Third Sunday of Lent

Today’s gospel is about Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman. She was a marginalised person both with regard to him as a Jew and to her own village because of her marital history. She didn’t put him or anyone else on a pedestal. Maybe this is why they became so intimate in telling the truth about themselves to each other.

The first time I heard Jean Vanier teach, when he gave us a memorable John Main Seminar in 1990, it was about this story. I was moved and enlightened by how deeply he identified with it and spoke from a place of humble, spiritually intelligent wisdom. It was a difficult time in my own life and in a couple of personal meetings he gave me insightful and healing advice that helped me continue on my path.

Over the years Jean’s friendship with the meditation community continued and just a few years ago he gave his second seminar from Trosly. I cannot deny or rewrite the history of the grace of this connection or the good he did. He had a profound sense that religion was not about control but healing and leading people to fullness of life; and that each person, however marginal, was wholly worthwhile. His theme was human woundedness; and, as the more he expounded it, more people called him a saint. I don’t think he wanted to be put on a pedestal; but, although people might have wondered what his own handicaps and wounds were, he was widely regarded as better than most people. This made his posthumous fall from grace all the more an awful surprise.

When I heard the truth, about the pattern of his sexual relations with a number of women whom he was guiding, I disbelieved it. But the evidence and the conclusions drawn from it are now hard and clear. L’Arche must be commended for the independent enquiry that it conducted into these cases where lasting harm was done to vulnerable women. He was, it seems, not just a wounded but a wounding healer. The way l’Arche leaders have handled this revelation about their founder reflects the best aspects of his own teaching though not of his personal behaviour. In time I feel l’Arche will be stronger and wiser.

I asked a Buddhist friend recently for his perspective on this breaking of an icon. He mentioned the number of teachers in his own tradition who had also been exposed in similar ways. On one of them the Dalai Lama spoke out because of a personal connection. He said how easily the power and influence given to gurus in their tradition could go corrupt, as power of any kind risks doing. But, he added, how disappointing and how inexcusable is the failure, when this power gives the one who holds it a sense of exceptional privileges and entitlements and exempts them from the normal standards of decency and probity.

Before tomorrow, when I conclude this sad reflection, I would ask you to reflect on the issue in itself. And also on the language we use to think and talk about it. How can we respond to the revelation of sinfulness in those brothers and sisters in whom we once naively saw only grace?

Monday Lent Week Three

Religious status or spiritual influence in any power structure is a source of temptation. Most of the dark side of the history of Christianity, since the edict of Milan in AD 313 (when the Empire stopped persecuting of the followers of Jesus), can be attributed to giving in to temptations of power. This was the illusion that Jesus so clearly saw through and refused during his own Lent.

I find it hard to believe that Jean Vanier was tempted by this kind of power.

I don’t know his inner world, but on the basis of his teaching and personality I would venture to say his self-inflicted wound that led him to wound others was not crude hunger for power but self-deception around his own handicap and hunger for intimacy. Clearly he *did* have power and misused it with people whom he should have been caring for, not using. But, my guess, is that it was not driven by the desire for power or acclaim. It was closer to what he often spoke about: weakness and handicaps. When these are not acknowledged they become dark forces.

But does this even make a difference? What matters for those he hurt is not his motivation but the consequences they suffered and the attention they now receive. I am not sure; it is uncomfortable for anyone to reflect on and get it right. But trying to understand it helps us to correct the mistakes we make about the important meaning of holiness. All religion proposes the idea of holiness, the enlightened, liberated state of individuals who have plunged more fully into the processes of human transformation. We may assume this process of sanctification is complete in someone when it is anything but finished. Don’t we all have good and bad, self-less and self-sacrificing, enlightened and shadow sides? When it is obvious that our process is not complete, no one calls us ‘holy’. If it is more advanced, people can jump to the conclusion we have arrived. And then up goes another pedestal and our human clay is re-used to make a plaster saint.

The only safe approach is to call no one holy (for Catholics not even the ‘Holy Father’). Jesus warned us to call no one ‘Father’ or ‘Teacher’ or ‘Master’. There is only one Father and one Teacher. Only God is holy. Only God is good. His warning to ‘judge not’ includes over-positive judgements of others as well as the total condemnations we like to make. It is complicated when someone we have learned from and whom we saw as a friend is exposed and we see how they harmed others. The first concern then is caring for those who have been hurt, the human collateral damage. Second, is being careful (for our sake and that of the truth) how we judge the offender. Even if, relatively speaking, we have only a splinter in our own eye, we need to take it out before we can see anything clearly. For example, how far were we, even unconsciously, facilitating a lust for power or the game of self-deception, which became, in a basically good person, an irresistible temptation?

It’s hard when heroes, especially our spiritual heroes, are shamed and downgraded. So maybe it’s good that there are no heroes anymore. Or only one hero. It’s better and safer for all concerned.

Tuesday Lent Week Three

There is a false view of Lent - and spiritual *ascesis* (exercise) generally - that associates it with being or pretending to be solemn to the point of miserable. Jesus addresses this by saying, when you practice a discipline of self-restraint, don’t publicise it and look hard done by or pious. Go out of your way to be relaxed and cheerful.

There is a guilt dynamic embedded in our psyche. And another upsetting factor in the ego is the magical feeling that every happy moment uses up limited credit, like on a phone plan, and this has to be topped up by doing something hard or difficult. You pay for happiness. Happiness is a product not our natural state. We don’t have the right to be happy while the world is disrupted by a global virus, or there are a million refugees displaced in Syria or a friend is suffering.

What is happiness? For religious people, this slides into the idea of a God who only wants you to be happy on his terms, when you are worshipping him in a way he approves. And this God, a complex form of the idea of karma – you get what you deserve – then becomes a petty god who rewards and punishes. Religious training and cultural ideas of God often reinforce these ideas, but they are first formed in childhood as we observe how adults treat us. Good boy, here’s a present. Bad boy, go to bed.

Meditation has a surprising power to break up every self-reinforcing complex of ideas and compulsive loop-thinking. This works directly on all our thoughts and images about God – which are not just intellectual items but strongly emotional. If you believe that God will punish you for your faults you are emotionally affected in everything you do and in all your relationships. Then, as ideas of God change, so do our fundamental views of reality and our relations with other people.

Religious people are often made uncomfortable in the first stage of this process. They feel that God is disappearing, that meditation isn’t really prayer or that they may end up as an atheist. A man once told me he meditated faithfully but was not convinced it was really a form of prayer of which the Church or God approved. So, he would begin each meditation with a prayer: ‘Dear God I am going to meditate now. But believe me, I am not really a Buddhist.’

As old ideas of God fade, nothing solid immediately comes to take their place. Time and faith however help us to realise that the *nothing* is poverty of spirit, that emptiness is the space of fullness and that the loss is the first part of a cycle that leads to a surprising fresh kind of discovery. We find what we have lost but it is changed because it was lost. In the distance it took from us while it was lost it or we changed. Sometimes we do have to lose our beliefs about God, even to stop believing and wait. Until we believe again in a new way. Faith is deepened in the tunnels of time. And time is transcended by faith.

Wednesday Lent Week Three

In the last war, while England was expecting to be invaded as other European countries had been, the government took measures to make things difficult for the enemy when they arrived. They used camouflage on coastal installations, set up a Home Guard of old men and boys with outmoded rifles, which the English today still feel nostalgic about; and they took down all road signposts. It is a funny idea that the mighty German army would have been seriously impeded by not knowing whether to turn right or left at a crossroads in the English countryside.

When I read about this I thought it reflected a feeling we have on any journey of faith – starting a marriage, beginning a new community, finishing the writing of a book or raising children. These are all journeys on which faith – personal commitment and trust - has to deepen at every juncture. And yet, often there are no signposts pointing clearly to reassure us we are on the right road or will take the right turning. Sometimes the signs are there but not very helpfully: like the time my decision-making powers were paralysed. I was driving from Bere Island to Cork. I came to a fork in the road. There *was* a sign. But one side pointed left saying ‘Cork’ and another pointed right saying ‘Cork’.

In the spiritual dimension the path itself is everything. The deeper we go into the silence and let go of words, thoughts and imagination, as we do with the mantra, the fewer conventionally reassuring signs there are. There is simply the path, the way we are treading. And there is the treading, taking the next step. At first we protest at the absence of reassurances and re-confirmation of our direction. Our senses of direction and confidence are challenged or confused.

Slowly we realise that the path itself *is* the reassurance. There comes a sense of relief that there is a way, through the jungle, through the maze of options that overwhelm people today. We have found it. There’s a big life-changing difference as we realise that we are on a way. We may feel, too, that it has found us because there is a sense, coming from the road itself, that we are being led by a direct, intimate connection with it. It knows us better than we know it. The connection is simply our treading the path, always taking the next step. *You did not choose me, I chose you… I am the Way.* This sense belongs uniquely to the spiritual dimension. It allows us to follow those stretches of the road that have no signs.

All this might sound flaky and impractical. The sign that it is real is read in daily life, on the parallel pathways of action and decision-making. In material matters there are difficult decisions to make with insufficient time or information. The faith of our inner journey is surprisingly useful here. We don’t panic, when necessary we wait and endure better. When we make a decision we have more clarity and make the best choice we can. We trust. If it turns out we were wrong we adjust by direction again.

If we are faithful in the deep issues of the inner journey we will be more faithful in the material issues of life as well.

Thursday Lent Week Three

I’d like to send this reflection to our community in Italy as they, with their 60 million compatriots are in lockdown because of the coronavirus. All our community worldwide would like you to know that we are thinking of you in these extraordinary days. More than just thinking about you, we are holding you with loving friendship in our hearts at meditation and in our prayers.

It is for you to tell us what you feel and what it is like for you and your families – and we will happily welcome your posts on our website or blog. I will speak with our national coordinator to see if they would like this connection with the wider community. But if I imagine what it must be like for you I think of two comparisons. The first is a Hollywood disaster movie. Much of the media coverage of the pandemic encourages this and indeed the scenes of empty streets and the cancellation of transportation suggests it.

But the other comparison I think of is a retreat that starts in one way and ends in another. The obvious difference is that a retreat is a free choice about how and where we spend our free time. Yet when Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was released from the Gulag forced labour camp where he had been imprisoned for eight years, he said he looked back at it and wept. His tears were a mix of relief at his departure and gratitude for what the camp life had taught him about himself and the human heart. The experience he underwent and the people he met there inspired his books for years to come

Sometimes, when we are forced into something and feel imprisoned by a coldly impersonal, external force, we may burn up in rage at it or go into depression. And yet sometimes, just sometimes if we are fortunate, the experience of being compelled liberates us into new and surprising views of reality. We encounter something unexpected, a hidden grace that could not otherwise have been able to find us.

As in meditation, there are times when we sit in a desert, dry and endlessly distracted by our anxieties or losses. An empty desolation stretches as far as we can feel in every direction. Better, we think, to do something useful or self-indulgent. The solitude is not the open space in which we feel connected to a greater whole but aloneness, constriction, abandonment or the feeling of being forgotten. The spectre of affliction haunts our soul.

Then from an inner point, without location, an invisible ray of light touches and restores our shrivelled soul to life and hope. Not that all our wishes are fulfilled, in fact none of them may be, and the pain or loss may still be only too present. But a joy emerges that opens a pathway to the source of being, our being.

I hope that in some way for all our Italian friends, who are feeling trapped by external forces, some peace of this inner freedom may at least occasionally arise. We hope that the time of the shutdown and quarantine may be short. We hope this for your sake and because the rest of us need the beautiful things - of your temperament and your country - that makes us love you.