

to discover that we belong
(homily for Easter 4c 2019)

Even the Today programme, Radio 4's flagship news broadcast gave extended coverage to Liverpool FC's victory over Barcelona last Wednesday morning. Tucked away amid the footballing euphoria was another item about the death a 90 years old man.

Jean Vanier was born on 10 September, 1928, the fourth of five children. His parents, Major General Georges Vanier and Pauline Archer Vanier were both Canadians with impressive careers.

His father was Canada's ambassador in Paris in 1945 and his mother a delegate of the Red Cross which led to Jean being present at the reception of concentration camp survivors in the French capital – an experience that marked him for life.

Aged 13, he had enrolled at Dartmouth Naval College in England, and in 1949 he transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy only to resign his commission a year later startling his contemporaries by stating that he did so *“to follow Jesus and work for peace”*. He studied philosophy to doctorate level and began teaching at St Michael's College in Toronto.

Jean's life took another decisive turn in 1964 following a visit to a psychiatric hospital that moved him profoundly: He described it like this: "I discovered a world of vast suffering that I had been totally ignorant of. In the navy, I had been in a world of efficiency; through my studies, I was in the world of intellect. And then I found myself faced by a world of '*the cry*' and that turned my life upside down."

So, in August of that year he invited two people with learning difficulties to live with him in a small house in Tosly-Breuil which he called *L'Arch* – meaning *The Ark* (a place of refuge), where they shared a simple daily life, of mutual help and friendship – a home where each were fully-fledged participants in the community instead of patients. Vanier later recalled: "What they really wanted was to have a friend. They didn't care about my knowledge or capacity to do things, but about my heart and my being."

The house quickly became too small for the numbers wanting to share this way of life and so other *L'Arche* homes started up in France and spread across the world.

There are now communities in 38 countries that are home to thousands of people both with and without disabilities.

These are the bare bones of a life that also produced a stream of books and videos in which Jean Vanier communicates how his experience of sharing life with those on the margins has shaped his and affirmed faith.

This is the time of year when we welcome children who have been prepared for the Eucharist to share with us at the Lord's table of welcome. This can stir up memories of our own first communion day. We can also reflect on how our faith has developed in the ensuing years. Recognising that through the ups and downs as we gather for the Eucharist we have formed invisible bonds with the living and the dead. Our familiarity with the routine can sometimes desensitise us to the significance and value of what we do with and for each other in the company of Jesus. But once in a while we surely realise what Jean Vanier realised, that:

“To be in communion means to be with someone and to discover that we belong together.”

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