

Who Cares?

by Thérèse Vanier

PREVIOUSLY I've written about the Sermon on the Mount and statements in Saint Paul about weakness and strength; and then I tackled the question of who, ultimately, is handicapped when it comes to trying to live God's kingdom. I believe that the people who are the most handicapped in this regard are actually those of us who think that we are normal. The question, then, is whether or not we care enough about God's kingdom to find a way into it alongside people who are poor, weak, and foolish. Can we risk discovering what foolish people are really like and in what ways they can confound the strong? It becomes very paradoxical; but then we know that Christianity happens to be the big paradox: in dying we rise again.

An important document has been put out by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches: *The Unity of the Church and the Handicapped in Society*. One of the points made was that the handicapped can be marginalized in the Church just as they are in society. One of the questions the paper asks is, "Have we simply assumed that Christians should always be a highly organized, articulate, and mature group seeking to help others?" Or can there be another view? I suppose that's the same question that I've been trying to ask. Are we willing to be a community which integrates the weak and the inadequate as well as the strong and active?

One of the authors of the document was Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who was instrumental in the creation of the Church of South India which brought together a number of churches. He suggests there could well be a danger that the affluent may substitute for the reality of the poor as the bearers of a special gift something which is a projection of their own feelings of guilt. The upshot is that poverty becomes merely a problem to be solved or an affront to be eliminated because it's a reminder of our guilt. When that happens there is no possibility that in the meeting of the rich and poor something precious is passed both ways.

Now what are the needs of mentally handicapped people? The greatest need, if you are living at the level of your heart much more than at the level of your head, is the need for relationships. And so, if you are living in community with mentally handicapped people, you discover that they have a great capacity to love and to be loved and to be faithful. And once you

discover that, you also discover within yourself a need for love and to give love and to be faithful. We also discover how difficult it is and that we are not very good at doing it. Then we have to try to discover ways and means to learn to love and to learn to be faithful. So it is that in trying to meet the needs of our handicapped people we end up by meeting our own.

I have already mentioned that in our communities there are people of different Christian denominations. In the community in which I lived in London there have been Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, and, on one occasion, a Greek Orthodox. If you are mentally handicapped, one of your great needs is to feel that you belong and, in particular, you need to be a full member of your church. There is a great need for mentally handicapped people to relate to God and to Jesus as a person. We discover that we have the same need but often seek it out much less directly. One of the most important times in our houses is the evening when those who wish spend a little time praying together, often just sitting around the supper table. The simplicity of the prayers is very touching. The handicapped people pray for their families and by name for assistants who have come and gone. You get a great litany of names, people I'd completely forgotten about. But they remember and they pray for them. Once I heard somebody say, "Please God, help me to accept to be who I am." Could you ask for a more profound prayer?

But I've talked so much about life in our communities that it sounds quite closed in. What about contacts between our communities and the world at large? I once attended a meeting at which an Anglican bishop was chairing a study day which had brought together church leaders from a number of different denominations: the institutional church on the one hand and grassroots communities (mostly Christian) on the other. In the course of the meeting the bishop said that the desire for personal growth present in all the members of our communities meant that they wanted to have the Gospel preached to them. He said that he always felt that he was affirmed when he came to our community because our people were hungry to hear the word of God. I thought, "Well, yes, it is important, first of all, that priests and ministers come to speak the Word of God to us, because we need it. But maybe it is also important that we help priests and ministers to be affirmed in who they are and what we need from them."

Over time I have been involved in two situations with handicapped people that gave me hope for greater Church unity. As you will have realized by now, I believe that hope for our society lies in our being quite foolish about certain things. I was very interested when the National Society for Mentally Handicapped People, Children and Adults, called a meeting to

look at the religious needs of the mentally handicapped. At that meeting there were Anglicans, Orthodox, Catholics, Baptists, United Reform, and Methodists. It is not all that common in England for so many denominations to be represented; yet here they were, united on the question of mentally handicapped people. What was really heartening was that we were talking, not just about the spiritual needs of mentally handicapped people—what we can do for them—but we were beginning to talk about what they can do for us. It gives me hope that Christians of different denominations could sit down and ask themselves what mentally handicapped people do for our society.

Another recent event that also gave me hope was the meeting of L'Arche people in Liverpool. Liverpool is a suffering city; there is a high level of unemployment. So what hope can be found there? One great hope is the friendship between the Anglican and the Catholic bishops. In this huge city where the Mersey comes to the sea, there are two cathedrals. Both of them were built relatively recently, and not very far from each other. If you are at one you can see the other, and you can also look down on this great sprawling city, most of whose inhabitants couldn't care less about either one. In fact there's a song about Liverpool's having a cathedral to spare. Significant, I think, is that the street—it's not a very long one—that links these two cathedrals is Hope Street. We had our meetings, first in one cathedral and then in the other, and so we marched up and down Hope Street!

The two bishops, because they are good friends and men for whom Liverpool means a great deal, always act together whenever there is anything that requires some kind of statement from the churches. Once, when there were riots they went out onto the streets. One of them I am told was literally pinned against a wall by a police jeep; he didn't find it a particularly pleasant experience. There was hope in that city, and one of the reasons was that these two men act together. This doesn't mean that the two churches are any closer to each other theologically, but they can act together with the people to bring about reconciliation.

Both bishops attended one of our gatherings during which we said a prayer that went something like this:

Lord help us to be close to people who are poor. We know that in this contact we will discover our poverty and weakness, our need for you. Grant that we may realize that each of us is the Church and take responsibility for that fact. Give hope to your Church, renew your Church through the liberation of the gifts of the poor.

We asked God to help us to know that each of us is the Church, for it is easy to criticize where you do not belong. Some years ago, when there was even more criticism of the institutional Church than now, one particular group I heard of decided to “bury the Church.” They came into their meeting room where a coffin had been set up to represent the Church. They all filed by to pay their respects to the institutional Church before burying it. As each one looked into the coffin, he saw himself because in the bottom of the coffin was a mirror. Someone had been very clever.

Let me finish with the words of a mentally handicapped woman from one of our French communities who redefined mentally handicapped: “The cells in my brain didn’t develop very well and they fell into my heart, and that’s why I like welcoming people.” ❧