**Draft paper: L’Arche in the world**

**Introduction**

‘The world you are inheriting is a world which desperately needs a new sense of brotherhood and human solidarity. It is a world which needs to be touched and healed by the beauty and richness of God’s love.’[[1]](#footnote-1) So said Pope John Paul II in 2002, and his words still have resonance today: we are in a world ever in need of human solidarity. I am going to suggest that the lived experience of solidarity in communities such as L’Arche can bring the healing touch of God, and, if allowed, it can also become a significant beacon of light for the world. As Jean Vanier would say, the L’Arche experience of community helps us all to become truly human.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this paper I am going to present two areas of promise and two questions of challenge. The promises: I will argue that the common life shared in L’Arche communities can enlighten the world in two specific areas: first, when the community values each person for his or her own sake and as a worker in God’s vineyard the community heals the wounds of loneliness and feelings of redundancy. This is a witness of solidarity for the world, not just for the members of the community; second, when the community shows the importance of the everyday little details of love the community touches on the real possibility of holiness. This is a witness for the world and for personal relationships, not just for the community. And now the challenges: I am going to point to two significant dangers for communities such as L’Arche: first, that like the Ark L’Arche communities can become closed up as a refuge, in the case of disability a refuge from discrimination, rather than prophetic witnesses to authentic human community and solidarity; and second, that fuelled by their success in the world these communities risk becoming simply exemplars of good social care rather than witnesses to the possibilities of the action of grace in our lives.

One caveat: I do not aim to romanticise or idealise L’Arche communities here: there is a reality about community – and I am using the word ‘community’ in a particular theological sense which I will explain in a moment - that accepts we are all on a journey towards holiness and this journey requires constant reflection and conversion. Moreover L’Arche communities are made up of human beings who, like all human beings, live complicated and sometimes messy lives and are ever in need of grace. Nevertheless the living out of community as a place of relationships, vulnerabilities, growth, change, solidarity and dignity is a theological phenomenon and as a theological phenomenon it has a power that merely social phenomena do not have.

**Areas of promise**

**First, wanted for my own sake**

Theology tells us that each person is wanted by God for his or her own sake. In the gospels Jesus looks at a person and addresses them by name: Simon Peter, Martha, Mary, Zacchaeus, Thomas, Matthew, ‘follow me’. We are each called by name. Theology tells us that each of us has been gifted with a particular task in the building up of the kingdom: we are all workers in God’s vineyard. [[3]](#footnote-3) Certainly as scripture shows when a person is called by God for a particular task the initial reaction may be ‘why me?’ particularly if the person sees themselves as weak or disabled. Nevertheless, as Jacob the lame[[4]](#footnote-4) comes to see, as Moses the stammerer[[5]](#footnote-5) finds out, as Naaman the leper[[6]](#footnote-6) discovers, as Paul with ‘a thorn in the flesh’[[7]](#footnote-7) explains, we all share in God’s work.[[8]](#footnote-8) And perhaps it takes the simple hearted, the child Samuel to be able to respond instinctively not ‘why me?’ but ‘here I am’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

When Jean Vanier speaks about community he speaks about it not as a place of work but as a place of relationships.[[10]](#footnote-10) Community is, he says, ‘a religious phenomenon’ because God is present and God has chosen and called its members.[[11]](#footnote-11) All its members. In community the ‘here I am’ applies equally to every member of the community: not only to those who are primarily seen as there to support others. For those who simply see L’Arche as good ‘care in the community’ rather than community in its theological sense it may seem that living in community is simply a way for people with disabilities to avoid loneliness and to have something to do so that they have a sense of purpose. Job done. Well, we cannot say that feelings of loneliness or of being redundant are confined to people with disabilities; and you can be lonely in community. Loneliness is part of being human. Feeling redundant is a real fear for all of us. As Jean Vanier points out, he only really found out about loneliness in L’Arche when he encountered people who had suffered acute loneliness and he came to realise that apparently strong people are able to submerge feelings of loneliness by the masks of busy-ness and seeking recognition and success.[[12]](#footnote-12) For Vanier the L’Arche experience gives witness to the possibility of facing up to our shared human experiences, of not being afraid of the truth that we all go through times of loneliness and vulnerability. This is a real solidarity and one that can give hope to the world. Moreover, healing can come through authentic relationships, of loving and being loved, of belonging, of being wanted. Commitment to a constant conversion, to change and growth, to acceptance that each of us needs to be loved and is wanted for our own sakes, is part of the journey to becoming truly human.

Furthermore the ‘here I am’ and as Isaiah adds, ‘send me’ illustrates an important truth: that God wills to make people holy and save them not just individually but as a people, the People of God.[[13]](#footnote-13) Solidarity: we are all in this together. We are each called in our own particular way to grow in holiness.[[14]](#footnote-14) And part of this growth is to come to realize that God wants to speak to the world by our life: life is ‘a mission’.[[15]](#footnote-15) The ‘here I am Lord, send me’ is beautifully expressed by John Henry Newman who says, ‘God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission—I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next.....I am a link in a chain, a bond of connexion between persons’.[[16]](#footnote-16) No one is redundant: each of us has a job to do. And about this connection between people: as Pope Francis explains in his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate* ‘growth in holiness is a journey in community, side by side with others.’[[17]](#footnote-17) Holiness is not purely an individual affair: after all we believe in the communion of saints. Pope Francis speaks of the Church as a ‘great orchestra in which there is great variety’, where the Holy Spirit blends the variety into harmony. Each person is different. Each person brings their own special God-given gift to enrich the others.[[18]](#footnote-18) One of the insights from L’Arche is that each person has something to contribute not only to their community but to the world at large.

**Second, details of love**

When Pope Francis and Pope John Paul II speak about growing in holiness they both talk about the possibility of holiness in ordinary life and in helping others to grow in holiness.[[19]](#footnote-19) One of the characteristics of holiness is reflecting the presence of God in our lives[[20]](#footnote-20) and through L’Arche’s attention not only to people’s basic needs but also to their emotional and spiritual needs God can be truly present and active. And God is present in fun, in joy, in being with other people. The attitude of accompanying others that teaches us, as expressed by Pope Francis, to ‘remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other’[[21]](#footnote-21)is evident in communities where people work, live, celebrate and worship alongside each other. In recognising the equal dignity of each person regardless of capacities or abilities we recognise the sacred ground of the other, ground that is sacred precisely because God is there first. The community truly becomes a community when all its members realise how deeply they need the gifts of others and try to make themselves more transparent and more fruitful in the exercise of their own gift.

A community that grows in holiness in the small things – being attentive to others, small gestures of thanks, a smile, a walk in the park – that offers friendship, that accompanies in times of difficulty and joy, that creates a sense of belonging and being wanted can be a great witness to other small communities, to care home communities and people living with dementia and notably to the ‘domestic churches’ established through marriage and family life where, as the synod on the family discovered, there is often a lack of being with, a lessening of communication, a parcelling out of time into ‘my time’ and ‘quality time’. As Pope Francis says in his exhortation on holiness, quoting St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, real history is made by ordinary lives lived in holiness; many of us owe ‘decisive turning points in our personal lives’ to the witness of people hidden in history.

And now the challenges.

**Challenges**

**First, closing in**

Jean Vanier first opened his house to Raphael and Philippe and they began to share their lives together because Vanier was deeply affected by the difficulties and discrimination faced by people with disabilities. Today the many media reports tell us that there is still discrimination. Last year in 2017 the Equality and Human Rights Commission published a comprehensive evidence-based report called *Being Disabled in Britain: A Journey Less Equal.* As the Chair of the Commission David Isaac said following publication of the report ‘disabled people are being left behind in society, their life chances remain very poor, and public attitudes have changed very little’.[[22]](#footnote-22) One of the central themes of the report was that we should ‘put the rights of disabled people at the heart of our society’.[[23]](#footnote-23) L’Arche does indeed put people with disabilities at the heart of what they do; they create communities with a culture of shared lives. However the Ark is not just a refuge from the rain of discrimination.

This ties in with the second challenge.

**Second, becoming simply another care provider**

There is no doubt that L’Arche communities provide excellent and exemplary support for people with disabilities. Good care in the community. And in order to operate effectively and responsibly communities must work with social services, other social work departments, health authorities, health service providers. However, and it is here perhaps that professionalization as opposed to being professional may come in: yes we should all be properly trained, notably in theology, ethics and care. We should know about first aid, safeguarding and legislation such as the Mental Capacity Act. We should reflect on our competencies and practice. However it is all too easy to fall into professionalization by which I mean offering high quality person-centred support but with no hugs, no touch, since that transgresses professional care; no friendships since that transgresses the professional service user boundaries; no mutual forgiveness since that transgresses the vulnerable client care giver power balance; a wariness of worship together since that may transgress notions of tolerance. In working with other professionals and professional codes, obligations, care plans, keeping records, I suspect that there are already some tensions here. There may also be tensions between care giving that is unduly risk adverse yet at the same time encourages total freedom (your food has to be finely chopped to avoid the slightest risk of choking but you can engage in sexual relationships since this gives you freedom of expression), and care giving that is spontaneous yet promotes growing in the virtues.

But I would like to draw attention to one particular danger: there is much talk of high quality person-centred care. That is quite right and proper. However in communities such as L’Arche, is it not God-centred care that we should be aiming for even if that is counter-cultural? Person-centred care places the emphasis on enabling choice with little concern over the kind of choice: a freedom of indifference. Certainly helping people to make choices, to make their own life is good. But, as St Augustine explains, making the right choices is even better[[24]](#footnote-24). God-centred care inevitably has our true direction at heart because we find our true selves in God and in friendship with God, together in solidarity with others. Moreover the witness of love and solicitude for others and among the community is a powerful witness. But this witness also points to God, it is evangelisation: we love because God loved us first.

**To bring all this together.**

To go back to the ark. Yes it began as a refuge from the rain, from discrimination and poor treatment. But eventually Noah, his family and the animals all came out of the ark. However they did not go back to the ways things were. The inspiration of L’Arche is to shape a more human society by recognising the gifts and contributions of all people, especially those with disabilities. It is about a shared spirituality, shared forgiveness, celebrating together. It is solidarity in action, the kind that today’s world and today’s other communities such as the family truly need. I am thinking also in particular here about what people fear most, dementia, and how the good practice of L’Arche could really change the conversation about how we as a community share our lives with people who would otherwise feel isolated and stigmatised. The beauty of the vision of L’Arche is protected and enhanced by the fact that each community celebrates together and reflects on its practice and is open to growth and conversion. L’Arche has much to offer the world, but to do so sometimes it may need to come out of the ark and, as Pope Francis explains when he speaks about pastoral ministry, ‘be bold and creative in the task of evangelisation’.[[25]](#footnote-25) For those who suddenly face limits they think that faced with people who have always had limits they can learn something. What they learn is that those who they thought had limits had in fact endless possibilities. What we in return can give is opportunities such as today’s event here to be witnesses to the world and we can remind communities of the inspiration and the call to belonging that underpins their very existence. Of course the task of transforming the world is daunting. However it can never be in vain because it is first and foremost God’s work.

1. Pope John Paul II, *Homily,* 17th World Youth Day, 28 July, 2002, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jean Vanier, (1998) *Becoming Human* London: Darton, Longman and Todd. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pope John Paul II, *Christifidelis laici,* 1988, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Genesis 32:23-26 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Exodus 4:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 2 Kings 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 2 Corinthians 12:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 1 Corinthians 3:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 1 Samuel 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jean Vanier, (1979) *Community and Growth* London: Darton, Longman and Todd, p.25 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Vanier, *Community and Growth* p.44 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Vanier, *Becoming Human* Ch.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,* no. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,* no. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, 2018, 24, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. John Henry Newman ‘Meditations on Christian Doctrine’ (1893) Part I.5 in *Meditations and Devotions* (2010) I. Ker (ed) London: Darton, Longman and Todd [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, 2018, 141 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. General Audience, St Peter’s Square, 9 October, 2013, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millenio Ineunte,* 2001, 31; Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate* 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate* 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* 2013, 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/our-work/news/disability-progress-%E2%80%98littered-missed-opportunities-and-failures%E2%80%99 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Being Disabled in Britain*, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. St Augustine, *Revisions* I.9.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)