Sermon on Christmas Day 2015

Earlier this week I had the privilege of reading Ian Brown’s moving and troubling piece in the Globe and Mail called Jean Vanier’s Comfort and Joy: subtitled, ‘Find the places of hope.’

Vanier is a famous Canadian who left his Navy commission in the 1950’s, earned a PhD. in Theology and Philosophy and then quit lecturing at the University of Toronto in 1964 in order to live with two mentally disabled men in a house in Trosly, France a few miles north of Paris.

From this grew L’Arche a worldwide community of houses for the mentally challenged; places and communities where the mentally challenged are treated as peers by their aides e.g. no decorations chosen without consulting the residents.

Brown is a well-known Canadian journalist and writer who has a mentally disabled son. It was Brown’s son, Walker, who provided the contact point between Vanier, a devout Catholic and Brown an Atheist.

In the article Brown starts this way: “I don’t want to overamp this, but at the end of a long dark year – after Charlie Hebdo, the Paris massacre, San Bernardino, thousands murdered by terrorists in Africa and the Middle East, passenger planes blown out of the sky, unstoppable climate change, unprecedented rates of species extinction, 12,747 U.S. gun deaths (and counting) in a single year – I can’t help wondering, and I don’t think I’m the only one: Is this the way we’re going to live now? Surrounded by threats, terrified but resigned, exhausted but furious? Welcome to the holiday season.”

The article is a back and forth between Vanier’s musings and Brown going back to his room to consider what Vanier says and if there is some way to live now that is hopeful without being delusionary!

Without saying so, what Vanier affirms in Christian language and what Brown find in his own a-religious musings is, I think, a direct implication of this Great feast we celebrate this morning!

We find our hope in a surprising way, a fresh realization that we can’t fix the world but that we can, in our own small way tap into love, joy and peace by opening to them and practicing them; and when we do we find that the love we offer each other is, indeed, counter-intuitively, world changing.

It changes *our* world, for one! It changes the ones we love, for another; and in a fresh realization that we are small, finite creatures that is saying a lot and, truthfully, doing a lot!

And it would seem that at the heart of what we celebrate is God saying, “to hell with changing the world, I’m going to go small, I’m going to become an infant and let the chips fall where they may.”

Of course, I would argue, this act of “going small” by the Word that shaped all things becoming, as an infant, one who had no words to utter, is indeed to save the world writ large, for a central reason I’ll mention in a minute but for now, it’s a kind of “giving up” on the macro, it’s God resigning the divine commission to run the world efficiently; it’s God saying, “you go ahead with your theology and philosophy lectures without me” I’m shacking up with a peasant family a few miles south of Jerusalem.

Let’s see what happens if I learn to make porridge and shave wood, walk the dusty hills and learn to think with a human mind; let’s see what happens if I learn to receive human love and give it in return!

This year, Vanier was awarded the $2.3-million Templeton Prize, awarded for “an exceptional contribution to affirming life’s breadth of spiritual dimensions.” Mother Teresa and the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu had won it before him.

The great irony, of course, is that he won it by becoming small, by giving up, if you will on the world’s way of doing things for nothing could be further from the world’s way of doing things than to spend all your considerable cultural and intellectual capital (and Vanier has a lot!) on those who most obviously have nothing to give to civilization’s growth!

And so it is with God, God saves the world by trying not to save it! By giving up the divine prerogative to make things the way God wants them.

But, and here’s why we can say this is the feast when our future is assured, by becoming this way with us God becomes this way for us and what God becomes can’t be undone.

God has now given the divine nature to us in the weakness of humankind and this can never be undone but becomes a persistent presence that keeps whispering out of far-flung mangers, little homes in Trosly and possibly here this morning; maybe in some kindness and “I love you” that you offered this morning.

It really is a merry, wonderful morning when we rest into our inability, isn’t it?

Then the little things we do become analogous to the “little one” God became for us this blessed morn!