

Jean Vanier Templeton Talk

May 18, 2015, St Martin in the Fields, London

Good evening everyone: Reverend Doctor Sam Wells, Jennifer Templeton Simpson, Heather Templeton Dill, Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

First of all, I wish to say a word of thanks, to Dr Templeton and to his wonderful family, and of course to the judges. Thank you for this magnificent award that you have given in recognition of the beauty and the value of people with intellectual disabilities. This beauty has been revealed as we have lived together in L'Arche and accompanied each other in Faith and Light. People with intellectual disabilities are the ones who are the heart of our communities, they are the ones who have revealed to so many people - families, assistants and friends - their human and spiritual gifts, and they are the ones who have inspired the fruitful growth of Faith and Light and L'Arche throughout the world. It is to them this prize will be given, so that many more people with intellectual disabilities throughout the world may grow in greater inner freedom, discover their fundamental value as human beings and children of God. They in turn will be able to help many so-called "normal" people, imprisoned by our cultures orientated towards power, winning, and individual success, to discover what it means to be human.

L'Arche and Faith and Light have been part of a real revolution; so often in the past people with intellectual disabilities were seen as a source of shame for their parents, or even in some situations, as a punishment from God. Their parents and carers have often been seen as wonderful people, even holy, for looking after people "like them". Today it is becoming clear that it is people with intellectual disabilities who can humanize us, and heal us, if we enter into a real friendship with them. They are in no way a punishment of God but rather a path towards God.

Today I want to thank all of you who belong to this beautiful and historic church of St Martin-in-the-Fields for allowing this ceremony to be held here in your church, known for its openness and welcome of the homeless. Thank you to your Vicar Samuel Wells who in his book "A Nazareth Manifesto" reveals that Jesus came to teach us, not just to *do* things *for* people who are homeless, but **to be with** them. Yes, that is the real secret of the church, and the secret of our communities, and hopefully one day it will be the secret of all humanity, **to be with**.

To be with is to live side by side, it is enter into mutual relationships of friendship and concern. It is to laugh and to cry together, it is to mutually transform each other. Each person becomes a gift for the other, revealing to each other that we are all part of a huge and wonderful family, the family of God. We are all profoundly the same as human beings, but also profoundly different, we all have our special gifts and unique mission in our lives. This wonderful family, from its earliest origins and since then with all those who have been spread over this planet from generation to

generation, is composed of people of different cultures and abilities, each of whom have their strength and their weakness, and each of whom is precious.

The evolution of this family from the earliest days until today certainly has entailed wars, violence, and the endless seeking of domination and more possessions. It is also an evolution wherein prophets of peace have continued to cry out for “peace, peace”, calling people together to meet each other as beautiful and precious. Many of us in our world continue to yearn for peace, and for unity. However so many of us remain stuck in our cultures where we are caught up fighting to win and to have more. How can we become free of the culture that incites people, not to responsibilities to the human family and to the common good, but to individual success and to domination over others? How can we get rid of the tentacles and the shackles of this culture, to become free to be ourselves, free of our oversized egos and compulsions, free to love others as they are, different yet the same?

To **be with** is also to eat together, as Jesus invited us: “When you give a meal don’t invite your family, friends or rich neighbor, but invite the poor and the lame, the disabled and the blind, and you shall be blessed.” To become blessed, says Jesus, is to invite the poor to our table (Luke 14). Let us be very clear that it is not the guests who are blessed because they enjoy good food at a party, but rather the host is blessed by his encounter with the poor. Why is the host called blessed? Isn’t it because his heart will be transformed as he is touched by the wonderful gifts of the spirit hidden in the hearts of the poor? This has been the gift of my own personal journey and those of many others. We have been led by those who are weak onto the road of the blessedness of love, of humility and of peacemaking.

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To be transformed, first we must **meet people** who are **different**, not our family, friends and neighbours who are like us. Let us meet across differences – intellectual, cultural, national, racial, religious and other differences. Then from this initial meeting we can begin to build community and places of belonging together.

Community is never called to be a closed group, where people are hiding behind barriers of group identity, interested only in their own welfare or their own vision, as if it is the only one or the best. It cannot be a prison or a fortress. Unfortunately, for a long time this was the rather closed vision of different churches and religions. Each one thought itself the best, with all knowledge and truth. Hence, there was no communication or dialogue between them. Isn’t there a danger that we close ourselves up in our own professional, religious or family groups where we never meet those who are different?

Community on the other hand is a place of togetherness in spite of differences, of people united in love and open to all other people. A community then is like a fountain or a shining light, where a way of life is being lived and revealed, open to others and attractive to them. It is a place of peace, revealing a way to peace and to unity for the human family.

Community is a place of belonging where each person can grow to become fully him or herself. It is belonging for becoming. We belong to each other so that each member can become more human, more loving, more free, more open to others, particularly to those who are different. When each member can develop their unique gifts and help others to develop theirs, members are no longer in competition but in collaboration, in cooperation and in mutual support. To become is not to prove I am better than you, but rather supporting together each other in opening up our hearts. Thus community is a place of transformation. Community is place of belonging where each one may be transformed and find human fulfillment.

What alternatives do we have for human growth? Belonging which is too rigid stifles becoming; on the other hand too much individual growth or becoming without belonging can become fighting to get to the top, or else it can become loneliness and anguish. To win is always to be lonely, and of course nobody wins for long.

Community then is not a closed group but a way of life that helps each person to grow to human fulfillment. The two key elements of community are **mission** and **mutual caring** for each one. We come together for a purpose that is the mission, and also to be a sign of love or rather to grow in love for each another. It is a mission that defines why we are together, and being together we learn to love one another. At L'Arche and Faith and Light our mission is to provide community where the most fragile person is the heart of the community, and can grow in their humanity and in their capacity to love.

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Community then becomes a place where we learn how to love each other. To grow in love is a long and difficult journey, and it takes time. L'Arche and Faith and Light are not just places where we do good to people with intellectual disabilities. They are places of relationship, where we grow in love together. But what is love? This word has been flung around for all sorts of emotional experiences as well as acts of bravery of soldiers, fighting out of love for their country. For me, love is to recognize that the other person is a person, is precious, is important and has value. Each one has a gift to bring to others. Each one has his or her mission in the larger family of humanity. Each one reveals the secret face of God.

We need each other, to grow in this sacred love, which implies love of those who are different, of those who get my goat and drive me up the wall, because of difference of ideas, temperament, culture, approach and so on. Community is a place where we rub up against each other's sore spots. Hopefully we can in this way rub off some of the tiresome and sour traits of our characters, so that we can become our real selves. To love then is to see in the other, the heart of the person hidden under all that annoys us. That is why to love, in the words of St Paul, is to be patient, which is to wait, and to hold on. It is to believe and to trust that under all the mess in the other person is their secret being, their heart.

In L'Arche some of the people we welcome have deep anguish and even violence. They are difficult to live with in community. We have to be patient and to believe that their true self will gradually emerge. We also have to be patient with ourselves as well, and believe that if we try to love and become open to a spirituality of love, our own true selves will also gradually emerge. If we love, if we truly love other people and believe in them, then they are transformed, and **we** also will be transformed. Community then is a place of healing, of transformation, and of humanizing people. It's a place where we are commissioned to grow in love, and in forgiveness, and this is real work. If you don't want to be transformed and to grow in love, then don't partake in community! When we find the strength to accept people as they are and to meet them in their secret being, they open us up to love.

People who are not endowed with intellectual gifts have on the other hand unique and marvelous gifts of the heart, and can open us to love in a special way. They are not crying out for advancement or knowledge or power, but simply for a personal relationship of love that will give them life and meaning. Let me tell you the story of Francis, a young boy with an intellectual disability, who was making his first communion in a church in Paris. After the service there was a wonderful family celebration. His godfather and uncle went over to Francis' mother and said "Wasn't it a beautiful service? The only sad thing is that he didn't understand anything at all." Tears came into the eyes of the mother, and Francis recognized them. He said to her: "Don't cry mummy, Jesus loves me just as I am."

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A personal relationship grows as we have fun together. "I am happy to live with you". Their simple hearts, their freedom to be themselves, to love unashamedly, and to be free in being foolish, draw our own hearts to rise up, to become free to become, I dare say, foolish. Isn't there something in each of us which longs to become like children and to have fun together like children? Isn't this foolishness the sign of the liberation of our hearts? It is for this gift of liberation of our hearts to love, that I thank from the bottom of my heart my companions of 50 years, people with intellectual disabilities, for all that they have taught me and given me. It is in their names and with them that I accept the 2015 Templeton Prize.

Thank you and peace to you.

Jean Vanier