

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 12th May 2019

Christian Aid

John 10: 22 – 30; Acts 9: 36 - 43

'When I am weak, then I am strong'¹, wrote the Apostle Paul in his second letter to the Church in Corinth. When I am weak, then I am strong.

For the past fifty-five years that principle has been embodied in an international federation of communities, founded by the Roman Catholic Canadian philosopher, theologian and humanitarian Jean Vanier, called L'Arche.

Jean Vanier died this week, at the age of 90. In 1964 Jean Vanier visited a friend of his who was working as a chaplain at an institution just outside Paris for men with developmental disabilities. There he witnessed a place where 80 men did nothing all day but walk around in circles. So, Jean Vanier bought a house nearby and invited two of the men, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seaux to leave the institution and come and live with him.

Through that experiment of living in community, Jean Vanier discovered two truths: firstly, that people with learning disabilities, who are all too often looked down upon as weak and as a burden on their families and their society, can in fact contribute to family life and society's wellbeing just as much as anyone else. Vanier also discovered that by living in a community with people – people with and without learning disabilities – we all open ourselves up to be challenged and to grow.

There are now 147 L'Arche communities in 35 countries across the world where people with and without disabilities live together as equals. The strength of these communities comes from the conviction that those whom the world regards as weak, and who are so often hived-off to live alone amongst themselves in institutions, should have not just an equal place in society, but the opportunity to make an equal contribution to strong, thriving communities. Through his example and his words Jean Vanier gently corrected our deeply misguided notion that it is possible to thrive, or even to survive, alone, as atomised individuals.

Jean Vanier took inspiration from words written by the Apostle Paul, *When I am weak, then I am strong*. The Apostle Paul took inspiration for his words from those very first Christian communities, which grew up following the death and the resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ.

We heard about one such community this morning in our reading from the Book of Acts. In it we discovered that soon after the Resurrection, in the lifetime of Jesus' first followers, not far from Jerusalem, in the town of Joppa, there was a Christian community, which included a woman called Tabitha. Tabitha is the only women in the New Testament who is explicitly called a disciple, 'In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha...'²

Tabitha was clearly a much-loved and respected member of this community. When she fell ill the members of the community went as far as to call upon Peter himself to help them; someone they clearly knew well, and who considered himself part of their extended group.

¹ 2 Cor 12:10

² Acts 9:

Tabitha had a role within the community, which helps us to understand a little bit more about it. She spent her days supporting local widows who were present in number around her sick-bed.

It appears that this group of early Christians were a mixed bag: it included people like Peter, like Tabitha, and widows who in first century Palestine were amongst the weakest and most disregarded members of society. Mixed-bag communities like this one in Joppa in time grew from strength to strength, eventually to inspire Jean Vanier's communities in the 21st century.

From our reading from the Book of Acts, we learn too that miracles happened in these first century communities in which those considered weak or who were otherwise disregarded lived as equals alongside those considered strong or who are at the heart of society's life.

It must have seemed like a miracle too, to him and to others, centuries later, when Jean Vanier discovered that people who spend their days doing nothing else but walking around in circles, can, when they are treated equally and live in community, live full lives in which they feel loved and are able to give love.

When we consider whether or not it is possible for all people to live dignified, respected, full lives in which they are given the opportunities to contribute as much as anyone else; when we consider whether it is possible for the Kingdom of God to reign, we too should believe in miracles. In communities like Jean Vanier's, and in communities like Tabitha's miracles happen, why not elsewhere in this world?

I don't fully understand what happened when Peter was left alone with the seemingly dead Tabitha, but there is no doubt that in the minds of those with whom she lived, she was just too important to be allowed to die. After all, the work that she did in the community was fundamental to its life. Those first Christian communities didn't just gather to keep the name and memory of Jesus alive, as he had commanded them to do - "do this in remembrance of me," he had said.

Nor did these first Christian communities gather only as vehicles for spreading good news about Jesus Christ - "go and make disciples of all nations"³, he had said. Nor were these first Christian communities expected to be held together only by love, "love one another as I have loved you," he had said⁴. No, although all of these were important – keeping his name alive; spreading his message; loving one another - it was equally important that these first Christian communities lived out Christ's work on earth through acts of service, just as at the end of his life he himself had washed his disciples feet in an act of service. Clearly, it was this role, an act of service to others, that made Tabitha such an important person in her community; so important that she just couldn't be left to die.

Across the world today there are people and communities that are too important to be left to die. They are too important, too, to be left walking around in circles suffering from one disaster after another; too important to follow the same worn path that offers few opportunities to the weakest and most vulnerable people. It is these people and these communities around the world that Christian Aid seeks to help, in which Christian Aid expects to see miracles take place.

Christian Aid Week, which begins today, is, in the United Kingdom, by far and away the biggest single act of Christian witness. What we do this week is not just about raising money

³ Matthew 28:16

⁴ John 13:34

to help those in need who have suffered misfortune around the world. Nor, is what we do this week about raising money by appealing to people's common humanity in order to help those who live in the world's poorest places.

Those things – raising money by appealing to people's sense of humanity – are important, but what is just as important is our witness to our belief that this world: its countries; its communities; its families, are at their strongest when they include an equal place within them for those who are most often considered to be its weakest members: the weakest countries; the weakest communities; the weakest families.

Whether it is girls who want to go to school, like Kadiate whom we heard about in the video this morning; or women like Jeddeh afraid to give birth, whom we read about; or whether it is entire countries like Sierra Leone, ravaged by Ebola and with few natural resources, our world and our lives are stronger when those who fill the weakest places have an equal place, "when I am weak, then I am strong".

We are at our strongest when we appreciate fully that the world itself and the people who live on it are all part of one community. Caring for the weakest is fundamental to that sense of community; and caring for the weakest is not a sentiment that we can let die.

So, let's do what we can this Christian Aid Week, not just because helping those who can't help themselves is important, but let's do what we can as a witness to the miraculous community that Christ has called us to live in, with all those who live in this world: as a memorial to his name; as an act of love towards each other; as a way of spreading good news; and as a way of serving each other so that one day we will witness a miracle that gives everyone in the world an equal place, and by so doing we will all be the stronger for it.