

**Reflection, April 25-26, 2015 , 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**Saint Joseph's Parish**

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Just over a year ago, I had the wonderful opportunity to attend a retreat / workshop led by Jean Vanier focused on the Gospel of John. A group of us, mostly long-term members of the International Federation of L'Arche communities, spent two two-week sessions reflecting on this Gospel. We met in Trosly-Breuil, the small French village where L'Arche began fifty years ago, staying at a retreat centre called La Ferme—the Farm.

The chapel at the centre of La Ferme is a renovated stone barn—which only a few decades ago, housed sheep and cattle. Perhaps two hundred metres to the north begins the vast Forest of Compeigne where, even today, hunters seek after the wild boar that live in the deep woods. La Ferme provides the perfect setting to contemplate these verses about the Good Shepherd. Even today, in that place, it is easy to imagine the sheep, the hired hand, the wolf, and the shepherd that inhabit Jesus' parable.

It is sometimes a bit difficult for us living in a large city in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to relate to the agricultural and fishing images that often come up in the scriptures. What exactly are we to make of this story of sheep, wolves and shepherds? Of course, there are many ways to understand the story; and over the centuries, right up to the present, many explanations have been offered.

Jean Vanier begins his own interpretation of this parable with a passage in the 34<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezekiel. Here, the prophet speaks God's condemnation of the false shepherds who have only looked after themselves rather than the poor and the weak entrusted to them. God promises to look after his people, sending a true shepherd, protecting them, nourishing them, keeping them safe from harm. The people to whom Jesus was speaking would have known this passage well and would have understood that Jesus was applying it to himself when he said "I am the good shepherd."

So, a true shepherd looks after the weak. A false shepherd exploits them, or at best ignores them. Jean Vanier updates this image by saying that a true society, a truly human society, looks after its weak, its most fragile members—cares for them, listens to their voice. In another gospel passage we hear that God has revealed his truth to the weak and hidden it from the strong who are caught up in a desire for power. So in honoring and in listening to its weakest members, a society honors and listens to

God. Such a society becomes a community whose members are bonded together in mutual caring—true shepherds to one another—its leaders protecting the weak and fragile who, in turn, and if allowed, will minister to them.

This may all seem a bit abstract, but, in fact, it is very simple and very real. Let's take a moment and look around. Look to your left and to your right. See who is sitting there. Look ahead. If you wish, turn around and look behind you. Look inward and see yourself.

How many strong leaders do you see? How many weak or fragile people? The truth is that at different moments each one of us is a leader, a shepherd. At other moments, we are weak. Sometimes we are both weak and strong in the very same moment. I know that this is certainly true for me. Does this ring true for you?

Here in the Saint Joe's community, we are regularly reminded of our dual call to recognize our own weakness and to share our strengths in the service of others. Some of us serve, like Peter and John in the Acts of the Apostles, in the Ministry of Healing Touch and caring for the sick. Others, also like Peter and John, proclaim God's word in ministries such as the lectors and sacramental preparation. Some volunteer at the Supper Table, or for the Women's Centre or in the Refugee Committee. Still others nourish us through the Eucharistic and music ministries. Many of us participate both as leaders and as members of other organizations outside the parish working to build a more human society.

This week, St Joe's will recognize the members of our community who are serving in one or more of the many ministries that allow us to care for one another and for others. Throughout the week I invite each of us to take the time to reflect on how God is calling us to be a shepherd, to share our gifts with others. Let's take a moment also to recognize the ways in which the members of our community and others are caring for us in our weakness. And let us give thanks for the ways in which the risen Jesus, the Good and True Shepherd, is leading us and protecting us at every moment.

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April 26, 2015