

JEAN VANIER

INTRODUCTION: It is my great pleasure to introduce Jean Vanier this morning. I'm sure there is hardly anybody in this room who needs to be introduced to him. He has all his life gone through a punishing round of lectures and talks all over the world and most of us here will have heard him on a good number of occasions. If we haven't been to his talks, we will have read one of his many wonderful books and if we haven't been in touch with his talks or his books, we will surely have been touched in one way or another either by large or by faith and light. If you look around our world for seeds, green shoots of hope, I think both large and faith and light would stand very high as really wonderful seeds of hope for now and for the future. So it's really wonderful to be able to welcome Jean and to say that we're all in your hand for the next three quarters of an hour or even an hour.

(APPLAUSE)

JEAN VANIER: Good morning. After that little interlude in French, we've just read a very moving text of Corinthians and I don't know whether it touched you when it said those parts of the body that are weakest are indispensable to the church.

Indispensable. I don't think I've ever read a book on ecclesiology which begins like that. So what I'm going to say is going to enter into a bit of a commentary of that reality because what was clear for Paul is not clear today. That the parts of the body which are the weakest are indispensable and those parts of the body which are the least presentable are treated with the greatest caring. Very strong words, those of Paul and it shows that we still have a long way to go to discover that those who are the weakest or the least presentable are at the heart of the church. They are today still marginalised.

So saying that, it's also how are they source of life not only for the church but for you and me and what is a source of life. So that we, each one of us become more Jesus, like Jesus because that is the role of a Christian, is to become like Jesus and to reveal through our lives maybe more than our words that Jesus is alive in our world today.

I want to tell you my first experience with people with disabilities. I'd been teaching philosophy at the University of Toronto and a priest friend of mine, a Dominican, suggested that I come to visit a small institution of which he was a chaplain and I came and he said, to understand what it means to be human, you must listen to those who have been the most marginalised. To understand what it means to be human, you must listen or get to know those who are the most marginalised. So I came, anxious. I didn't quite know how to speak with people who do not speak or to communicate with them and even if I could, what would we speak about. But I was touched by that institution because pretty well each person that I met, there was really only one question ... am I important for you? Do you love me? Am I someone for you? Am I someone?

They were very different to my students in philosophy. My students in philosophy wanted to go up the ladder, pass their exams, go into a world of power and money. They wanted to go up the ladder of promotion. They weren't asking me, do you love me? But these people, it was a different ... they didn't want power, they didn't want knowledge, they just wanted one thing ... am I important for you? Do you love me?

Do you know that practically the last words of Jesus in the Gospel of John are, Do you Love me? Do you love me? And it's a question of Jesus but it's a question of all those who are marginalised and poor. I will speak from my experience that I could say the same thing about many people today who feel crushed and oppressed because people with disabilities remain crushed and oppressed. 90% in France of people with Downs Syndrome are aborted before birth. We are confronted by something very particular. Things are being done which help us to understand that people who are fragile are important but a lot of things are being done to crush them, put them away. Where do we stand in that? Cos I don't believe it's just a question of saying pro life. It's to be committed to life, not just to say pro life but committed to life and particularly the weakest and the poorest and maybe the greatest problems of our time is the widening gap between the rich and the poor and that affects us all. That is our world today. A widening gap between the rich and the poor and in all probability things will get worse.

I want to speak to you about Eric. We found Eric at the psychiatric hospital, a little guy, 16 years old, he was blind, he was deaf, couldn't walk. He'd been put in the psychiatric hospital at the age of 4. His mum, a beautiful lady, but she was lost and living the pain which so many parents live of not understanding what has happened, suddenly to discover her fourth child has a very severe disability. The general hospital sends Eric to the psychiatric hospital and he was 4 years old. Mum came to visit him once but she was horrified with what she saw and she never came back. So here we have this little guy, now aged 16 when we met him, extremely fragile and I don't think I've ever seen a young person with as much anguish. The whole of his body was just one immense anguish.

I'd like to just, with you, enter into the heart of Eric. What does Eric live? You could ask me, does he know that he has a handicap. I don't know, he doesn't speak. All I know is that the little baby who has just been born, that little baby knows whether he or she is loved. You see, a little baby that's just been born is so fragile, so vulnerable, so weak, no defence mechanism, totally incapable of looking after his most basic needs. If the little child is loved and how will he know? By the tenderness of the voice, by the tenderness of the hands, by the way the mother responds to the cry. Something very beautiful happens and of course that little child has a name. You call me by your name. Any child has a name and mum and dad call the little child by his or her name and in that tenderness they are saying, you are precious, you are important, you have value, you're a child of God, you have a mission ... a mission in society and in the world. It's not as explicit but the words are, you are my daughter, my beloved daughter, my beloved son, and the whole of the life turns around this little child. The fact that that little child is loved and the way love is revealed through play ... you know how it is with mothers sort of saying, giddy, giddy, giddy and the father saying, giddy, giddy, giddy ... I mean, that relationship becomes celebration. The little child is centre of celebration, of laughter, of smiles. It's beautiful to just be with a newly born child with mum and dad, the brothers and sisters, the grandfathers, everybody peaking in and saying, giddy, giddy and all the rest. It is a celebration and in that celebration, the whole of the atmosphere is saying to the child, you are precious. For the mother and father gives joy to the child but the child also gives joy to the parents. It's a celebration.

What happens when somebody is seen as a disappointment? And Eric, it's not just a question of disappointment. It's much deeper than that. It's abandonment and yet an abandonment which we can understand. Mum, her husband was a lorry driver, she didn't know what to do. We're here in the 1990 God knows what ... 50 something ... the situation was different then to today and so Eric has nobody to say, you are precious, you are my beloved son. So what happens to Eric inside of him? Anguish, loneliness, loneliness, terrible loneliness. He doesn't say, nobody loves me but he lives that reality, I am not wanted. I am not wanted and this is immense pain. Immense pain. It is anguish, terrible anguish. Agony. Agony. I have seen many people in agony.

What does Eric need? And what happens when we welcome Eric into our community? What is our role? Yes, we need good professionals and when we welcomed him in 1978, our medical team saw that if we gave operational ... if he had an operation on his legs, he could walk and so he was able to walk. We need competent people when there is somebody as deeply wounded as Eric but everybody needs competent people cos education is never an easy thing. To help people to rise up and to be themselves and not just to be what their parents want. Education is to help people to become free, to develop their conscience, to grow, to be themselves. So what we must try to do is not just have generous people and generosity is a very important thing, to have generous people who take people on pilgrimage or things like that. It is important but generosity which is doing something for someone must flow into a meeting. A meeting. And in that meeting I get to know your name and you get to know my name. The whole of this weekend is around, I've called you by your name and calling you by your name is not just Peter or whatever it is. The name renders the person present. To know somebody by their name is not just, Hi Peter. It's, I know you. I know you. I know your weakness, I know your fragility, I know your gifts, I know your beauty. I know your story. I know your story. So meeting is two persons coming together, revealing to each other not that I'm a good nurse or a good doctor or a good this or that. No. I tell you my name, you tell me your name. Generosity implies a certain power and because I'm generous I bend down to somebody who is weaker and I give the surplus of my money, I give my time, I give my knowledge, I give ... but it's a system of power and to be generous is to be good. Yeah, it's to be good but it's also to reveal to the other that

you are inferior. A meeting is something else. A meeting is something else. It's we become vulnerable one to each other. You tell me your name, I tell you mine. You tell me your story, I tell you mine. We get to know each other and then we begin a communion of hearts. A meeting can become a communion of hearts which can become a friendship, which can become a fidelity, which can become a covenant. We are bonded together. We are bonded together. And you won't be alone and I won't be alone. So that implies a vulnerability. No longer power but vulnerability and a meeting so that it becomes communion of heart takes time. Takes time. Maybe none of us have much time but it takes time.

But of course with somebody like Eric, communication is not simple. It takes time to understand what he's saying, by his body, by his tears, by his cry, by his gestures and it demands a team of people working together to understand where his desires are. You see, a human being becomes human when they can express a desire and desire can become a choice and the choice can become a project but it's about desire. And many people with disabilities have not been allowed to have desire because desire is something about their growth, their moving ahead. So it's obviously not easy with somebody like Eric but we have to be together. We have to work together to understand desire.

I had the privilege when I left the directorship of my community to live with Eric to give his bath every morning, not just myself but others in the team, to help him to eat. Sometimes he had got into a system where he was able to do it but sometimes the food would go all over the place. That's great too, you know, to fool around. It's like pee pee. Sometimes during the meal, we would be flooded out but that's life, you know, that's not ... don't say ... ugh ... (LAUGHS) ... say thank you. Actually, to tell you a story. One day ... you won't believe it ... he did pee pee in the toilet. We had a celebration and we had champagne.

(LAUGHTER)

If anybody had entered into our community that night, we were all drinking champagne and, what's it all about?

(LAUGHTER)

Anyway. You have to work with body ... (LAUGHS) ... and body is pretty little ... (LAUGHS) ... it's pee pee, ka ka, all the rest. It's body. It's incarnational. It's incarnational. It's what Timothy was saying last night. It's body. To give him his bath was very moving because he would relax so totally in the bath that it was very, very touching. It's as if he sort of became in a new way. Another moment which was very moving in that little home where there was people with similar disabilities, there was Luick, who we call the Founder of Faith and Life, little Luick but the other moment was the evening prayer and Eric would come and ... blind, he would sort of move around but then he would touch someone and then come into sit on a lap and then he would sort of huddle up and sit on a lap. It was very moving. He would sort of just be in a state of restfulness, just lying their in our arms.

You know, when you live with somebody like Eric and you give him his bath, he teaches you about touch. You can only touch Eric if your hands are at peace. I say your hands are at peace. If you're agitated, that will come through the hands. So he calls us to touch him with tenderness, to be quiet with him, not to hurry through the bath, quick, quick, quick. No. Things should be done ... he teaches us, slow down because that is the relationship with somebody like Eric. Slow down, slow down. Everything is done pretty slow. Dressing him and putting him to bed and all the rest.

So the incredible thing that happens and you will hardly believe that but having listened last night to Timothy, in a way, Eric changes us. Eric transforms us. Here, we're beginning to enter into a commentary of that text I mentioned that the weakest people are indispensable to the church. You see, we have to be just attentive to Eric. It's what Timothy was saying, to be attentive and the whole team to be attentive and that is the beauty of Eric. It's his weakness. It's his weakness that brings us and brings us together and teaches us, move slowly, be at peace, don't go too quickly. Touch him with respect because Eric and Timothy was saying that yesterday about the brother who was blind and somebody who is blind has a sort of sensitivity to listening, to touch which may be because of our sight we lose. So Eric can pick up very quickly if we're agitated or if we're annoyed or if we want to get the bath over done quickly, so we can look at a television or see who's winning the

football or God knows what. So he's calling us to interiority. Calling us to go slow. But we're in a society which teaches people to go quick and to be a success and to move quickly and to move into the world of promotion and Eric is telling us to go in the other direction. So there is something very deeply counter culture and as I'm taking the example of Eric, I could take the example of others who maybe are not as totally fragile as Eric but in reality it's the same thing. We must slow down and we're beginning to see.

We had in my community January last at one moment in the 5 communities of Larch in the area, which is quite a big area, 19 future priests for a month in the various communities. And they asked to see me at the end of their period that were there and I said, I'm not terribly interested in speaking to you, I want to listen, tell me ... what have you lived? And pretty well each one of those future priests said, I feel transformed. You feel transformed. What does that mean? When you become priests, will you remember that a month living with what people, some people call people who are a bit crazy, in our communities there are many crazy ones. Maybe in our world there are not enough crazy people, let's put it that way. People are too intense about going up the ladder and succeeding and all that sort of stuff and they don't know about celebrating life and having fun and having champagne when somebody goes to the toilet. I mean ... take it easy. Take it easy. So I said to them, what is it that has transformed you? And is it really true that there is transformation? I hear this all the time. I mean, in Faith and Light, I remember in a retreat I gave to people of Faith and Light, I think it was in Poland, a young girl who got up and said, I spent a year in Faith and Light and I feel completely changed. I had a vision of being human was to go up the ladder, to be efficient, to be capable and to create a world where we are efficient and I'm discovering something totally different. I saw people with disabilities as a failure. I'm beginning to see them as a way to become more human. That was a witnessing that I heard. That we become more human as we live with them.

So here we're touching a mystery. You know, we are beginning to discover that those who are the most rejected are those who will heal us. St Francis of Assisi and I would encourage you to read Francis ... and in his will or his testament, he says, I always had people with leprosy in repulsion. At that period, there were 20,000

leprosians in Europe. I always had lepers in repulsion. And then one day the Lord sent me towards them, I stayed with them and when I left there was a new gentleness in my body and in my heart. The word, a new gentleness in my body and in my spirit. Sorry, my spirit. And from then on, I followed the Lord. What did he discover? That those people that society rejected, that they were people like you and me. They had a heart. They had had a family, they contracted leprosy and then they were thrown out and they were there in the streets, people running away from them. So there wasn't just the pain of the leprosy but there was the pain of this total radical rejection. If any of you know anything about the fathers of the church, I would encourage you to read St Gregory of Nice. The way he talks about the leper as a presence of God. That the most rejected is a presence of God. So it's not a question of marginalisation for the church, it's to bring to the heart of the church. And this is what I think we are here about. That they're at the heart of the church.

What does that mean? You see, St Paul at the beginning of this letter to Corinthians says that God has chosen what is foolish and what is weak to confound the strong and the powerful. That God has chosen the lowest and the most despised. That is the choice of God. And why? Does that mean that God loves the lepers and Eric more than others? No. It's not that. You see, I come back to that first meeting, that what I discovered in that first meeting in that little institution was the cry, do you love me? What people with disabilities were crying out for was relationship. What is that relationship that they're crying out for? What is the relationship that Eric is crying out for? It's a deep respect. You see, to love someone is not just to hold their hands and say, giddy, giddy, giddy. To love someone is to reveal to them they are important. That's what love is. It's to reveal to them that they're important. That is the way that Jesus loves us. Jesus loves us by telling us, you're important, you are precious, you have a job, you have a mission in the church and in the world to bring life, you are very important. We're all important, you are precious. So to love is to respect and reveal and how do we respect and reveal? Listen. Where are your desires? And there's something very particular, is to love tenderly. You see, Eric is somebody who has suffered so much already. So we have to learn to touch him with tenderness. Tenderness is a word today that has unfortunately sort of become sexualised and we've forgotten what it means to listen to someone tenderly, gently. Be gentle.

As we enter into that relationship with Eric, learning to respect him, to reveal to him that he has value, to listen as best we can. I say as best we can. To touch him with tenderness. Do you know something? He's teaching us how God approaches each one of us, to discover the tenderness of God, the respect of God for each one of us. There's beautiful text in the Apocalypse where it says, the Lord stands and knocks at the door and if somebody hears and opens the door, the Lord says, I will enter to eat with that person, that person close to me and I close to that person. Let's see. The Lord that knocks at the door and that's a sort of murmuring, something very quiet but maybe we're so busy and our heads are so filled with projects and things to do that we're like those people who're invited to the wedding feast but we have no time to listen to God knocking at the door. You see, God respects our freedom. He doesn't kick the door down. That is the mystery of the way God approaches us with tenderness. You see, with Mary, he doesn't violate Mary. He says, will you accept? Will you accept? She said, be it done to me according to your word. Do you accept? And that is God speaking to each one of us. Do we accept? To be with Jesus, to liberate our world from the powers of fear, because that's what's happening. We're in a world empowered by fear, everybody's frightened of each other. People are frightened of people with disabilities. People are frightened of the different. They are frightened of people of other cultures. They're frightened. Jesus came to liberate us from fear but it's a long road, that transformation. So many people I hear are frightened of people with disabilities. Have you ever met one? No. Why are you frightened? Come.

In our community, every year there are about 100 or maybe 200 young people aged 15 who come to spend a day in our community, in the workshops, in the homes and so on. And each one writes a little paper and it always, pretty well always, before I came to Larch, I was scared stiff of people with disabilities. These are 15 year old. And then I came and I find they're super. You see, before we meet, we are frightened. So we have to create in our world places where those who are different can meet.

I was speaking in Paris to a group called Captive Liberation. They work with people who are caught up in prostitution and, you know, in Europe 100,000 women come

from eastern countries and Africa as slaves in the world of prostitution and one of the people said to me, you know, once you have listened to one and listened to their story, you are changed. You are changed. So I come back to this mystery of Eric. That if we take time to listen to him, if we take time to respect him, if we take time to respond to his needs which are of competence, yes, we need to be competent. In any education, we need to be competent to help people stand up and to discover who they are and to discover their value and their beauty. I mean, education is not just yan, yan, yan. Help people to stand up. That's what compassion is about. Compassion is to bend down to help people stand up and discover who they are, their beauty, their value and to discover that they can be happy and rejoice and celebrate. So ... it takes time. But it takes time to get to know Jesus and Jesus wants to reveal to us his deep respect, his tenderness.

I'd like to tell you a little story about a little boy in Paris. He was making his first communion in a church in Paris and after the Eucharist, there was a sort of family celebration and the uncle of the little boy went up to the mother and said, wasn't it a beautiful liturgy? The only thing that's sad is that he didn't understand anything. The little boy heard and, with tears in his eyes, he said, don't worry mummy, Jesus loves me as I am. Which is saying, I don't have to be what you want me to be, I don't have to be what uncle wants me to be, it's open. And of course, that little boy is learning to live with his disabilities but what we've discovered is that all the assistants that comes to Larch are learning to live with their hidden disabilities and we all have these hidden disabilities, which is a difficulty to relate, a difficulty to forgive, not to be controlled by fear, by prejudice, to think we're part of an elite or whatever it is. No. We're all people who are disabled. With some, it's more visible, it's obvious. Eric is very visible. For others ... it's inside, it's all part of fear and anguish and difficulty in relating, difficulty in forgiving and that's who we are. We are a broken people. In some, that brokenness is more visible. For Eric, it's very visible. For others, for myself, you don't see it but it's there. I mean, I have my anguish, I have ... living in Larch, I discovered a lot of things about myself. I discovered a lot of violence within myself. Eric ... with Eric, there was also Lucien. Lucien, very severe disability. Is it a form of autism? Like a deep psychosis. I don't know. He didn't ... he couldn't walk, he couldn't speak, he couldn't look you in the eye, he was catatonic, he would be all like this. When we gave him his bath, it was super because all that was sort of

stuck in him became flexible. It was beautiful to see him in the bath. But he had lived 30 years with mum. Mum, incredible woman, beautiful and mum recognised every grunt, every movement of the body. She understood and there was a beautiful communion between mum and Lucien but mum fell sick, had to go to hospital. Then Lucien couldn't be by himself obviously. He was put in hospital and there he lived ... you see, anguish is broken communion ... for 30 years he had lived with mum and there was a symbiotic attitude which was quite beautiful, there was something true and loving and suddenly he is alone. Terrible loneliness, terrible anguish and he would scream and scream and scream and of course his place was not in hospital and eventually he came to our community and I lived with him. I loved giving him his bath and being with him but I can tell you that when he began screaming and screaming and screaming, it touched me very deeply. I think I can say his scream of anguish awoke my scream of anguish, which maybe I didn't know existed. So he revealed something about who I am and when the scream of anguish comes up, there's a tendency to want to get rid of that which was creating the anguish, therefore violence. I could see in myself violence and I could see that I could have hurt him but I live in a community and other people weren't affected as I was affected. Two or three years ago Lucien died and I said to Lucien when he died, thank you, you have revealed to me who I am. Just like that little boy. Don't worry mummy, Jesus loves me as I am. We all have violence in us, it's just that we have to know about it. We have to become conscious, we have to speak about it, we have to be able ... otherwise our violence becomes a controlled violence which becomes prejudice and we push people down, people we don't want to listen to because they annoy us and might bring up that violence. Prejudice is a sort of protection from our own violence and that violence is with us all. I was in the company of a married woman with children and she was telling me how she could become violent when her little boy ... you know how it is ... wash your teeth darling ... WASH YOUR TEETH darling ... and then the voice goes up a bit and then IF YOU DON'T WASH ... you know. We all have a protective system to protect our vulnerability which can become violence. Just let's get to know about it. Don't be embarrassed, don't feel you're awful because you have violence within you. Of course, try and not take a saucepan and hit the kid over the head but know that it is there and these are things we all have to work at. We have to talk about it. Do you know the number of houses that are being set up in the United Kingdom for people,

battered wives? Mm hmm. There is a lot of violence in men and in women but the violence is there. Let's talk about it. It's our handicap, it's our fragility. We need help. Let's do it, let's go into it. We need to be freed from these powers of violence and the powers of fear. So the Erics of this world, they lead us into a community. Eric needs community. Assistants need community because if we don't have community, we can use handicapped people or people with disabilities to have power over them, or to have an emotional relationship. I am not there because I need to be loved. It's super to be there to be loved but I'm not there. I am there to help create a community where people can stand up, assistants and people with disabilities, stand up to rejoice in their humanity, to create places of celebration and peace because that is church. Church is the mystery or the discovery that those parts of the body which are the weakest and the most fragile are indispensable. Why are they indispensable? Because their cry to be loved will help others to answer their cry and become men and women of compassion. That is the church, a place of compassion, a place of forgiveness, where we are united in the same and we then become mission because we are men and women, very different with all our fragilities and disabilities, where we can sing, it is good to be alive.

Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)