

A few weeks ago, as the great and the good gathered for the World Economic Forum at Davos, a very different get-together was taking place in London. An elderly French priest had been invited to talk on a subject that all those economists and power-brokers in Switzerland would have done well to pay attention to. The priest was Jean Vanier and he was speaking about why those who are strong have a great need for those who are weak.

He was speaking from personal experience. In 1964 he invited Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, to share his home in France. From these small beginnings, the L’Arche, a world-wide network of communities for people with learning disabilities has grown, where those who are handicapped live together in equal partnership with those who are able-bodied. Vanier put it this way: “In a world that values winning and coming first, L’Arche communities are places where people can discover who they are, not just what they can do.” And when one of the able-bodied members described how he came to join, he said: “God said to me, ‘Go and live among the poor in spirit and they will heal you.’”

In our gospel reading today, we heard how Peter came to learn this lesson. Peter wanted Jesus to be successful in terms that he could recognize. He wanted him to be admired, to win lots of followers, to come out on top. But Jesus will have none of it. “You think as men think, not as God thinks”. And then he goes on to spell out the message: “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

That was something that the disciples never fully grasped in Jesus’ lifetime. The topsy-turvy values of the gospel that came to a head in the idea that their Lord and Master would be rejected and killed, was so counter-intuitive, that they seem to have blanked it out until, after the resurrection, they began to reflect on the things that Jesus had been trying to teach them. But who can blame them for not grasping the implications of what Jesus was saying? It’s not as though the Church, down the centuries, has ever managed to live out this gospel effectively. Over the years, people

have found it all too seductive to think as the world thinks, and to measure their lives by what the world counts as success – accumulating wealth, achieving power and status, becoming famous, feeling healthy and secure. These ambitions may not necessarily be wrong in themselves, but Jesus’ teaching is clear that if we make them the main purpose of our lives we will be prevented from recognizing where our true self, our real worth, is to be found.

It only takes a moment’s thought to realize that the single-minded quest for success in these terms is usually counter-productive. When you reflect, you will probably realize that in your life it’s not the times when you have been successful that have taught you most, but the times when you have failed. Paradoxically, it’s often the occasions when we feel most vulnerable that teach us about forgiving and being forgiven, about being humble and learning to start again, about perseverance and courage and integrity, about generosity of spirit, and the importance of friends and family, of what it means to be accepted and to love in return.

This is where the example of Jean Vanier and his way of affirming the value of people who are handicapped and disabled is so important. People who are needy, people who are considered to be unimportant, people who are on the margins, are in fact embodying a valuable truth for us all. Vulnerable people prompt us to connect with our own inner vulnerabilities. As we value them, affirm them and care for them, they can teach us what being human is really about. They show us our true selves.

Take the example of Henri Nouwen. He was a successful university lecturer, priest and spiritual director when he went to live among mentally handicapped people in a L’Arche community. This is what he had to say about the experience: “Not being able to use any of the skills that had proved so useful in the past, was a real source of anxiety. I was suddenly faced with my naked self, open for affirmation and rejection, hugs and punches, smiles and tears, all dependent on simply how I was perceived at that moment. In a way it seemed as though I was starting my life all over again. Relationships, connections, reputations, could no longer be counted on. Those broken, wounded and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things, and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give

love, regardless of any accomplishments. I had to learn again that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because He has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life.”

The Gospel turns our natural human aspirations upside down. Instead of protecting ourselves, massaging our egos, seeking our own satisfaction, we are invited to take the risk of becoming vulnerable, open to others’ needs. We are encouraged to deny ourselves, give ourselves away in a spirit of generosity, lose our lives for others. This is the pattern of death and resurrection that Jesus himself lived through, a pattern that he offers us for our own lives, and indeed for the life of the world.

One of the greatest ironies is that throughout Christian history, people have constantly failed to live this out, and have fallen for the temptation of power – political power, military power, economic power, or moral and spiritual power – even though they were claiming to speak in the name of a God who did not cling to his own divine power but emptied himself and became as we are. The temptation to imagine that power is an appropriate instrument for proclaiming the gospel has led to crusades, inquisitions, religious conflicts, slavery. Christian history is full of the stories of those who have misused power by claiming the name of a Jesus who became poor and powerless for our sake. In daily life it seems easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. But, as St Paul recognized so perceptively, true power is made perfect in weakness, and when we are weak, then are we most strong. That is the truth that Jesus made visible for us on the Cross. So we need not fear our own vulnerability because we have been shown that through failure a different kind of success can emerge.

Very soon now we shall have the opportunity to cast our vote in the General Election. One of the most important debates at the moment concerns how we should be caring for those who are most vulnerable among us. If it is indeed the case that they show us how important our own weaknesses and vulnerabilities are, then the way we care for those who are most in need is an indication of how we understand ourselves, the nature of the common good, and the priorities for our life together. When you are deciding who to vote for, please consider carefully the policies of the different parties towards those who are the weakest and most in need.

It's good news that God works through our weaknesses. Good news that when we give ourselves generously we will find ourselves. It always feels risky, but then whoever said that loving wasn't a risky business? The danger is always trying to protect ourselves, putting our trust in things that cannot give real life. Today let's learn Peter's lesson and resolve to try to let go of our protective masks and all those ways we use to massage our self-esteem through pride, status, possessions, power. And let's surrender ourselves to God so that he can work through our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, that we may grow in generosity, in self-giving, in hope and in service of others.

Let me end with this wonderful poem by R.S.Thomas which beautifully expresses the topsy turvy nature of the Gospel. It's entitled 'The Kingdom':

It's a long way off but inside it  
There are quite different things going on:  
Festivals at which the poor man  
Is King and the consumptive is  
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look  
At themselves and love looks at them  
Back; and industry is for mending  
The bent bones and the minds fractured  
By life. It's a long way off, but to get  
There takes no time and admission  
Is free, if you will purge yourself  
Of desire, and present yourself with  
Your need only and the simple offering  
Of your faith, green as a leaf.