

Among the many items highlighted by the media this past week were two events, which, while quite different, I couldn't help but bring into relationship with one another. The first was a birth and the second a death. Both spoke of love and life, family and the mystery at the heart of every human being.

For Harry and Meghan, as for most young couples, the birth of their first child was a marvel, a miracle, a gift beyond their expectations. Mother and father were all but ecstatic in presenting their child to the world. One can only hope and pray that he will live up to the hopes accompanying his birth and that he will continue to be for his parents a source of pride and joy.

The death that was much commented on this week was that of Jean Vanier, a truly remarkable human being who, in all that he did, was inspired by the person, teaching and example of Jesus. Raised in a deeply Catholic, French Canadian family, he only slowly came to discern his true vocation. At the age of 35 he visited an institution in France, which housed some 30 mentally disabled men, whom, he said, he was both attracted to, and repelled by. He was touched by their loneliness and by their desire for acceptance and love.

The experience inspired him to invite two men with intellectual disabilities to live with him in a small and somewhat dilapidated cottage not far from Paris.

He named their home, L'Arche, the ark. The reference is to Noah's ark and to what it represented for those who, by being in it, escaped death. That was in 1964. Today there are more than 150 L'Arche communities in 38 countries. The second L'Arche was founded just north of us in Richmond Hill, in 1968.

The great realization to which Vanier came in his experience at L'Arche was that the relationship developing between him and the two men was a mutual one. It was not just him doing something for them; they were doing something for him. That something had to do with his sense of life and of himself. They helped him to see and to accept his own vulnerability, as well as his need for love and tenderness. Even more importantly, they helped him to recognize the dignity and value of each and every human being. Not only are we all members of the one human family, each of us has a gift to contribute to that family's well-being.

Vanier later described Raphael and Philippe, the two men with whom he lived at L'Arche, as "teachers of tenderness." They had, he said qualities of "wonderment, spontaneity and directness" that many so-called "normal" people lack. Their qualities taught him to begin to love from the heart.

The heart for Vanier symbolizes love and compassion, tenderness and caring, things that marked the life of Jesus. The Gospels are full of stories of him

reaching out to the poor and the sick, to those who are pushed to the margins of society. Vanier often referred to Matthew's account of the last judgment. We will be judged, it affirms, by the way we have or have not come to the aid of those who are hungry or thirsty, in prison or homeless.

The love of which Vanier speaks is not primarily a feeling. It involves emotions, but it is much more than emotions. It starts by seeing others as human beings, as persons; it is deepened by listening to, and affirming them, opening oneself to them. While recognizing the importance of providing food, shelter and other necessities, Vanier insisted that our encounter with the poor and the vulnerable be respectful and mutual, that it be open to what is deepest in them. "Everybody is beautiful," he loved to say, "Everybody."

Among the many books that Jean Vanier wrote is a lyrical and devotional meditation on the Gospel of John, a Gospel that celebrates in a special way the love of God revealed in Jesus. "God so loved the world," John says, "that he sent his only Son and the Son so loved us that he gave himself for us." At the Last Supper Jesus declared, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." He then adds, "By this will everyone know that you are my disciples that you have love for one another." John Vanier did this is such an all-

embracing way that he has been celebrated not only by Christians and other religious people but by those everywhere who care about humanity and its future.

In his final message to members of L'Arche, Vanier writes, "God is good and whatever happens it will be the best. I am happy and give thanks for everything. My deepest love to each one of you."

Among the many statements made on the occasion of Vanier's death, one by a core member of L'Arche, London was eloquent in its simplicity. Speaking of his many encounters with Vanier, he said, "He always made me feel that I could do things. He made me feel loved."

The CBC radio program "Ideas" did a two-hour interview with Vanier a few years ago. They replayed it this week and have made it available on their web site.

Birth and death and between them the life that we are called to live and to make fruitful for others. In the course of his life, Jean Vanier was able to make a significant difference in the lives of many people, beginning with those whom we tend to avoid or to push to the margins of our consciousness and of our society. May this good and gentle man find in God the fullness of peace, love and tenderness that he sought to show to everyone he met.