

For he himself knows of what we are made;
he remembers that we are but dust.

Prayer of committal, Funeral Service BCP2004

Over the years, I have long admired the work of the late Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche community, a community in which able and disabled live together in Christian community in mutual respect. They have a house here in Baldoyle. I've gone to hear Jean Vanier on a number of occasions, the last time in Taize only two years ago. I have a number of his books in my study that have given me much food for thought over the years.

Like many I found myself deeply shocked and saddened at a report, itself commissioned by the L'Arche Community, that revealed a darker side to the life of Jean Vanier.

I found myself thinking. A realisation came to my mind that even the very best of us are flawed human beings. My mind went back to the circumstances that lead up to my arrival in the Parish of Ahoghill. My predecessor, who had served faithfully for 30 years, exercising a wonderful pastoral ministry, had been caught out in a scandal and had taken his own life. The Parish was distraught as they sought to reconcile their memories of a faithful pastor who had seen them through so much

both as individuals and as a community, and the tragedy of the scandal that had lead him to take his own life.

Over the last weekend my mind went back to the end of a Bible study. We were all chatting over a cup of tea and my predecessor's name came up. An old lady leant back in her chair and said, 'I will never understand what he did – but boy he was good to us.'

For he himself knows of what we are made;
he remembers that we are but dust.

This morning, the First Sunday in Lent, our Old Testament Lesson is part of the account of the Fall, the Temptation in the Garden of Eden. I just want to get behind the images of serpent, of forbidden fruit and go to the fundamental truth behind this well known story. From the very outset, man is understood as having been created free. Man is free; free to be faithful, free to fail.

But it goes further than that. Failure is not the end of the story. God does not wash his hands of man. God continues to call, continues to engage with man. As the Old Testament story progresses, we see major figures emerge who respond to God's call; Abram, Isaac, Jacob, David.

Each are presented as real human beings with strengths and weaknesses, instances of great faithfulness, instances of abject failure. Abram in

Egypt, in fear for his life, passes his wife off as his sister. Jacob deceives his father Isaac to rob his brother Esau of his father's final blessing. David abuses his power, seducing Bathsheba, arranging the certain death of her husband Uriah.

God works through human beings, despite their weaknesses, despite their failure – and is not ultimately frustrated even by their wickedness.

For he himself knows of what we are made;
he remembers that we are but dust.

God comes among us in the Incarnation, in the person of Jesus. He lived among us, grew up in a human family, knew what it was to laugh, to weep, to be lonely, abandoned. Our Gospel reading speaks of Temptation. But Jesus' experience of temptation in the Gospels goes beyond what we read of this morning. And so I find myself turning to those words in the letter to the Hebrews:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are —yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 4:15ff

God in Jesus knows, really knows what it is like to be human. He knows the pressures we face. He is one who not only knows; he is one

who understands, one in whom we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

I look back to that night in Ahoghill Parish and remember a people who still could not understand, still felt the hurt of what my predecessor had done, but who looked back in thankfulness to a ministry in which they had experienced God's love in their midst and thanked God for him.

The L'Arche Community are in the process of coming to terms with what they have learned of the darker side of one they held in huge regard. People have been hurt and they must never be forgotten. Something remarkable happened in the establishment of L'Arche that would not have happened in quite the same way without the drive and vision of Jean Vanier. It is our hope and prayer that that work will continue.

It is a reminder that God can, and does, do remarkable things in and through the lives of imperfect and flawed human beings – and from that I take great comfort.

For he himself knows of what we are made;
he remembers that we are but dust.

