

# Along the track

## Affirming Difference

In her book, *Late Migrations* Margaret Renkl recounts that in 2007, the fossil remains of a severely disabled prehistoric man was uncovered in what is now Vietnam.

*The skeleton revealed the fused vertebrae and weak bones characteristic of a congenital disease called Klippel-Feil Syndrome. The man was a quadriplegic, unable to feed himself or keep himself clean, and yet he survived to adulthood – during the Stone Age, mind you – because others in his community took care of him.*

Incredible, isn't it! What a beautiful story. It gives you heart, doesn't it. We tend to think of prehistoric people as being primitive physically and emotionally, but human emotions lie deep within. They are essential ingredients in making us human, in who we are, all these years later! Renkl makes the point, however, that what makes this story stand out is that humans can be wonderfully generous and full of empathy.

Yet we can be dreadfully cruel, particularly to anyone who is perceived to be 'different'. Such people can be bullied, laughed at, ostracised. Some of us may have been subjected to any one or all of those at some stage in our lives. The sad thing is that very often the bully was himself or herself first bullied, the tormentor was first tormented and told he or she was a loser, he or she was treated as an outsider, unfairly excluded. It is not always the case, but very often it is and such victims then decide to inflict on others what was first inflicted upon him or her.

Being cruel can include labelling people. Sections of the media classify those without jobs as bludgers, they like to keep those who suffer mental challenges out of sight, unless it is convenient to find someone to blame. People who are struggling for whatever reason are portrayed as 'bringing it on themselves'. We classify people as "winners" and "losers", as if they alone were responsible for their success or failure. They aren't. But it takes courage to make the change from bully to supporter, from ostraciser to companion and being open and humble enough to accept the grace that God quietly and subtly offers us daily, in every decision, on every occasion. So often, that grace often comes through contact with supporting companions.

Yet on the other hand we have a great capacity for empathy, kindness and generosity. It is really up to us to choose how we live and how we react to others.

Renkl also recounted a visit to the San Diego Museum of Man to see the exhibit of ancient clay figures. *The human figures were all visibly different in some way: people with dwarfism, people missing a limb, people with severely curved spines or extra fingers. An information placard explained that these figures had been fashioned by members of a tribe who revered physical difference. What we call a disability they had considered a blessing: God had entrusted to the care of this community a rare treasure, and even in their art they strove to be worthy of that trust.*

This beautiful story gives you heart too, doesn't it. We are bearers of this story, this grace-filled history. Both examples remind us to be more aware of what's undeserved in our lives. In St Paul's words, it is by the grace of God I am who I am. (1 Cor 15:9). In another place he writes: *And who makes you so superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? 1 Cor 4: 8.* We owe so much to others. It is not that we have not done anything ourselves, that we don't deserve any recognition, any praise but Paul reminds us to reflect, to look for God's love and grace in our lives, and that might lead us to a deeper gratitude towards God and towards all who have loved and gifted us. Mostly undeservedly.

We are complex creatures. We express our spirituality daily in how we live. We can be self-confident yet carry shame, we can be generous and open hearted, but sometimes petty and vindictive, sometimes we express love and other times we can be ungrateful, even suspicious and hate filled. Sometimes we can be a blessing, sometimes a curse with our pessimism and negativity. But these two stories of ancient times teach us such an important lesson for today.

In Pope Francis' words: "Even if difficult days happen to everyone, we must always remember that life is a grace, it is a miracle that God has pulled out of the blue."

Regards  
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