



Sunday Reflection

in the Charges of St Margaret's, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 28 January 2024

Epiphany 4

Today, as we see Jesus emerging as a spiritual figure of great authority, we pray that we may be able to recognize authentic leadership and discern when authority is God-given and when it is serving selfish ends.

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. (Mark 1.22)

An illustration to set the scene

On 22 February 2020, a month before the first lockdown I posted a short phrase on my Facebook page: *'oh no, not Jean Vanier'*.

You probably know that Jean Vanier was the founder of L'Arche communities across the world, places where people with and without learning disabilities live together in community. L'Arche means 'shelter' and L'Arche communities are places of belonging where life is celebrated in family meals and festivals and everyone can find their place. Jean Vanier's books about community and the spiritual importance of valuing the weak and helpless, as Jesus did, were very widely read.

Over and above this, Vanier was revered in his person as a spiritual leader and a saint-like figure. He had a striking, very imposing physique, extremely tall, but soft and gentle in manner. When he came and spoke at Wellington Church in Glasgow, people hung on his every word. When I met him, he fixed me with his eyes, asked

me what I did and wished his blessing upon my work, and like many others I felt I was in the presence of a Christ-like figure.

At his death in May 2019 there was an outpouring of respect. Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, pictured kneeling, yes, kneeling beside Vanier's chair, issued this press release:

Jean Vanier lived the Gospel in such a beautiful way that few who met him could fail to be caught up in it...His generosity of spirit and Christian hospitality embraced the whole world...His love for Christ overflowed into every human relationship with abundant grace... Such a luminous goodness was combined with humour, wisdom and practicality...I had the privilege of spending time with him on several occasions and always came away with a sense that here was someone whose whole being spoke of the goodness of God.'

That's how great the deception was. After his death, because with a reputation like that, it was hardly possible before, six women revealed that Jean Vanier had sexually abused them, in some cases, when he had been their spiritual guide. The abuse had taken place over decades and, far from being peripheral to his Christian life, had been an integral part of a warped spirituality held in secret with his own spiritual mentor.

The L'Arche communities across the world have come through this terrible revelation. L'Arche commissioned an independent investigation and faced up to its findings in community, so that all the members were able to share their disbelief and very difficult feelings at the news. The organisation has learned lessons and so a good movement continues to flourish. But what happened raises very serious challenges for our perception of Christian leaders.

Today's Gospel teaching

Today's Gospel helps us here – it is all about spiritual authority. Jesus comes to teach in the synagogue at Capernaum, the main public gathering place and a very different context for worship than the Jerusalem Temple where the sacrifices were offered. The Torah

and perhaps the Prophets were read and explained. Now it wasn't everyone who could turn up and speak, Jesus must have been invited by the synagogue leader, so he already had a reputation. And Mark emphasises two things about his teaching. It was new and Jesus himself spoke 'with authority'. Mark describes his hearers as being astonished.

And there was further evidence that Jesus was no ordinary rabbi. For words were followed by action. Jesus exorcises 'an unclean spirit' from an afflicted man and those present recognise that he has power, even over the powers of evil.

Mark's whole Gospel narrative is about demonstrating who Jesus was. And even at this early stage we see how people's understanding is being challenged by Jesus' unique status. At that time, there was a ferment of apocalyptic expectation of the end times. And Mark is underlining how Jesus demonstrates the characteristics of one whose actions would signal the approach of those days. A healer and a powerful exorcist, Jesus was showing that he could resist and silence the forces of evil in the present age, a sure sign of the coming of God's kingdom.

Now this was a time when healers and exorcist were not unusual. But being birthed in Mark's narrative is the beginning a new interpretation of who Jesus was, one that owes much more to the Greek influence in Palestine at that time. People aren't ready for it yet, but it is there in the voice of the 'unclean spirit' – 'The Holy One of God'. Jesus' healing power comes from his special relationship with God. The final unfolding of Mark's Gospel will reveal Jesus as the expected Messiah but not in the way that people were expecting. For the Son of Man will be not a powerful lord, but the suffering servant. Mark does not reveal what the new teaching Jesus gave on that day was, but we can guess – *a new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

Jesus' authority is recognizable because it comes from God and is directed to God's work, not to any agenda of his own. And Jesus

down not cut a lone figure. He is surrounded by his disciples and is working out his mission in company with them.

How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?

Charisma is a dangerous quality, we have seen that in many cases, not just that of Jean Vanier. The real danger seems to be when those in power come to believe that they have a unique capacity to discern what is right and that this gives them the authority to pursue it, whatever other codes get broken.

This was not what Jesus was like. He was a leader who constantly sought to understand what God's will was for him and to put this before his own inclinations.

So how are we to distinguish authentic leaders who are acting for the benefit of others from those who are acting out their own shadow sides? There are some helpful indications in the Gospels and the Epistles. Good teaching or words leads to good acts – through Jesus

the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. (Matthew 11.5).

Would a modern version be that the children are fed, the disabled can flourish, the old are warm and belong to a caring community, the refugee is welcomed and those sick at heart and given reasons to hope?

Moreover, those who are led by the Spirit have particular qualities:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Ephesians 5.22).

But Vanier, of course exhibited these.

Safe discernment, especially with respect to spiritual and religious leaders, or those who seek to adduce a religious reason for their actions requires something more. It requires us to let go of the things that we venerate as idols, the projections we make that

prevent us from seeing clearly and anything that we elevate above what God requires. Whether we are deciding who to vote for or working out who to believe about the rightness of a policy or of a conflict we have to try and see past our own hungers and desires and consider who might be being harmed by ideas we find the most attractive. And to avoid the trap of idolising any leader who seems to embody what we most long for because we have no right to hand to anyone the power that is God's alone.

When I reflected on my own response to Jean Vanier at the start of Lent 2020 I realised that I had been beguiled by a saintliness I wanted to believe in and that that image was not that of the rejected, suffering crucified Saviour who is the proper focus of our worship.

Repenting of false idols

*Forgive me Lord,
When I have worshipped your shadow,
robed you in clothes of power
investing you with trappings of charisma.*

*What Scripture was I reading?
When I projected onto you
my longings for holiness
that distorted your image in me.*

*The truth is less alluring:
I would have walked right past you without a thought
turned away
as you lay in the gutter,
flinching from your pain and injuries which repelled me.*

*Lord, I repent of the false image
I created of you,
I pray that I can welcome you now
and see you as you truly are.*

What they heard and saw in the synagogue was indeed new and unique – God’s power made flesh in human weakness, authentic leadership.

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. (Mark 1.22)

www.SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk