

Sermon for the Sunday after Ascension 2019

It was the teeth, or rather the lack of them, that did it for me. Back in the mid 90's 3 men in their 60's were moved out of a huge hospital to a house in my parish. It was the time of the closure of such places where people with learning difficulties or who didn't quite fit in to "normal" society. Jimmy, Willie and Bobby had been there for 40 or 50 years and it had been the policy of the place to remove their teeth because it was easier! So they came to live with a team of carers and made up for lost time, going to the cinema, the football, the shops yes and getting a set of teeth each. And they were welcomed into our church and attended faithfully week by week and it was my privilege with my lay team to prepare them for confirmation. A daunting but rewarding challenge. As a community we learnt and received a lot from them and in return hope we helped a little to repair some of the years in an institution.

I was reminded of Jimmy, Willie and Bobby by two things this week. The first was the death at 90 of the Canadian Catholic theologian Jean Vanier. Back in the 60's he was encouraged by his spiritual director to visit similar large hospitals in France. There he was shaken by the aimless chaos and the violent uproar that met him. Some people shackled to their beds, others free to walk endlessly round and round in circles. Vanier's genius was to work not just to end such places but to create small communities where people with profound difficulties could live alongside those with ordinary lives **but as equals**. He bought a house and invited two or three folk to live with him as equals sharing the household tasks, not seeing people with disabilities as needing help but as having gifts to live and work and share together. His insight was to discover that living together in community those with difficulties however challenging meant receiving gifts the rest of us do not have.

At his death there were 154 such communities named L'Arche (Ark) in 38 countries. This seems to me to speak to us on this Sunday after Ascension as we wait for the great Feast of Pentecost and the giving of the Holy Spirit. Our collect today reflecting on Jesus returning to heaven prays 'leave us not comfortless but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us'. Among the many titles of the Holy Spirit is Paraklete from the Greek someone who comes and stands beside us. Used in law courts for an advocate or witness for the defence but often translated Comforter, God coming to stand **with us** through the difficulties of life and faith. Ascension and Pentecost speak to us not of a God distant far off, uninterested nor of Jesus just an example we have to try to remember and copy now he's gone but God still always present with us, walking with us, comforting and encouraging us. There is the same mutuality that Vanier saw – God giving us the gifts of his Spirit but also depending on us to use our gifts in his service. Being his agents, hands, eyes feet in the world. We and he in community.

How we need to pray for the Paraklete, the Comforter to stand beside us today. In all the ups and downs of our personal lives, as our young people wrestle with their exams, as we live with dementia in our family, as we struggle to make ends meet under Universal Credit, we pray for his/her strengthening encouraging presence. As our nation faces the ongoing crisis of Brexit and the search for a new prime minister, as our world faces the threats of global warming, how we must pray for the Comforter to come beside us and help us see the way forward. Since we are prone to choose the wrong path, we need to come close to the Spirit who invites us to take the best way forward – and that we shall pray for and rejoice in next Sunday at Pentecost.

But this is not one sided. I said I was reminded of Jimmy, Willie and Bobby by two things. The second was the Panorama documentaries that revealed the appalling scandal of Whorlton Hall with the inhumane treatment of people with learning difficulties or mental issues, torture, mental and physical abuse

that we naively thought had been dealt with after Winterbourne View scandal 8 years ago. Then last week there was the film about the effect of funding cuts on our care of the elderly, a subject which is very close too many of us. Here we need to play our part as the community of the Paraklete, the Comforter. How we need again to care as a society, not to reinstitutionalise those who are hard to handle, not shut them away and leave them to be "cared for" by poorly paid under resourced staff who do not care. How we need a new Jean Vanier, to see not just that the weakest, oldest, frailest in our society need our greatest concern and care, however costly, but ourselves to be the comforter to stand alongside them as a community that values all as equals and receives their gifts every bit as much as we treasure and give our own. Here is something we as church need to say to society through the ballot box, through social media, through our personal lives. We need the Holy Spirit of God to stand beside us as Comforter, to lead us to see that only as a whole community as we walk together, live and learn together and share our gifts that we can fully become the people of God, his Body on earth, the church which 'lives the good news we proclaim'. Amen

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