

A Witness to God's Peace: A Jean Vanier Symposium.

"Your involvement at the event will consist of responding to Jean's answer to the question above and to contextualise it! Be creative, refer to some of Jean's writings, tell a story, use PowerPoint slides, but make sure your response is grounded in the abovementioned question and the overall theme for the event, which is: A Witness to God's Peace: A Jean Vanier Symposium.

Why has John's Gospel been such a point of focus and inspiration for you? Why do you often retell the Samaritan woman at the well story in John 4?

The Gospel of John is really a **gospel leading us to a friendship** with Jesus
Everything is about **growth to friendship**
At the end, we **discover** that Jesus has washed the feet of the disciples
It's about calling people into friendship, entering into a relationship with them
Gospel of John is the gospel of relationship **the gospel of friendship**
Jesus is teaching us to **become friends to all people**

A woman who is fragile and Jesus meets her in **fragility**
What happens is a relationship and she is **transformed**
A woman who's **discovered** that though she's been pushed aside is loved.
The whole message of Jesus is to **meet those who have been humiliated**,
The **Samaritan women teaches us** in a special way in a desire for Jesus to meet people.

Response

A particular word stands out in Jean Vanier's short reflection on the significance of John's Gospel for him, and for the *L'Arche* communities. It is the word 'discover.' Jean uses it twice. Firstly, to make a particular remark about how John's gospel is the gospel of friendship, that leads us to friendship with Jesus; and second, he uses it to describe what brought about the change in the Samaritan woman as a result of her meeting with Jesus, a meeting that became a friendship. In both remarks, friendship is the key relationship in play.

For the English Dominican Herbert McCabe OP, understanding friendship is a task in recognising its thoroughly mundane reality:

We have, then, a special name for *human* living with each other: we call it friendship. ... Now, if the purpose of human living is to live with each other, and if this involves living in friendship, ... [then] this is *not* something that we have resolved upon, not a decision or option we have come to, not even a fundamental option. It is something that belongs to us because of the kind of animal we are ...

We are born as players of this game; we do not *decide* what shall be its aim and purpose. We *discover* these things.¹

The lesson that McCabe wanted to stress is this: if we want to understand friendship, then we need to keep it human, because “befriending” simply is “living well a human kind of life”. [Friendship] is a way of being with another, of sharing life with another. ... Friendship is a quest for unity. ... Friendship is finding the *sharing* of life more important than carrying on the individual life. ... Friendship is always *with*. It is always reciprocal.²

McCabe places the sanctifying nature of the relationship between God and Jesus – their friendship – at the heart of what it means for Jesus to be human. From a theological point of view, it is noteworthy that McCabe follows Vanier, and identifies John’s Gospel, especially John 15, as a key hermeneutic.

We are not abiding in friendship if we prefer something else, if we opt for anything else, even life itself, at the expense of unity with our friends. That is why Jesus goes on to say: ‘No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’ (John 15.13). Friendship is finding the *sharing* of life more important than carrying on the individual life.³

Given that human beings are made for the game of befriending, that it is something proper to being human, it follows that friendship is primarily something to be lost, rather than something to be gained, and for that matter something lost by choice.

Since 1964, Vanier has lived his own life in friendship with people who themselves have lived with disabilities, some profoundly impaired, in the communities of *L’Arche*. He has described their life together as a sign “touching the roots” of humanity, a discovery of a way of life “other than the ladder of material success and individual accomplishment.”⁴ Vanier speaks often of how his life has been transformed by “descending the ladder”, and he has come to use this metaphor in a variety of forms as a pointer to the deeper purposes of being – or, as he prefers to say, becoming – human.

The excluded, I believe, live certain values that we all need to discover and to live ourselves before we can become truly human. It is not just a question of performing good deeds for those who are excluded but of being open and vulnerable to them in order to receive the life that they can offer; it is to become their friends. If we start to include the disadvantaged in our lives and enter into heartfelt relationships with them, they will change things in us.⁵

Vanier’s point is not that the people who are among those at the bottom of the ladder, including those with disabilities (or the woman at the well), do not have a desire for the experience of friendship, but that being at the bottom has placed them in a position of appreciating friendship over power or domination or self-will. Their personal situation –

¹ McCabe, *On Aquinas*, 54-55.

² McCabe, *God, Christ and Us*, 48-49.

³ *Ibid*, 48-49.

⁴ Vanier, *Encountering the Other*, 1.

⁵ Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 84-85.

embedded in the very condition of their lives – wins for them a ready-made desire for friendship. When it comes to friendship, those at the bottom of the social ladder are less inadequate than the rest of humanity because they are already personally present to where friendship may be more readily found. A life of discovery awaits them, while others have to work for it. It is this discoverability of friendship as the path to our humanity that Vanier recognises as being at the heart of the Gospel of John.

We may say that someone who does not pursue friendship is someone who exhibits a reluctance for being human. To not want to befriend (or to not to want to be befriended) is to not want to live a human kind of life. This negatively expressed insight into the anthropology of friendship has an important implication: friendship is discovered, not earned (despite a common phrase to the contrary). Friendship is not an achievement of humanity that needs to be gained; it is a given of our humanity, that can be lost. Friendship belongs to our humanity; it is something to be discovered (or recovered), not attained.

Friendship is always in the direction of self-giving, not self-making. In the light of Vanier's anthropological imagination, it is manifestly the sign of living a truly human life. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." (Jn 1.14) Friendship – as the Johannine paradigm for the life of Jesus - is discovered in him washing feet; it is discovered in him requesting a drink of water. It is in recognising the humanity of Christ that we discover the kind of persons we all are: creatures who are made for friendship.

While friendship might be a "special name" for the living of the human life, the living itself reveals friendship to be an utterly ordinary feature of human beings. In this sense, the recognition that someone is a human being is made in the discovery that he or she is befriendable.