

Along the track

Never too Late

I copied this paragraph from a magazine in the doctor's waiting room:

And when it is time to truly rest, I can be laid in the soil and a tree planted so that my children can hug me still, lay their weary head against my limbs, trace the lines of my life...we remain embodied in place that they may be always connected to the ones who loved them, saw their light and sung their songs when they had forgotten them.

The Quillinan Family resting place is in Kilmore. The graves are situated under a spreading, rugged old gum tree. When the Irish side of the family have visited this place, they marvel at how peace-filled and "beautifully Australian" it is.

Almost all of the family members at rest there were farmers, people of the land. When it came time for them to put down their labours, they went back to the soil they had farmed and came to rest under this tree that they had watched grow over the many years they had come to visit this place. It offered a connection to those who had gone before and those to follow.

When there was a decision that this tree was for removal, the Quillinans rose as one and threw themselves in front of the metaphorical bulldozer (in this case the Cemetery Trust) and the tree, our link with the people and stories of the past, was saved. That old tree is a reminder that we are on a journey – the others buried here saw that tree, they stood under its shade and sheltered under it from the rain, as I have done at many a family funeral. It is a reminder that what was handed on to us we must nurture and grow and develop and hand on to the next generation. It is a reminder that, as we hear during the Mass for the deceased one we are farewelling, "Life has changed, not ended." Her or his life has not come to nothing but life has changed by their passing. The future is now in our hands. That future is created by the large or small decisions we make today and every day. And one day it will be our turn to hand over what we have made of this to the next generation.

When we look at what we are handing over, it is never too late to work to make that more just and fair, more compassionate and loving, more generous and inclusive, the stranger made more welcome and creation itself being more appreciated and cared for. None of that will happen unless we decide to make it so.

We are wanderers today, perhaps more so than the past but finding our place in life and in death is still important. In death we want to think of ourselves in a place where we may be always connected to the ones who loved us.

While we know the person who we loved in life is not in that grave, that place does give us a point of connection, a place to mourn and remember, to give thanks and to pray. It would seem that most of us across the world and across cultures believe that death isn't final. What that means is beyond our comprehension but, despite that, we believe that, in some way we are still connected with those who have died.

So how would we like to remain connected to those we love, those we will leave behind? Leaving money and possessions rates highly in our culture but we all have something far more valuable than possessions to pass on. We each have the stories of who we are and where we have come to in our journey, what we have come to believe, who we love and what we hope for them. We have all the accumulated experience and wisdom of our unique lives.

That old gum tree has many twists and strange angles. It has lost the odd branch or two. It has reacted to what life has thrown at it over the years. So how have we reacted? Writer Fr Ronald Rolheiser offers this wisdom. When we have been forced to make a change, to leave a job perhaps or different groups we may have belonged to, a marriage perhaps, a community we lived in, we have made departures that were significant or perhaps less so. So how did we leave them? he asked.

With a legacy of disharmony, unfinished business, anger, or bitterness, jealousy perhaps? Or did we leave behind a legacy of harmony and completeness, a spirit of understanding, compassion, affirmation, and unity. Going away in death has exactly the same dynamic. By the way we live and die we will leave behind either a spirit that perennially haunts the peace of our loved ones, or we will leave behind a spirit that brings a warmth every time our memory is evoked.

Regards
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