

# Along the track

## Celebrating Our Differences

Some years ago I heard the story of a mother preparing her children for the visit of a friend who had only one leg. She told them not to stare at him or to ask any questions. Just act normally! That, of course, heightened their curiosity and, inevitably, one of them asked “Why have you only got one leg?” He told them that a friend of his needed it, so he gave it to him. And they were perfectly happy with that and went off to play.

We make too much of differences, be they physical or political or religious or racial or whatever. Our differences don't divide us, it is our inability to recognise, accept, and learn from those differences. They can enrich us. Why be angry or hostile at someone just because he or she looks or feels and thinks differently than we do? Fear of the unknown, jealousy, a sense of self-righteousness, bitterness, recrimination – all pretty negative sentiments but they often underlie our reactions to those who are different. Respect and friendship don't breed suspicion or antagonism.

Being different is the way of nature which presents us with a bewildering array of difference every minute of every day. There are literally billions of species, often with incredible variety even within the same species. Daily we enjoy colour almost beyond imagination in a world which still challenges our intellects and imagination with its size, complexity and diversity. Weather-wise no two days are alike. New discoveries amaze us, they sometimes debunk old theories and even change long held beliefs which we thought to be self-evident.

Theology lecturer and author, Fr Ronald Rolheiser writes: *God and nature, it would appear, do not believe in simplicity, uniformity, blandness, and sameness. We aren't born into this world of conveyor-belts like cars coming off a factory line. The infinite combination of accidents, circumstance, chance, and providence that conspire to make up our specific and individual DNA is too complex to ever be calculated or even concretely imagined.*

Sadly, we seem to live in a time when exploiting differences has become an art form. In a world where division and conflict are rife, instead of reaching out, instead of seeking common understandings and common ground, playing on the fear of the unknown, on prejudices born of ignorance is skillfully manipulated. That will get us nowhere. We can't point the finger only at the media or the politicians – we have to ask ourselves, what have I done to promote understanding, tolerance, co-operation and generosity of spirit?

I saw a piece of graffiti in Flemington which said: “Diversity is the one true thing we all have in common. Celebrate it every day.”

What great advice. We don't need to blame someone, to be angry at someone, or resent or be suspicious of someone simply because he or she is different. They may well think the same way of us. Those differences may try

our patience at times, frustrate us and tax our understanding but how boring life would be if everyone was the same, thinking the same, doing the same things, enjoying the same things. Difference enriches us, enriches our lives. Difference can challenge the way we think and act, the way we see our world, our future. When we are faced with difference, we have to ask ourselves what do we want our world to be? How do we see the future? What do we witness to our children in our conduct, the way we live our lives, the way we relate to each other, care for one another, the way we think and talk about what is just and right. What will our children see us committed to? Working for?

There is much to celebrate in diversity. We have been enriched in Australia by the waves of migration which have been so much a part of our history. Our way of life, our culture, our eating habits, our entertainment, our sports are the result of what these people have brought to our country. We have received greater insights into our understanding of so many things because of the many different perspectives people employ. Our understanding of God and some of the great mysteries of life, for example have been enriched because other faiths and peoples have different insights, beliefs, ways of looking at reality, different ways of praying and worshipping. What sort of a world do we want to live in, to hand on? If we are to live in peace, approaching others with suspicion and antagonism is not going to help but seeking common ground will come about with an attitude of respect and dialogue. It will come about with an attitude of welcome and co-operation rather than exclusion and hostility. We can see the effects of that now. Finding ways to celebrate our differences rather than exploiting them will take effort, ingenuity and innovation but it seems to me that we have little choice about doing that. Celebrating diversity starts at the local level, in our local communities, in our local worshipping communities.

Pope Francis' statement on dialogue, published in his 2011 book *On Heaven and Earth* says, “Dialogue is born from an attitude of respect for the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It assumes that there is room in the heart for each individual's point of view and opinion. To dialogue entails a cordial reception, not a condemnation. In order to dialogue it is necessary to know how to lower defences, open the doors of one's house, and offer human warmth”.

Nothing is more powerful, no message is more potent than seeing it in the flesh, seeing what a vision, a dream might look like. Jesus' ministry put flesh and bones on the vision of God for our world – a vision for love and justice, equality, forgiveness and generosity. People could see it, hear it, feel it. Now it is our turn. Are we up to it?

Regards  
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