

12 Fairwater Grove West
Llandaff
Cardiff
CF5 2JQ
g.rayner-williams@stteilos.com
Tel. 02920569581

Dear Friends,

Welcoming the least, the last and the lost.

Jesus said, "Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests." Matthew 22: 9-10(NRSV)

When I was in my early twenties I did a postgraduate degree in Political Theology at the University of Hull. During the summer, all my undergraduate friends went home whilst I stayed on to complete my thesis: "A Theological Critique of Thatcherism". It was an eventful summer, not because I had the arrogance to believe that my thesis destroyed Thatcherism, but because I decided to move in to live with a local L'Arche community rather than stay on my own in the Halls of Residence. It was an experience that taught me much more than any thesis.



L'ARCHE®

You may have heard of L'Arche: they are religious community where 'able-bodied' and 'disable-bodied' people live together as co-partners and equals. The community originates from the vision of the priest and disability advocate, Jean Vanier. He was the son of a Canadian Governor-General and an accomplished academic philosopher. But in 1964 his life took a real turn when he visited a large mental asylum and met Raphael Simi and Phillippe Seux, two residents with intellectual disabilities. Phillippe told Vanier how he and his fellow patients were dying of loneliness, drugged up and kept permanently passive and isolated. They felt unwanted, worthless and diminished. Moved by their sadness, Vanier immediately gave up his academic career and set up home with Raphael and Phillippe in a nearby French village. There they created a community of welcome where able and disabled could live side by side and share their lives in mutual vulnerability together.

Vanier called this community 'L'Arche' – the ark. In the book of Genesis, the ark is a place where anyone is welcome especially those who are drowning. Vanier placed relationship with the sinking vulnerable - 'the little ones' - at the centre of community life. He embraced radical hospitality and encountered a profound transformation to which others began to feel drawn. So, from those simple beginnings, L'Arche communities spread throughout the world to become what is now an international federation of 147 communities in 37 countries, including Britain.

In that summer of 1988 I spent my three months with the L'Arche community in Hull. There I learnt that weakness and vulnerability help to join us to each other and that compassion is beautifully transformative. L'Arche taught me that healing comes when we welcome our own vulnerability and embrace difference. Of course, I had joined the community thinking that I could 'help disabled people', I left it realising that I'd been helped - helped to see that to be human is not about power or academic achievement but about hospitality and radical welcome. That summer, the relationships I formed with my disabled friends introduced me to the healing grace of friendship. I discovered that humans all share a primal need to be accepted, wanted, known and loved, just as Phillippe and Raphael had expressed, and that I was no exception.

When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God his most often used imagery is that of 'the banquet' and the profound joy that comes from feasting and mutual hospitality - where the difference between 'giver' and 'receiver' dissolves as each gives up any claim to have power over the other. He says that the best of human relationships are not 'above' or 'below' others but are encountered in mutuality where all are welcome and none are regarded as less than any other. The world teaches something quite different: that to be a successful human is to have 'power-over' others. That to thrive is to be more attractive and popular; to be smarter and wealthier than others. L'Arche exposed what a toxic game this is and that only fools continue to play it. It was a lesson taught to me by those free of the toxicity to ever want to play this game in the first place – the weak, the severely disabled, the vulnerable – 'the little ones', as Jesus called them.

In our Gospel reading for this Sunday, Jesus tells us that it's those at the margins who actually respond to the invitation to feast in the Kingdom – they 'get it'; they understand that God is radically hospitable. It's often the case that those at the margins help us to see what being human is all about and how we can not only thrive but truly flourish. Jean Vanier put it like this: "Each human being, however small or weak, has something to bring to humanity. As we start to really get to know others, as we begin to listen to each other's stories, things begin to change. We begin the movement from exclusion to inclusion ... from closedness to openness ... It is a movement of the heart, a movement of grace."



We begin the movement from exclusion to inclusion ... from closedness to openness ... It is a movement of the heart, a movement of grace."

Prayer written by Thérèse Vanier (Jean's sister):

May oppressed people and those who oppress them
set one another free.
May those who are disabled and those who think they are not,
help one another.
May the poor melt the hearts of the rich.
May those who seek the truth
give life to those who are satisfied they have found it.
May the dying who do not want to die
be comforted by those who find it very hard to live.
May the hungry tear the veil from the eyes of those
who do not hunger for justice.
May the weak confuse the strong.
May hatred be surmounted by compassion. Amen.

As ever,

Gareth