

A Reading on Jean Vanier -

Acclaimed as “a Canadian who inspires the world who lived by the principal, *Change the world, with love, one heart at a time*” and a “nation builder”, Jean Vanier is the founder of the international movement of L'Arche communities, where people who have developmental disabilities and the friends who assist them create homes and share life together. Born in 1928 in Geneva Switzerland.

At just 13, during the most difficult period of World War II, he persuaded his father to permit him to enter England's Royal Naval Academy. He served in the British Navy and then the Royal Canadian Navy. In 1950, looking for deeper meaning in his life, he resigned his commission in the navy and began a period of spiritual search. During this time he worked on a doctorate in philosophy.

After teaching at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, he returned to France. Distressed by the plight of people with developmental disabilities, in 1964 he welcomed two men from an institution to live with him in a little home he called “L'Arche,” after Noah's ark in the French village of Trosly. L'Arche grew quickly as this new way of sharing life together in community with people who would otherwise be shut away in institutions attracted many young people. And Vanier himself began traveling and speaking about his own life-changing experience of coming to know people with developmental disabilities. Today, there are 130 L'Arche communities in 30 countries on six continents.

Jean Vanier has become a leader in consciousness-raising about the suffering of all who are marginalized. He is internationally recognized for his compelling vision of what it means to live a fully human life and for his social and spiritual leadership in building a compassionate society

In his own words:

Since I was a child, there have been three very distinct stages in my life. When I was thirteen, I joined the navy and spent eight years in a world where weakness was something to be shunned at all costs. We were required to be efficient and quick to climb up the ladder of success. I left this world, and another opened up to me—the world of thought. For many years, I studied philosophy. I wrote a doctoral thesis on Aristotelian ethics, I embarked on a teaching career. Once again, I found myself in a world where weakness, ignorance, and incompetence were things to be shunned—efficiency was everything. All my life I had been taught to climb the ladder, to seek promotions, to compete, to be the best, to win prizes. That is what society teaches us. In doing so, we lose community and communion.”

Then, during a third phase, I discovered people who were weak, people with mental handicaps. I was moved by the vast world of poverty, weakness, and fragility that I encountered in hospitals, institutions, and asylums. I believe, that we are healed by the poor and the weak, that we are transformed by them if we enter into relationship with them, that the weak and the vulnerable have a gift to give to our world. They call us together, in unity and peace, to build community. The poor and the weak are also each one of us and living in this reality is a cornerstone of peace.

Vanier on Jesus and the poor

*Jesus is in Jerusalem.
He does not go first to places of learning and power
But to the local asylum,
Where there was a multitude of people with disabilities: lame,
blind and paralyzed. (John 5:3)
Lying around, living in disgrace.
They were no doubt dirty and ugly,
According to the values of the world, shunned and despised:
Neither beauty nor comeliness in them.
Yet it is to them that Jesus goes first.*

ON COMMUNITY by Jean Vanier

COMMUNITY AND FREEDOM

Community is the place where we ideally learn to be ourselves without fear or constraint. Community life deepens through mutual trust among all its members.

The more authentic and creative a community is in its search for the essential, the more its members are called beyond their own concerns and tend to unite. A community becomes truly and radiantly one when all its members have a sense of urgency.

It is when the members of a community realize that they are not there simply for themselves or their own sanctification, but to welcome the gift of God, to hasten His Kingdom, and to quench the thirst of others, that they truly live as community.

The process of becoming a community happens when the majority of its members make the transition from 'the community for myself' to 'myself for the community.'

Loving means to want others to fulfill themselves according to God's plan. It means wanting them to be faithful to their own calling. The more community deepens, the more vulnerable and the more sensitive its members become.

Community is established by the simple, gentle concern that people show each other every day. It is made of the small gestures, all the services and sacrifices which say 'I love you' and 'I'm happy to be with you.'

COMMUNITY AND FORGIVENESS

Community reaches its height in celebration and its heart in forgiveness.

Community is the place of forgiveness. There are always words that wound, self-promoting attitudes, situations where susceptibilities clash. That is why living together implies a certain cross, a constant effort and an acceptance that comes from daily and mutual forgiveness.

If we come into community without knowing that the reason we come is to discover the mystery of forgiveness, we will soon be disappointed.

If we are to make the passage to acceptance and love of others we must start by recognizing our own blocks, jealousies, prejudices and hatreds.

Our antipathies towards others is a thorn in the flesh that perhaps the Holy Spirit may someday liberate us from. But perhaps He will let us go on walking with this thorn which humiliates us and forces us to renew our efforts each day, careful not to offend again.

Patience, like forgiveness, is at the heart of community life; patience with ourselves, with the laws of our own growth and with others.

COMMUNITY AND IDEALISM

A community is not simply a group of people who love each other. It is a current of life, a heart, a soul, a spirit.

We shouldn't seek the ideal community. It is a question of loving those whom God has set beside us today. They are signs from God. We might have chosen different people, people who were more cheerful or intelligent. But these are the ones God has given us, the ones He has chosen for us. It is with them that we are called to create unity and live in covenant.

It is difficult to make people understand that the ideal community doesn't exist and that the equilibrium and harmony they imagine possible are things that come only after years of struggle, and that even then come only as flashes of grace and peace.

COMMUNITY AND UNITY

Community is the place where each person grows towards interior freedom. It can never take precedence over the individual. In fact, its beauty and unity come from the radiance and diversity of each individual when its own light, truth and love come into free union with others.

The gift of community, of unity, will come only when all members of the community are truly themselves, living as expression of God's love within them in the exercise of the gifts He has given them. The community becomes one because it is fully under the influence of the Holy Spirit who unites it.

Almost everyone finds their early days in a community ideal. It all seems perfect. They seem unable to see the drawbacks, they see only what is good. Everything is marvelous. They feel they are surrounded by saints, heroes, or at the least, most exceptional people who are everything they want to be themselves. And then comes the let-down. During this time everything becomes dark; people no longer see anything but the faults of others and of the community. They feel they are surrounded by hypocrites. Life becomes intolerable. The greater their idealization of the community at the start, the greater the disenchantment. If people manage to get through this second period, they come to a third phase; that of realism and of true commitment. They no longer see other members of the community as saints or devils, but as people; each with a mixture of good and bad, darkness and light, each growing and each with their own hope. The community is neither heaven nor hell, but planted firmly on earth, and they are ready to walk in it, and with it. They accept the community and the other members as they are; they are confident that together they can grow towards something more beautiful.

Many people who have lived together for years and whose love for one another has been often tested know that community has not resulted from the fact that they were able to hold together but from the knowledge that they were somehow held together by a greater force. We are a community not because we happen to like each other, or share a common task, but because we have somehow been called together by God.

All members of a community must be on their guard against sowing discord, whether consciously or unconsciously. All of them must constantly seek to be instruments of unity.

COMMUNITY AND PURPOSE

A community is there not only for the growth of its members, but for the growth of the people for whom it is destined. When we know these people, and our responsibility towards them, then we are able to go beyond ourselves.

A community gradually discovers as it grows that it is not there simply for itself. It belongs to humanity. It has received a gift which must bear fruit for the sake of others.

When it begins, a community is like a seed which must grow to become a tree. As it matures, and becomes a tree that bears fruit, it also must be a place where birds of the air can come to make their nests.

COMMUNITY AND GROWTH

Community is always in a state of growth. The growth of a community depends on the growth of each of its members.

Communities need tensions if they are to grow and deepen. There are a thousand reasons for tension. And each of them brings the whole community, as well as each individual member, face to face with its own poverty, its inability to cope, its weariness, aggression and despair.

There is nothing more prejudicial to community life than to mask tensions and pretend they do not exist, or to hide from them behind a polite facade and flee from reality and dialogue. But people are not necessarily helped to overcome their limitations, egoism, jealousy and inability to enter into dialogue simply by being made conscious of them. In fact, this can sometimes shut people off in an even greater despair.

People can generally only become conscious of their limitations if at the same time they are given the strength to overcome these by being helped to discover their own capacities for love, goodness and positive action, and to regain confidence in themselves and the Holy Spirit.

Tensions in a community should neither be hidden nor be brought prematurely to a head. They should be taken on with a great deal of sensitivity, trust and hope. They should be approached with deep understanding and patience, with neither panic nor naive optimism, but with a realism born of a willingness to listen and a desire for truth.

An individual's growth towards love and wisdom is slow. A community's growth is even slower. Members of a community need to be great friends of time. They have to learn that many things will resolve themselves if they are given enough time. It can be a great mistake to want, in the name of clarity and truth, to push things too quickly to a resolution.

Each member of a community who grows in love and wisdom helps the growth of the whole community. Each person who refuses to grow, or is afraid to go forward, inhibits the community's growth. All the members of a community are responsible for their own growth and that of the community as a whole.

Perhaps the most essential quality for anyone who lives in community is patience: a recognition that we, others and the whole community, take time to grow. If we are to live in community, we have to be friends of time.

COMMUNITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

We all carry our own deep wound, which is the wound of our loneliness. Some people think their wound of loneliness will be healed if they come into community. But they will be disappointed.

We have to realize that this wound of loneliness is inherent in the human condition and that what we have to do is walk with it instead of fleeing from it. We cannot accept it until we discover that we are loved by God just as we are, and that the Holy Spirit, in a mysterious way, is living at the center of the wound.

One of the signs of life in a community is the creation of links with others. An inward-looking community will die of suffocation. Living communities are linked to others, making up a huge web of inter-relationships for the world.

Some people cannot see what nourishment they are and refuse to become bread for others. They have no confidence that their word, their smile, their being or their prayer could nourish others.

There is external growth in community which is nearly always in expansion. But there is also internal and secret growth. In monasteries and houses of prayer, this growth is a deeper rooting in prayer in Jesus. This is invisible, but it creates a tangible atmosphere wherever this growth is present: a lighter joy, a denser silence, a peace which touches hearts and leads people to a true experience of God.

Through the experience of providence communities, in time, discover how God has watched over them in times of trial which could have destroyed them. Serious tensions have been resolved, people have arrived exactly when they were needed, there has been unexpected financial or material help, someone has found inner freedom and healing. This growing awareness enables the community to accept difficulties, times of trial, need or weakness with a new serenity because it knows from experience that God is present and creative within them.

The first sin of a community is to turn its eyes from the One who called it to life, to look at itself instead. The second sin is to find itself beautiful and to believe itself to be a source of life.

Some communities should stay small, poor and prophetic, signs of the presence of God in a world which is becoming more and more materialistic. But other communities are called to grow in order to show the world that it is possible to create structures which are sensitive to people and to exercise authority in a way that is both humane and Christian.

COMMUNITY AND PRAYER

We are nourished in community by everything that stirs the essential in us and brings it to consciousness. This may be a word, a reading, a meeting or a suffering: all these can reawaken our deepest heart and give hope.

Solitude and community belong together; each requires the other as do the center and circumference of a circle. Solitude without community leads us to loneliness and despair, but community without solitude hurls us into a void of words and feelings.

If we do not pray, if we do not evaluate our activities and find rest in the secret part of our heart, it will be hard to live in community. We will not be open to others. We will live only from the stimuli of the present moment and we will lose sight of our priorities and of the essential.

A community which prays together, which enters into silence and adoration, is bound together by the action of the Holy Spirit. God listens in a special way to the cry which rises from a community.

The Eucharist links communal and personal nourishment because it is itself both at the same time. The Eucharist is celebration, the epitome of the communal feast, because in it we relive the mystery of Jesus' gift of his own life for us. It is the time of thanksgiving for the whole community. There we touch the heart of the mystery of community. But the Eucharist is also an intimate moment when each of us is transformed through a personal meeting with Jesus.

Jean Vanier - "Change the world, with love, one heart at a time"

In 1941 Vanier's family was forced to leave France after Germany invaded, they escaped to London just in time for some of the fiercest bombings of the war where they made the dangerous Atlantic crossing into Canada. Less than two years later, Vanier at the young age of thirteen entered his father's office and asked if he could "*cross the U-boat filled ocean again to join the Royal Navy College*" this demonstrates values deep in his family: service, courage, and responsiveness to the needs of the times. His father said to him, "*I trust you and, if that is what you want, well then that is what you must do.*" Vanier later reflecting on this event writes, *I did not realize it at the time but that was probably one of the most healing moments in my life. Because my father, whom I loved and admired, trusted me, then I could trust myself.*

Vanier had a very successful career in the Royal Navy during this time he learned a lot about himself.

"When I was in the navy, I was taught to give orders to others. That came quite naturally to me! All my life I had been taught to climb the ladder, to seek promotions, to compete, to be the best, to win prizes. That is what society teaches us. In doing so, we lose community and communion."

In 1947 Vanier's metaphorical use of the "ladder" has a curious irony, he nearly died falling off a rope ladder in gusting winds and rough seas. He lost consciousness immediately and was swept away by the strong current. The boat's chaplain and some sailors spotted his fall caught up with him in a small boat and rescued him.

In 1950 Vanier chose to fall off the ladder of promotion into the arms of Providence, after a thirty-day retreat following the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, Vanier had made his decision. He resigned his position in the navy, with little future direction other than a hunger to follow Jesus and live according to the Gospels. After finishing his naval career, his mother introduced him to her spiritual director, a Dominican priest named Thomas Philippe. The powerful bond that was immediately formed with "Pere Thomas" would shape the rest of his life. Vanier moved into a community, *Eau Vive*, that Pere Thomas began for students to study philosophy and theology while living a *communal life of love, reconciliation, and charity.*

In 1952, Pere Thomas was removed by Rome for unorthodoxy and for spiritual direction that was considered too mystical. Jean Vanier took over the leadership of the community until 1956 Next Vanier worked on his doctoral thesis from the Trappist monastery of Bellfontaine, then in greater solitude in small villages, Longing to follow Jesus and to live simply, he focused on his *studies, times of prayer, and daily Mass.*

In June 1962, Vanier defended his thesis, "Happiness as Principle and End of Aristotelian Ethics," and was graduated as a Doctor of Philosophy *cum maxima laude*. His research into the basis of Aristotelian ethics brought a great deal of light and helped him to grasp the connection between ethics, psychology, and spirituality.

In January 1964 Vanier takes a temporary teaching position at St. Michael's College, University in Toronto. He was offered a permanent position but instead decided to move back to France to be close to Father Thomas who had moved to Trosly, France to be chaplain to the *Val Fleuri*, a small institution for men with intellectual handicaps. Vanier despite his discomfort became impressed by the men who were becoming Father Thomas' friends, he also began to visit centers for people with intellectual disabilities. He was struck by people's screams and the heavy atmosphere, yet also by a mysterious presence of God

"I was touched by these men with mental handicaps, by their sadness and by their cry to be respected, valued and loved."

August 1964, Vanier moved into "L'Arche" a house so simple that there was no toilet, only a bucket, and no electricity. He brought three men with disabilities home from an institution to live with him- after the first night he had to send one of the men back because the small house could not meet his needs. Vanier does not consider himself the founder of L'Arche but saw it as a call from God, a call revealed to him through Father Thomas Philippe

In 1966, the L'Arche communities traveled together to Rome for an audience with Pope Paul VI, who declares, "*Seeing you all together makes me realize that you are a small group united by love and an active will to help one another. You are a community in whose midst Jesus is happy to live.*"

In 1969, spending time in India with Mother Teresa and learning from the vision of Gandhi deeply impacts him. The first L'Arche community opens in India in 1970.

In 1976, after returning from India the exhaustion from all of the expansion of the work of L'Arche catches up to Vanier. He becomes sick for over five months, two of them in the hospital. Through this illness he learned a great deal and Jesus used it to renew him spiritually as he was forced to slow down. He writes:

"Let us simply stop and start listening to our own hearts. There we will touch a lot of pain. We will possibly touch a lot of anger and possibly touch a lot of loneliness and anguish. Then we will hear something deeper. We will hear the voice of Jesus; we will hear the voice of God. We will discover that the heart of Christ, in some mysterious way, is hidden in my heart and there, we will hear, "You are precious to my eyes and I love you."

In March 1980 Vanier was in Honduras when Archbishop Oscar Romero was murdered in nearby El Salvador, he was asked to give the official Mass for Romero. Vanier spoke of Romero as, *"a man of peace who indentified himself with the poor and who preached non-violence and reconciliation, and he was like Jesus in that he was not afraid to speak the truth."*

In 1980 he left the role of community leader in Trosly (the original L'Arche community) and took a "sabbatical year", during this year he becomes more aware of his own suffering, and the importance of each person to recognize their own, *"hidden places of pain...little by little we can become a friend of our weakness."*

To love is to reveal the hidden beauty in the hearts of all people, to trust them and to call them forth to greater trust. To love is a way of looking, of touching, of listening to all: taking time with others, especially with those who are broken, depressed, and insecure revealing to them their importance.

In 1981-82 Vanier forms a deep friendship they spent a year together in 1985 in Trosly then Henri Nouwen moved to the Daybreak L'Arche community as their priest and remained there for 10 years until his sudden death in 1996

In 1989 Vanier writes expanded version of 'Community and Growth' and dedicates it to Father Thomas Philippe, *"with whom I made my first steps in community."*

In 1993 Father Thomas, instrumental in the birth of L'Arche and who stayed at the heart of it for 28 years dies.

In 1998 Vanier gives a series of lectures about what it means to be human, which develops into a best selling book titled *Becoming Human*.

In 2004, Vanier publishes a book about the Gospel of John that reflects his experience of prayerful silence writing, *"I have come to see that to pray is above all to dwell in Jesus and to let Jesus dwell in me,*

In 2015, Vanier received the 2015 Templeton Prize and determined that 100% of the Prize money (1.7 million) will be used to benefit people with intellectual disabilities, who are among the most oppressed people on the planet.

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In his own words:

Since I was a child, there have been three very distinct stages in my life. When I was thirteen, I joined the navy and spent eight years in a world where weakness was something to be shunned at all costs. We were required to be efficient and quick to climb up the ladder of success. I left this world, and another opened up to me—the world of thought. For many years, I studied philosophy. I wrote a doctoral thesis on Aristotelian ethics, I embarked on a teaching career. Once again, I found myself in a world where weakness, ignorance, and incompetence were things to be shunned—efficiency was everything. All my life I had been taught to climb the ladder, to seek promotions, to compete, to be the best, to win prizes. That is what society teaches us. In doing so, we lose community and communion."

Then, during a third phase, I discovered people who were weak, people with mental handicaps. I was moved by the vast world of poverty, weakness, and fragility that I encountered in hospitals, institutions, and asylums. Jean

believed, “ *that we are healed by the poor and the weak, that we are transformed by them if we enter into relationship with them, that the weak and the vulnerable have a gift to give to our world. They call us together, in unity and peace, to build community.*” *The poor and the weak are also each one of us. Living in this reality is a cornerstone of peace.*

Two insightful stories by Vanier:

A man came to see me when I was director of the L’Arche community. He was a man with many problems and a very sad person. I suppose he was somebody very normal. I don’t like the word ‘normal’ but if anyone was normal, it was this man. While he was sharing his sadness with me there was a knock on the door, and before I could answer it, Jean Claude was in my office and laughing. Some people call him mongoloid or Down’s syndrome but we just call him Jean Claude. He is a happy man, he likes to come by my office and shake my hand. And that is what he did. He shook my hand and laughed. Then he shook the hand of Mr. Normal and laughed and he walked out laughing. Mr. Normal looked at me and said, “*Isn’t it said that there are children like that.*” The great pain in all of this was that this man was totally blind. He had barriers inside of him and was unable to see that Jean Claude was happy. You couldn’t find anyone more relaxed and happy than Jean Claude. When people start lamenting because there are people with handicaps in our world, the question is whether it is more sad that there are people with handicaps or that there are people who reject them. Which is the greater handicap? Is it that there are men like Jean Claude or is it that Mr. Normal has this barrier which renders him totally blind to the beauty of people?

When Vanier was visiting one of the L’Arche communities he was preparing to address the community and one of the long-term members David, dragged a mat to the front and sprawled out at Vanier’s feet. “*you always put me to sleep, Jean,*” he commented. Vanier smiled delightedly and addressed us all.

“This is that dangerous sleepy time after lunch. Its alright if you go to sleep. Ill keep talking as long as one person is still awake.” Then he leaned forward and spoke quite earnestly. “*But when you wake up, listen.*

That is the prophetic word for you, the word for which you’ve been awakened.”

Vanier’s life choices have been based on his conviction that for each of us there are prophetic moments that God will initiate, the wake-up calls of our lives. Every person, no matter how socially marginalized, has a unique call and purpose from God in the world.

Jean Vanier on Prayer

Prayer is communion

Isn't this the heart of prayer: to hear Jesus say, "You are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter; I rejoice in you"? Prayer is rest; it is to be still, to abide in the presence and in the arms of God, knowing that we are loved just as we are; we are held and safe. We do not have to be perfect or saints or anyone else; we can be ourselves. Jesus says to us, "Abide in me, as I abide in you. As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Abide in my love" (John 15:4,9). This abiding is gentle trust; it is peace; it is safeness. As we abide and remain still in the love of Jesus, he reveals to us our beauty and our value: "I no longer call you my servants. Instead I call you friends, for everything I have learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15).

Friendship is not a one-way gesture but implies a certain equality and reciprocity; it is two-way. Friendship is communion, and communion is the to-and-fro of love. We give and we receive. We give our hearts, our trust, our openness-and we receive a heart, a trust, an openness. Prayer is to say to Jesus, "Tell me what you want. May your will be done." Then, unexpectedly, Jesus says to us, "Tell me what you want." "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do.... If you ask anything of me in my name, I will do it" (John 14:13, 14).

Prayer is a journey

It is all so simple, so gentle, so loving. Prayer flows from faith, from our belief and trust that Jesus is living with and in us. Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, in our everyday joys and pains, in our crises, in our work, and in our leisure activities; God-with-us as we go to bed, as we sleep, and as we awaken. Though we may not always feel it, we trust in Jesus' promise. We trust that he is there, the friend and the beloved. Jesus and the Father send us the Holy Spirit, who teaches us to live this friendship and communion with them. This implies, however, that we really want to live this treasure of communion with God; that we do not do just what we want for our own glory and power in a competitive world.

Prayer is a journey, then, as are all relationships. We grow in friendship and in mutual trust through the times of honeymoon and through periods of pain, absence, and trials of all sorts. It can begin as an experience of being overwhelmed by love, or it can begin as a small light burning in the heart. It can begin as we kneel by our beds to say our prayers or as we receive the sacrament of the Eucharist. It grows through many meetings until the friendship becomes rooted and we become one with the Beloved.

But to grow, this friendship demands fidelity and a struggle against seductions that can drag us away from communion with Jesus. It demands that we be part of a community of prayer and love that holds us and calls us to grow more deeply in this journey.

Prayer is to cry out

There are some persons with mental disabilities who, when I am with them, awaken in me what is most beautiful: my capacity to love and to be present to them. But then there are others who provoke me and awaken the anguish, fear, and darkness in me: my incapacity to love.

As we live with the poor and the broken, they reveal to us our own poverty and brokenness. They disturb us and reveal to us that we are part of a broken humanity. The good news of love is announced to the poor, not to those who only serve the poor. People come to l'Arche communities to serve the poor, but they will stay only if they discover that they are the poor, if they discover and accept their own inner disabilities and barriers. This is not an easy process when we have been accustomed to hiding these imperfections, even despising them, for the sake of success and power. Yet God hears the cry of the poor.

As we begin to follow Jesus and grow in our friendship with him, we discover all these obstacles. We discover struggles, temptations, and fear. Jesus tells us that he is the vine, we are the branches, and that branches that bear fruit may be pruned to bear more fruit (John 15:1-2,5). It is not easy to be pruned. To be pruned means to be cut open, to be wounded, to suffer loss. To be pruned is to live emptiness and anguish. It is to cry out in pain. A young girl with a mental disability made her First Communion during a beautiful celebration of the Eucharist. After the ceremony her uncle said to her mother: "What a beautiful liturgy! The sad thing is that she did not understand anything." The young girl overheard this remark and said to her mother: "Don't worry, Mommy, Jesus loves me as I am." Assistants at l'Arche who cry out their inner anguish and feelings of guilt will also

experience the response of God in moments of inner stillness and peace. They, too, are able to say: "God loves me just as I am, with all that is broken in me, with all my inability to love."

Jesus always wants to penetrate more fully into our psyche, into our hearts and flesh. He wants to liberate in us all our energies of love and wisdom; he wants to reside in us at the deepest level of our being, beyond all our fears and defense mechanisms. He wants to pray in us and to love the Father and others in and through us.

Prayer is meeting Jesus in the poor and weak

Dare I say, God's greatest fear is that we be frightened of God? Isn't that why God became flesh, became weak? "The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25). God is the almighty Creator of heaven and earth. But as the Word becomes flesh, God becomes the weak one, the little one, the powerless one. Jesus becomes the little beggar who says: "I need you. I need your love. Give me your heart. Let me come and dwell in you."

Prayer is not simply to adore the greatness and beauty of God; it is to welcome the littleness of God, the silent, hidden God who yearns to find rest in open and humble hearts. Our God yearns to find a dwelling place in our hearts, to live and love in us, and to reveal God's forgiveness through us.

As we live in communion with all sorts of people, we discover that prayer is not just time spent alone in chapel. In Bethlehem and in Nazareth, Mary did not leave her child in a corner when she prayed! Her prayer consisted of being with Jesus, loving him, listening to him, touching and nourishing him, playing and laughing with him. Mary lived this simple love in faith.

At l'Arche we discover that we, too, are called to live in faith, to grow in faith, and to demonstrate this faith in Jesus when we are with our brothers and sisters who are in need. We must seek times of solitude for quiet prayer, where we can nourish our faith in order to meet Jesus in the poor and in the weak. We need the presence of Jesus in the sacrament of his body, the Eucharist, in order to live the presence of Jesus in the sacrament of the body of the poor and the weak.

Identifying Jesus with the weak and wounded of this world is one of the greatest mysteries of the gospel. How can God be hidden in those who are broken and disabled? The words of Jesus are clear: he is the poor. This is our faith. And in and through the poor and the broken, he calls us, saying: "Whatever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for me" (Matt. 25:40).

Prayer is offering

I am always moved when I visit refugee camps, institutions, psychiatric hospitals, and other places of suffering where I meet so many shattered minds, lonely hearts, and broken bodies crying out their pain. Is it useless, wasted pain, or is it broken humanity's cry for love, for a saviour, for God? Is this the revelation of who we human beings really are, in all our poverty; and what we are called to become, a cry to God: "Come, Lord Jesus, come!"?

Each cry of pain becomes an offering when we unite ourselves to the pain of the world and to the pain of the crucified Jesus. A mocked and rejected Jesus cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Jesus identifies himself with all those shattered minds, lonely hearts, and broken, tortured bodies; with all those who, throughout the world and throughout the ages, feel abandoned by God, by the church, by humanity. I believe that each one of us is hidden in the loneliness and brokenness of the crucified Jesus. All the misery and agony of the world are bound up with his agony. Nothing is wasted; all is offered as sacrifice to the Father to bring life to our world.

I am beginning to touch this mystery, but I cannot say that I have lived it. My faith calls me to discover it in the offering and sacrifice of the Eucharist. Our pain and the pain of the world find meaning ultimately in the rejection and pain of Jesus, lived each day in a sacramental way in the Eucharist. All our tears and our confusion find meaning in the tears of Jesus and in the tears of Mary as she stood by him, the compassionate, silent woman. Our hope is the Resurrection.

This prayer of offering and of intercession enfolded in the Eucharist is lived by many people in monasteries. But it is also lived by many old people, people with disabilities, people who are broken yet whose faith remains alive. I am in contact with a woman who lives with severe mental illness. She goes in and out of a psychiatric clinic. She lives alone in a one-room apartment in Paris. She spends her days in prayer -- a little hermit in the midst of a big city. She and other contemplatives like her are at the heart of our communities and of my retreats. They are hidden pumps irrigating our barren world.

Prayer is being led

Jesus is our friend and our beloved. He leads each one of us. I am always moved by these words of Isaiah: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine. When you pass through the water, I will be with you; in the rivers you shall not drown. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned; the flames shall not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your savior. You are precious in my eyes and... I love you.... Fear not, for I am with you" (Isa. 43:1-5).

Prayer is to trust that in all the dangers and difficulties, in all that overwhelms us in everyday life, Jesus is there, watching over us, guiding us, holding us. Prayer is to live each moment to the fullest, with the lamps of our hearts and our faith burning. Prayer is to be vigilant of the little signs by which God leads us, showing us how to be open and loving. We do not have to withdraw in fear or be consumed with the need to prove something. Even in our weaknesses and limitations, we know that the Holy Spirit is there. Prayer is to trust that Jesus will make good on the promise he once made to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you. My strength is manifested in your weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Prayer, then, becomes an attitude, an inner peace, as we attend to reality and listen to people, as we speak and share with them and make decisions together. It becomes a way of life, listening to the heart of God beating in all that surrounds us, in life, in ourselves, and in others.