

Trosly, December 2001

« Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold a young girl will conceive and bear a son and shall call him Emmanuel, God-with-us. He shall not eat the cream of milk and honey. He shall refuse what is evil and choose what is good.» (Is 7:14)

Thank you for the many messages of love and communion. I want to wish you the peace and joy of Christmas. At the same time never before have I been so aware of the pain and brokenness in our societies: the conflict between Israel and Palestine, the pain of September 11th, the war in Afghanistan, the dire poverty, injustices and inequalities everywhere. Never before have I been so conscious of my own failings, inadequacies and brokenness. And never before have I been so grateful to Jesus for l'Arche and Faith and Light as little signs of love in the world.

Over the past few months I have given a number of retreats and talks. I always share about how those who are weak and fragile can heal us of our prejudices and need for power and recognition and lead us on the road of peace. They do not seek power but cry out for understanding and friendship. Their cry for friendship is like a warm paste that bonds us together. Their very weakness, the weakness of us all, is like a call for community. People are thirsting for such a message which can give them hope and life. The world is sick with rivalry, misunderstandings, the search for power and elitism. Let me quote from **“Expecting Adam”** by Martha Beck: ***“This is the story of two Harvard driven academics who found out in the midpregnancy that their unborn son would be retarded. They decided to allow their baby to be born. What they did not realize is that they themselves were the ones who would be “born”, infants in a new world where Harvard professors are the slow learners and retarded babies are the master teachers”.***

Our communities are built on tenderness, goodness, respect for each person, especially the weakest and are a sign of hope for the world. Yet our communities are sometimes being hurt in richer countries by more and more stringent rules et regulations. Law makers and local authorities can sometimes be frightened of communities because they are frightened of cults, of people being brainwashed. Yet we all need community, a place of belonging, a place where we can celebrate and be committed to each other, a place where we learn to accept ourselves as we are and to forgive. Our societies, inspired by a strong sense of individualism, are fearful of commitment. That is why family life, marriage, community life are in difficulty today. Many of our communities are in difficulty, lacking funding and committed assistants. Some people living in l'Arche are even wondering whether a life long commitment to l'Arche is possible, whether it can be a vocation for them, whether there will be a place for them when they grow older.

Our world is going through a period of deep insecurity. It is not surprising that this insecurity penetrates also into our family and community life. Christmas reminds us that God so loved the world that God sent his beloved Son into the world, to heal us, save us and give us the security that comes from God's love and from our mutual love. Then we discover the importance of doing little things with gentleness and forgiveness and so create community. One of the great dangers of our world is division which comes from rivalry, a need to prove that we are better than others, the refusal to see and accept the violence in one's own heart. All this turns into conflict, hate and war. We are all called to become men and women of peace and of forgiveness in order to built communities where we trust one another. Isn't there the danger also for our communities and for each one of us of losing our vision because of our busyness and because of the powerful forces which want to institutionalise us, which are suspicious of any sense of belonging, which proclaim that gift of self and love are impossible and which make us insecure?

Today more than ever before we need trust: to trust in God and to trust in the quiet, gentle power of the weak. In so many ways the world has lost its meaning. Many do not know where they are heading. The weak are being hurt and rejected. As I grow older, my love for those who are weak grows and deepens. I have found my harbour with them in l'Arche. My joy will be to die and be buried here where I have lived now for 37 years. At the Val, where I have been living for the past 20 years, (I was in the first house of l'Arche for 16 years, then in La Forestière for my sabbatical year). I am grateful for the way I am loved and helped by each one in the house. Even if I do not sleep in the Val, I have most of my meals there and relax there after the meals and pray there each evening. We celebrate together, and sometimes talk about serious matters together. Tonight, the Saturday before Christmas, we all went to sing Christmas carols and distribute chocolates in each of the other houses and to some neighbours and friends: it is a way of announcing the coming of Jesus, Prince of Peace, the One who comes to give us the strength to love.

I am happy to be here, to grow old here together with others in l'Arche. Our life is simple and human: meeting people, smiling at people, taking time with people, welcoming visitors, eating and praying together. I do not do the washing up after the meals as I used to as my house allows me to take time to sit down and read the newspaper. That is what Jesus is calling me to today. To rejoice and be together in family, in community. Even though I am still called to travel for L'Arche and Faith and Light - soon to Malaysia, Haiti, Santo Domingo - I try to keep my eyes and heart fixed on Jesus, Mary and Joseph in Nazareth. Jesus lived there for more than 30 years a simple life of love and presence to each one, revealing to neighbours, especially to those in need, that they were loved and precious.

Here in Trosly there are also all the ups and downs of life, the disappointments, misunderstandings, disagreements even conflicts. But that is very human and natural. We come from different backgrounds, cultures, faith traditions and have different temperaments. But we are seeking to love one another and to create in this broken world of ours a tiny place that radiates love and forgiveness and a desire for unity. I believe more and more in the loving power of the gospels. Yet we are confronted daily with the impossibility of living out the gospel message day by day without the presence of Jesus and the wisdom God gives us. My experience is that the God of Love and the Love of God are hidden in those who are weak and vulnerable, in our own weakness and vulnerability; God is hidden in our communities of l'Arche and Faith and Light. I take rest and rejoice in that. In the darkness of our world, the light and love of Jesus shines. During this New Year may our communities grow in love and in simple gestures of kindness and forgiveness.

My love to each one of you,

Jean Vanier