

## 2019 5<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER

A few days ago, on May 7<sup>th</sup>, an elderly Catholic gentleman by the name of Jean Vanier died in France at the grand old age of 90. He was neither a Bishop nor a priest. He was a layman. While our secular media did not give his death a mention, the London Tablet produced an eight page supplement in his memory. Our own 'New Zealand Catholic' dedicated a special page to him. At some time in the future, Jean Vanier will assuredly be declared a Saint and will be remembered with admiration and love by faithful Christians until the end of time.

I went into our Parish library and counted 18 books of his on our shelves. He was a wonderful scholar. And Catholic libraries throughout the world have a good selection of his books.

But it is not for his books- as inspiring as they are- that Jean Vanier will be remembered and revered. It was because of the witness of his charity.

Jean Vanier was a Canadian. At the end of the Second World War Jean's father was the Canadian Ambassador to France. While on leave from the Canadian Navy, Jean accompanied his father to see what assistance Canada could give to survivors from Nazi concentration camps. Seeing the emaciated faces of these victims was the spark which compelled Jean to leave the Canadian Navy, to study philosophy and then to dedicate his life outreaching to people who have been rejected by society.

In 1964 Jean Vanier invited two men who had severe intellectual disabilities to come and live with him. This was the seed-bed of the wondrous L'Arche movement which has spread throughout the World. Today there are 1,500 L'Arche communities, caring for tens of thousands of people who have serious intellectual disabilities in 81 countries. They live together in comfortable homes, always with at least two people well able to care for them. There are three such L'Arche communities in New Zealand- one at Paraparamu, one in Christchurch and one to the North of Auckland. Jean spent his life visiting L'Arche communities across the world, inspiring them with his love for those whom the world mostly rejects.

Today's Gospel gives us some of the final words of Jesus to the Church: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you

must also love one another. By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples.”

Jean Vanier lived this Gospel in a radical way. He was a modern St. Francis of Assisi.

I went to our library and pulled out the first Jean Vanier book I saw. I opened it randomly and this is what I read: “Living day after day with our men- we are responsible for 70 adult men and will look after them for life if they wish- I have discovered in them a world of simplicity, purity and goodness. Of course these qualities, often hidden deep in their hearts, can only develop to the extent that they feel secure and live in an atmosphere of work, peace and joy, and where they are respected for their deepest qualities. I have also seen the deep sadness of mentally deficient men and women, when they are closed up in asylums and psychiatric hospitals. I have also known their possibility for violence if they are not treated as human beings. But when those whom society class ‘feeble-minded’ or even worse ‘idiots’, feel they are appreciated, a very harmonious life flows forth, with much confidence and love.

They have taught me more about the gospel and about human relationships than all the great psychological and philosophical concepts I have studied. I have discovered Jesus in them, Jesus radiating goodness, Jesus- the mirror of purity, Jesus- meek and humble, and sometimes Jesus- suffering and in agony.

I think it is one of the greatest graces of my life to have met Jesus in the hearts of the weak. In the radiation of the weak one touches on a divine presence through simplicity and love- a tender love, confident and faithful.”

Jean continues: “Obviously one must not exaggerate; the mentally defective are not saints simply because they are handicapped. It is up to us to put ourselves at the service of the Holy Spirit in them. They need our love- and we need theirs”.

Pope Francis rang Jean Vanier a week before Jean’s death to thank him, on behalf of the Church, for the inspiration of his life. Speaking last week Pope Francis said: “I wanted to express my gratitude for his witness. He stood up for those who risk being condemned to death, even before being born. He was a man who was able to read the Christian call in the mystery of the cross, in the mystery of those who are despised and discarded.”

Bishop Nicholas Hudson wrote in the London Tablet: “Jean Vanier discovered in people with an intellectual disability nothing less than a pathway towards God. He discovered them to be messengers from God who bring us closer to Jesus.”

All of us meet people who are intellectually disabled. Jean Vanier warns us against the all-too common attitude of type-casting them as somehow inferior to us and presuming that any effort in trying to relate to them is simply a waste of good energy. Jean Vanier reminds us that those who are intellectually disabled have been made in God’s image and when treated with dignity will beautifully reflect the warmth of God’s love. They have much to give us.

I well remember Mark Nolan at St. Pius X Parish in Melville. When I came to meet him, Mark was in his early 20’s and had Downs Syndrome. He was intellectually disabled. But he certainly wasn’t spiritually disabled. He could spot sad parishioners a mile away and would come to them with his colossal, outrageous grin and give them a warm hug. The love of Jesus radiated from Mark. He was a parish treasure.

In reaching out in love to those who are intellectually disabled, as Jean Vanier did so magnificently, we become true disciples of Jesus. But it is not one-way. The love we receive back enriches our lives for in them we meet Christ.