

1 John 3-18-24: 'Whatever we ask...'
A sermon preached at the Luketide Healing Eucharist
at St Andrew's Chesterton on 23 October 2011

'Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.'

Words written, perhaps first spoken, by John – who may have been the apostle, who may have been the gospel-writer, who was probably not the writer of the book of Revelation, although he may well have been part of the same tradition that goes back to the apostle, as early Church tradition suggests. 1 John, 2 John, 3 John – there may have been 5 Johns for all we know, but they could all have said those words, 'Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.' And, more importantly, they all lived those words. As does a John who lives and writes today. Not strictly a John, but a Jean, because he is of French extraction, French Canadian to be exact, although he now lives in France. That's where I met him in the flesh.

It was on our diocesan clergy conference five years ago in France – those were the days of advantageous exchange rates when it was cheaper to transport us all over there than to hold it here. We did however have to share our bedrooms which meant that our late nights had something of the Eric and Ernie about them – remember those bedroom scenes? My Ernie for this conference – I liked of course to think I was Eric – was very low church, slightly fierce in his Protestantism and pretty suspicious of the spiritual air we were breathing in what was a Roman Catholic retreat house and former seminary. We even had a Catholic speaker on the programme, Jean Vanier. Vanier was born into a high-ranking family – his father was Governor-General of Canada; at the close of the second world war he served in the Royal Navy and then the Canadian Royal Navy where he was destined for great things. But he was more and more drawn into prayer and a sense of his Christian calling and so left the navy to study theology and philosophy in Paris. He built up an academic career, returned to teach in Canada, but for a second time abandoned a promising career to return to France to pursue a calling in Trosly-Breuil where his spiritual mentor, Father Thomas Philippe, was chaplain to an institution for men with intellectual or mental disabilities. He bought a house and named it 'L'Arche' (The Ark); he invited two of the men from the institution to come and live with him, and there began a worldwide movement of communities where people with and without such disabilities live together and learn from each what it means to be human and to love not in word or speech but in truth and action. Our own Clare Gardom spent last year in the L'Arche community in Glasgow. Jean Vanier has been a much sought-after speaker and retreat-giver around the world and he has inspired thousands of people by his Christlike example and presence.

"To love someone is to reveal to them that they are beautiful"

"What meaning can be found in life in the modern world? So many people today are searching, so many seem lost and no longer have any kind of ethical reference points; so many are dissatisfied with a purely materialistic life, with ephemeral pleasures or with a quest for power and success.(...)"

"Openness does not imply weakness, nor a tolerance which ignores truth and justice. Being open does not mean adhering to others' ideologies. It means being truly sympathetic and welcoming to people, listening to them, and in particular to people who are weak or poor or oppressed, so as to live in communion with them."

Jean Vanier, *Our Journey Home*, p 145

Vanier has always testified that those with intellectual disabilities were his true teachers and it was only in living in community with them that he discovered his true humanity – what it means to be truly human.

After we heard Jean Vanier speak I bumped into my room-mate; he looked shell-shocked. Later on in our Eric and Ern sessions before we turned the lights out, he said 'you know, that was the real thing, wasn't it?' It was as though he had seen Christ in Vanier's eyes and heard him through his gentle words.

The earlier John, of 1 John, was part of a not dissimilar community in the 1st century – not perhaps with those with mental disabilities, but we know that Christ's followers by-and-large weren't from the top drawer but slaves, ex-sex workers, the marginalised and looked-down-upon. And in John's day his small community of such disciples had been persecuted for their adherence to Christ, such that some had fallen away, some had decided that Jesus could not have been the Son of God after all and that this radical experimental of faith, hope and love must have been a mistake, based on a delusion. Those who left (the 'they' that some of us were hearing about on Tuesday) had come to hate those who had been their brothers and sisters and had returned to the pursuit of worldly wealth and honour. They may have been good at talking the talk of love and Christian community, but did they in the end walk the walk? They left behind a Christian community bruised and confused – where had they gone wrong, was it their fault, were they right or maybe they had been deceived by a lie? John points to the truth of their brotherly and sisterly love, contrasted with the hatred they had experienced from 'them'. John is like Baron von Trapp with his family – they may not be many, and the powers that be in the world, and those who have gone over to them, may seem against them, but they must have confidence that their song is sweeter, their love purer and their cause truer than the evil they are resisting. By their care for one another and for others,

'By this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.' (vv19-20)

Sometimes our hearts condemn us – they say to us: we are worth nothing, we are poor things, bad examples, poor Christians; perhaps we're not Christians at all, we can't be right about Jesus, because so few believe in our modern world. I often listen to people whose hearts seem to be condemning them: people living with doubts – big, unresolved questions, depression, feelings of inadequacy; and the fact that they have these feelings makes them feel that it is their fault, somehow. If only they were a better person or a holier Christian they wouldn't be in this situation. Their hearts condemn them. But John says, 'God is greater than our hearts', he's bigger than all that.

What God requires of us is not burdensome. Two things, John says:

'And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.' (v23).

And if we do that, all who do that 'abide in him, and he abides in them.' This is the language of communion, the communion of love that 1 John spoke of and that is the title of a book by the later John, Jean Vanier. It's not about being clever or having sorted out everything we believe or having learnt a disciplined spiritual life, it's not about never losing your temper or always feeling calm and collected; it's about believing in Jesus and learning to love one another (and discovering our humanity in that of our brothers and sisters) – and when we do that, John and Jean assure us, we live in God and God lives in us. But how do I really know that? 'By this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.' The gift of God deep in our spirits, that testifies deep within that we are God's children.

We are shortly to come to a time of healing prayer and may I encourage you to take the opportunity of receiving prayer for yourself and others. The laying on of hands is a sign of touch, that healing comes through others, through their touch, their words, their love and prayer. That is a reminder of what the community of the church is for – brothers and sisters who bring healing to us by their lives touching ours. Members of our healing team will be administering the laying on of hands, but they

are only representatives of all of us – and incidentally we need more of them. Is God calling you to be part of this ministry of healing prayer and touch; no special qualifications are needed, but a willingness to learn from others in the community of healing.

You may also receive anointing this morning - and it isn't either/or, it can be both/and. Anointing is the sign of the Spirit and if you are seeking the assurance that God is with you and you are with God this morning, then anointing may be for you.

The central verse of our passage if taken too literally would mean that there would be no sickness and no disability – and thus for Jean Vanier and for us probably no community where we could learn to be human. But hear the invitation nonetheless without ifs and caveats – for it is God's invitation to you:

'Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God, and we receive from him whatever we ask.' (v23)