

## A REFLECTION ON TROUBLING MATTERS BY FR LAURENCE FREEMAN

Fr Jock writes: 'It's been another week when it's not been easy to hold one's head high as a Catholic, what with the findings of the IICSA (Independent Enquiry into Child Sexual Abuse) Enquiry being published in London, and the Vatican publishing the Report into the abuse perpetrated by the American Cardinal, Theodore McCarrick. By chance, I was sent this week the following reflection by the Benedictine monk, Laurence Freeman, written during Lent. He, like me, had been close to, and very much inspired by Jean Vanier, and was similarly reeling at the revelations of his abuse of some of those he had accompanied spiritually.'

**Second Saturday in Lent:** There are no heroes anymore, only celebrities. This is how it seems, anyway, in a culture where we project perfection on those we put on pedestals. Then, the exposure of human weakness, sinfulness, or historical misdemeanor, incites mob rage on social media and a public execution on a virtual scaffold. How are the mighty fallen and how, secretly, as the media sales show, we enjoy this disgrace, their fall from grace.

Leaving the personal sin aside for a moment, the blame for this social state of affairs falls on both sides. There are those who create false gods and then idolize them. And there are the idols who exploit the privileges they receive, power, attention, wealth. Then there are idols who do not want the privileges but just passively go along with it. Anyone who feels they are being idolized has a responsibility to declare and show they are only human. When Cornelius fell at Peter's feet and worshipped him, Peter replied 'Get up. I am only a human like you'. His own previous weaknesses were of course part of the story by then.

There is a lot of forgiveness, repentance, and new beginnings in the Bible stories. But no perfect characters. Well, we would say there is one; but holiness and authenticity are better terms to describe him than perfection, which is more of a mathematical term than a human one. Perfection dehumanizes us. Wholeness, integral humanity, loving-kindness, non-violence: these are the qualities we see in him. They are not superhuman or supernatural, but simply fully human, revealing our own actual true nature. What we can be and what we are called to be *is* our true nature. We are not perfect, but we can aspire to wholeness.

And what is this elusive wholeness we feel ineluctably drawn to through the never-ending healing of our serial imperfections and failures to be our true selves? Freedom from self-deception, freedom to love to the fullest human capacity, unflinching clarity of mind and a gentleness of heart taken to the most vulnerable degree, the humility to try again.

Moses was refused entry into the Promised Land because his faith had once faltered, and he had failed as a leader. King David lusted after another man's wife and killed her husband so he could have his way with her. Solomon the Wise ended his day as an old lecher with thousand women in his harem. Elijah the Prophet slaughtered 850 of his religious opponents after he had showed them the superiority of his God. And so on, until our own times and the revelations of endemic sin and hypocrisy in the religious leaders of many traditions in whom people put their faith and, perhaps unconsciously, expected them to be more perfect than they were. Not surprisingly, the only sinners whom Jesus pointed angrily to were not the public sinners but the one who hid their sins under their religious persona.

Lent is not a time to play at being more religious but for purifying our religiousness until it better conforms to the truth about ourselves. This cannot be done firstly in public but only in our inner room with the door closed.

**Third Sunday in Lent:** Today's Gospel is about Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman. She was a marginalized person both with regard to him as a Jew and to her own village because of her marital history. She did not put him or anyone else on a pedestal. Maybe this is why they became so intimate in telling the truth about themselves to each other.

The first time I heard Jean Vanier teach, when he gave us a memorable John Main Seminar in 1990, it was about this story. I was moved and enlightened by how deeply he identified with it and spoke from a place of humble, spiritually intelligent wisdom. It was a difficult time in my own life and in a couple of personal meetings he gave me insightful and healing advice that helped me continue my path.

Over the years Jean's friendship with the meditation community continued and just a few years ago he gave his second seminar from Trosly. I cannot deny or rewrite the history of the grace of his connection or

the good he did. He had a profound sense that religion was not about control but healing and leading people to fullness of life; and that each person, however marginal, was wholly worthwhile. His theme was human woundedness; and, as the more he expounded it, more people called him a saint. I don't think he wanted to be put on a pedestal; but, although people might have wondered what his own handicaps and wounds are, he was widely regarded as better than most people. This made his posthumous fall from grace all the more an awful surprise.

When I heard the truth, about the pattern of his sexual relations with a number of women whom he was guiding, I disbelieved it. But the evidence and the conclusions drawn from it are now heard and clear. L'Arche must be commended for the independent enquiry that is conducted into these cases where lasting harm was done to vulnerable women. He was, it seems, not just a wounded but a wounding healer. The way L'Arche leaders have handled this revelation about their founder reflects the best aspects of his own teaching though not of his personal behavior. In time I feel L'Arche will be stronger and wiser. I asked a Buddhist friend recently for his perspective on this breaking of an icon. He mentioned the number of teachers in his own tradition who had also been exposed in similar ways. On one of them the Dalai Lama spoke out because of a personal connection. He said how easily the power and the influence given to gurus in their tradition could go corrupt, as power of any kind risks doing. But, he added, how disappointing and how inexcusable is the failure, when this power gives the one who holds it a sense of exceptional privileges and entitlements and exempts them from the normal standards of decency and probity. Before tomorrow, when I conclude this sad reflection, I would ask to reflect on the issue in itself. And also on the language we use to think and talk about it. How can we respond to the revelation of sinfulness in those brothers and sisters in whom we once naively saw only grace?

**Monday:** Religious status or spiritual influence in any power structure is a source of temptation. Most of the dark side of the history of Christianity, since the edict of Milan in AD 313 (when the Empire stopped persecuting the followers of Jesus), can be attributed to giving in to temptation of power. This was the illusion that Jesus so clearly saw through and refused during his own Lent.

I find it hard to believe that Jean Vanier was tempted by this kind of power.

I don't know his inner world, but on the basis of his teaching and personality I would venture to say his self-inflicted wound that led him to wound others was not crude hunger for power but self-deception around his own handicap and hunger for intimacy. Clearly, he *did* have power and misused it with people whom he should have been caring for, not using it. But, my guess, is that it was not driven by the desire for power or acclaim. It was closer to what he often spoke about: weakness and handicaps. When there are not acknowledged they become dark forces.

But does this even make a difference? What matters for those he hurt is not his motivation but the consequences they suffered and the attention they now receive. I am not sure; it is uncomfortable for anyone to reflect and get it right. But trying to understand it helps us to correct the mistakes we make about the important meaning of holiness. All religion proposes the idea of holiness, the enlightened, liberated state of individuals who have plunged more fully into the processes of human transformation. We may assume this process of sanctification is complete in someone when it is anything but finished. Don't we all have good and bad, self-less and self-sacrificing, enlightened, and shadow sides? When it is obvious that our process is not complete, no one can call us 'holy'. If it is more advanced, people can jump to the conclusion we have arrived. And then up goes another pedestal and our human clay is re-used to make a plaster saint. The only safe approach is to call no one holy (for Catholics not even the Holy Father). Jesus warned us to call no one 'Father' or 'Teacher' or 'Master'. There is only one Father and only one Teacher. Only God is holy. Only God is good. His warning to 'judge not' includes over-positive judgements of others as well as the total condemnations we like to make. It is complicated when someone we have learned from and whom we saw as a friend is exposed and we see how they harmed others. The first concern then is caring for those who have been hurt, the human collateral damage. Second, is being careful (for our sake and for the truth) how we judge the offender. Even if, relatively speaking, we have only a splinter in our own eye, we need to take it out before we can see everything clear. For example, how far were we, even unconsciously, facilitating a lust for power or the game of self-deception, which became, in a basically good person, an irresistible temptation?

It is hard when heroes, especially our spiritual ones, are shamed and downgraded. So maybe it is good that there are no heroes anymore. Or only one hero. It is better and safer for all concerned.