraclete, and Vanier wrote in his commentary on John's gospel, "Paraclete is one of those rich Greek words that are difficult to translate completely. A Paraclete is someone who defends and comforts and speaks up for and helps a weakened person. So the word Paraclete can be translated as advocate as well as comforter, consoler or helper. The Holy Spirit is the supreme Paraclete, the divine carer who takes away the anguish of loneliness, brings presence, security, peace and communion."²

About God's peace, Vanier wrote, "Jesus promises us a peace that is not just a balance of forces or an absence of violence or destruction. It is not just a good feeling inside of us, a feeling of centeredness, wholeness, quietness, stillness or inner silence. It is not merely an absence of inner conflicts or of desire, as early Greek philosophers taught. No, this peace is more than all of these things combined. It is the trust that Jesus is there with us and in us. For Jesus is our peace. Peace is resting in the Beloved, having total trust in him. It is the peace of a child resting in the tender arms of her loving parent."³

May we therefore, in this time of reconciliation and for all time, follow the way of Jesus as did Jean Vanier and hold each other in the preciousness of the infinite beauty of each person. Making ourselves weak as did Jesus at the washing of the feet – and the least of the servants – trusting that he is with us and in us as we tenderly and lovingly give thanks for diversity in the oneness of all creation. The Lord be with you.

¹ <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/05/17/jean-vaniers-funeral-highlights-gods-love-each-person>
Accessed 25.5.19.

² Jean Vanier, in *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, Paulist Press: New York. 2004. p.260.

³ Jean Vanier, *ibid.* p.265.