

Trinity College Cambridge
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Some Modern Saints? Jean Vanier
John 13: 1–17

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Someone has said that the life of a saint can often be seen as the working out in practice of a single verse of scripture. I want to suggest that the life of Jean Vanier can be understood as the working out, not only of a single verse in the reading we have heard from the Gospel of John, but even of a single word in that verse. The verse, my text, is John 13: 15: **'For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.'** The single word is 'as'.

In the Gospel of John 'as' is an astonishing little word. It is a word that first of all makes you think hard. When Jesus says: **'Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life'** (3: 14) we are offered a new way of thinking about the crucifixion of Jesus as his lifting up and drawing people to himself. When he says: **'I know my own and my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father'** (10: 14–15) you are being invited to think: what sort of knowing is going on here? Or when he says: **'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love'** (15: 9) what sort of loving is this?

But, above all, the thinking about that little, capacious word 'as' is meant to be practical. **'Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.'** (13: 34) You have to think hard about how in fact Jesus has loved people, you are being invited to reflect on the stories about him, on the drama of his life, actions and relationships, and especially on his death, his distinctive way of giving himself in love – what our reading means by saying **'he loved them to the end'** (13:1), **'to the extreme'**. But then you have to *do* something like that. What does it mean in practice to love one another as Jesus has loved? It only rarely means that we lay down our lives for others, though that can never be ruled out. What it does mean is that we have to enter into the meaning of the love of Jesus as thoughtfully, imaginatively and daringly as possible and then improvise upon that in our lives and relationships. The 'as' is saying: sometimes an attempt at literal imitation may be right, but usually we are being invited to extemporise, improvise, seek to do creative variations on the melody of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Christian saints are virtuoso improvisers on the Gospel of Jesus. They are like great jazz players. They know the melody intimately. They know their instrument through long, disciplined practice. They are intensely attentive to the others in the band, and know how to respond to their playing, including their mistakes. And they risk performing new improvisations. As we attend to them, we hear the melody of the Gospel as we have never heard it before. But the point is not for us just to appreciate this great performance. Their

point has not been taken if we do not ourselves join the band, learn that melody intimately, practise our instruments lovingly day after day after day, and improvise creatively in whatever situations and relationships we are in. We are given the responsibility for our own 'as', and we need not only the inspiring examples of the saints but we need to take part in their master classes.

Jean Vanier's master class is centred on the washing of feet, both literally and in endless improvisation. About fifty years ago in a village in France he began sharing a house with two men with severe disabilities, Raphael and Philippe, from a local institution. From this seed has grown the international federation of L'Arche communities, around a hundred and fifty of them in all continents. They are family-like places where people with and without serious learning disabilities share life together. I have now visited L'Arche communities in London, Bognor Regis, Liverpool, Toronto, Trosly-Breuil (the mother community near Compiègne in France) and Madras in South India. Time and again I have been impressed by the local variations on a common theme: daily life, with all its messiness, practicality and difficulty, lived with a sense of deep respect across all the differences, and with repeated notes of celebration. In a moving poem dedicated to Jean Vanier, called 'Admiral of Arks' (a reference to Vanier's early years in the British Navy, and 'l'Arche' meaning 'the ark') Micheal O'Siadhail describes the origins and character of this life:

*To trust the grooves and habitats of love.
Soup, apples from village neighbours.
Raphael and Philippe. One tap and one stove.*

*Slobber of dailyness. Tasks begun and rebegun.
Small humdrum of the wounded,
Seizures, tears, rushes of anger or affection.*

*More listening than wanting to do things for,
Fecundity of nothing accomplished,
Ordinary unhurried to and fro of rapport.*

*No mask or echelons, a kind of upside-downness,
Osmosis of bare and broken
Takers and givers in a single fragile caress.¹*

Perhaps most striking is the way 'takers and givers' come together, with 'More listening than wanting to do things for'. This is not about people *with* abilities and skills 'doing good to' those *without* them. Instead, there is a more fundamental mutuality that does away with that division of 'us and them'. One of the most common testimonies of those who spend time as assistants in L'Arche communities is that they have been surprised by the quality of mutual relationship that has developed between themselves and the core community members with learning disabilities. They often speak of in terms of friendship. They have found themselves friends with one or more people with whom they would never have imagined such a relationship before. L'Arche is a place of surprising, counter-cultural friendships.

¹ Micheal O'Siadhail, *Collected Poems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2013) p. 580.

The spirit of these relationships is exemplified by Jesus at the Last Supper washing the feet of his disciples on the evening when he first called them friends and gave the new commandment to love one another as he had loved them. And in all these communities the ritual of footwashing is celebrated. Jean Vanier says in our reading:

*The history of humanity has changed
since God knelt humbly at our feet, begging our love.
To wash a person's feet
is a gesture that creates and expresses a communion of hearts.*

*Through the way we touched, held and washed [Eric's] body
with respect and love,
we were able to communicate and reveal to him
that he was precious.*

But beyond the literal imitation is the endless variety of improvisations inspired by the example of Jesus. The 'as' in '**do as I have done to you**' has been worked out over the years in a glorious variety of ways. Vanier himself has repeatedly been open to fresh improvisations, many of which called for daring and courage. L'Arche began as a Catholic community in Trosly-Breuil, and Vanier's co-founder was his friend and spiritual guide Père Thomas Philippe, a remarkable Dominican priest and theologian. The two always remained close, but Père Thomas did not approve of Vanier leading l'Arche into becoming first ecumenically Christian and then, with the first Indian communities, also inter-faith. Vanier did not want l'Arche to be an officially Catholic community reporting to the Vatican, and encouraged it to develop a form of governance as an international federation responsible for its own affairs. It has a distinctive Christian ethos, one that has deepened over the years; but it also encourages those of other faiths to work out and deepen their own ways of living l'Arche (there is at present, for example, an international group of Muslim assistants and scholars with whom I have met), and some in positions of responsibility are not identified with any religious tradition. Rather than trying to maintain a clear identity just within one tradition Vanier has brought l'Arche into all the complexities of our multi-faith and 'multi-secular' world, a move that has required continual fresh improvisation on his own original conception.

Vanier has also led l'Arche beyond his own leadership. The next generation of leaders has completely taken over, and Vanier himself, now in his eighties, lives in part of a little house next to the chapel in Trosly-Breuil, mostly occupied with prayer, writing, seeing people and giving retreats. It is rare indeed to see succession handled so well. My interpretation of this is that it is in line with the Gospel of John, where in his Farewell Discourses (Chapters 13–17) Jesus tells his disciples that it is better for them that he is going away because the Holy Spirit will come to lead them into all the truth and to help them to do 'greater things'. It is no accident that his last major work has been a wonderful commentary on the Gospel of John, from which we have had a reading. It is as if he is saying to l'Arche and to the rest of us: if you want to take me seriously, then take this Gospel seriously, and you will find the right way into the future. That is above all the way of improvising new melodies of love, new dramas of loving, all grounded in the astonishing truth that we are all utterly loved. Jesus '**loved them to the end, to the extreme**' (13: 1).

One reason why the ‘beloved disciple’ in the Gospel of John is never named is, I think, that each of us can identify with this figure: each of us is loved by Jesus.

And it is good to be able to announce that here in Cambridge a fresh improvisation on the vision of Jean Vanier has just begun. Twenty years ago Jean Vanier met my wife, Deborah, here in Cambridge for the first time. Before the end of that meeting he had challenged her to found a l’Arche community in Cambridge. Finally, last year she consulted with Vanier, nationally and internationally with l’Arche, and with a local group, and the result has been Lyn’s House. This is not a l’Arche community, but a house of hospitality in De Freville Avenue where four people, all happily here with us this evening, have just moved in. At a time when the emphasis of local councils is on independent living it is very difficult to found a residential community, so what seems to be needed are places where those with disabilities living at home or independently can be offered hospitality, have more of a social life, and have the chance to form friendships. So an experiment has begun, and this College has generously helped it with a grant.

It would be fascinating to say more about Jean Vanier, but there is not time – and anyway he would want the focus to be on l’Arche, friendship, footwashing and the Gospel of John. And there is a superb biography of him by Katherine Spink. The saintly challenge he poses to us is clear: not so much to repeat what he has done as to do new things in the spirit in which he did his things, and above all to be inventive in loving.

Vanier wrote in his commentary on the footwashing in John:

‘When Jesus calls us to wash one another’s feet,
he is calling us to love, to serve and to forgive each other... (230)

Mahatma Gandhi was deeply influenced
By the life and message of Jesus,
Especially by the Sermon on the Mount and the washing of the feet.
Even when he had great power as a leader of his country,
He took the humblest place in the ashram where he lived.
His role each day was to clean the toilets...’

(Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, 230, 233–4)

On that day when Jean Vanier came to our door in Cambridge to meet Deborah for the first time, she answered it, said hello, and apologised that she would have to go upstairs to change our baby son who had a dirty nappy. Jean at once said: ‘I’ll change him’ – and he did. Now there’s sanctity!

From Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (DLT 2004)
pp. 223ff.

*Jesus kneels
at the feet of his disciples;
as a slave,
he washes their feet.*

*In this simple gesture
he reveals the face of God
and a new way for us
to exercise authority
to bring people to unity
and to work for peace.*

*This is the way of humility
and service. (p.223)*

*The history of humanity has changed
since God knelt humbly at our feet, begging our love. (p. 226)*

*To wash a person's feet
is a gesture that creates and expresses a communion of hearts.
I became more aware of the importance of this gesture
when I left the leadership of my community
and lived a sabbatical year in one of our homes
that welcomes people with severe handicaps.
Among them was Eric.
We had met him at the local psychiatric hospital.
When he arrived he was a young lad of sixteen:
he was blind, deaf and could not walk or speak.
He was not toilet trained.
I have never seen so much anguish in a young person as I saw in Eric.
There was a desire in him to die;
he just would not keep down food in his stomach.*

*Many of those with disabilities
who are welcomed in our l'Arche communities
have a broken self-image.
They have been seen as a disappointment for their parents;
they are not wanted as they are,
so they feel they are no good.
If people are not loved,
they can feel that they are in fact not loveable,
that they are somehow bad or evil.
Our hope in welcoming such people
is to help them to transform their broken or negative self-image
into a positive one and find self-esteem.
The vision of l'Arche is to help people rediscover their value,
their beauty, their importance.
Only then can they begin to grow and do beautiful things;
they respond to love with love.
Someone who has a negative self-image will only want to do
negative things to themselves or to others.*

*But how could we help Eric make this transformation
when he could neither see nor hear nor understand?
The only way to communicate with him was through touch.
Through the way we touched, held and washed his body
with respect and love,
we were able to communicate and reveal to him
that he was precious. (pp. 231-2)*

Micheal O'Siadhail, *Collected Poems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2013) p. 579ff.

Admiral of Arks

For Jean Vanier, founder of *L'Arche*; born September 10th 1924

Evacuated from Bordeaux at eleven Vanier
Saw an overloaded captain
Watching a tug of refugees driven away

Whose cries traverse his years and multiply
Among the marred and broken
And fix him with Lazarus's begging eye.

At thirteen as he opts to leave Québec on his own
For Dartmouth's British Naval College,
His army father trusting as though he'd known.

A butterfly collared cadet, chevron winged,
All day moving at the double,
No room for teenagery, tough and Kiplinged;

5 a.m. barefoot scrubbing decks at sea,
Turns below or on the bridge;
Three of his classmates all admirals to be.

A sailor inside sails against the stream.
If you can trust yourself
When all men doubt you. A different dream

As life pulls and loops strands to plot
Surreptitious ins and outs
And tie, as if by chance, the perfect knot.

A concrete asylum where eighty retarded inmates
Tramp their tethered days in circles
Charges his psyche with horror and fascinates.

Whose presence had his friend Père Thomas seen
Crying *I am who I am*
In some noisy muddled sequence of a gene?

To trust the grooves and habitats of love.
Soup, apples from village neighbours.
Raphael and Philippe. One tap and one stove.

Slobber of dailyness. Tasks begun and rebegun.
Small humdrum of the wounded,
Seizures, tears, rushes of anger or affection.

More listening than wanting to do things for,
Fecundity of nothing accomplished,
Ordinary unhurried to and fro of rapport.

No mask or echelons, a kind of upside-downness,
Osmosis of bare and broken
Takers and givers in a single fragile caress.

A flood of middle 1960's volunteers.
Americas, India, Africa, Jerusalem
Flotilla of arks across some forty years.

By guess and by God, fellowships of need,
Ravel decades of care and laughter,
Hurt or seeking minds slowly unmutinied.

Each new community he heartens to adjust,
Admiral of arks, servant-leader,
A father's voice still saying, of course, I trust.

Villagers overlooked, zealous finger-pointings,
Let live of breakage and passage,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings

As after two years' illness his return to hidden
Gradual rhythms of healing that heals,
A stiller brother's keeper who loves unbidden

Guests that might never be if it were known
Chromosome messages had so mistaken.
A refused slab becomes the corner-stone

Lain against the market's coarser grain.
Day by day a giving in
To banalities of love. Over and over again

To announce a vision, even to wear renown
And to fall short anew with every
Ups-a-daisied child let forever down,

A tug still fails all who'll never board.
Yet the joy in Abigail's cry:
To wash the feet of servants of my lord.