

# Along the track

## Finding Ways to Come Together

There's a cafe in Melbourne where the meals are made from 'waste' or donated food. It a place worthy of a visit, or two or three or... It is not the only one that is addressing the waste of food but this project brings together people of all ages and all nations, from all stations of life, who have perhaps never come together before. It is a very social place to visit with no pretensions, just good food and good company. Those who came talk away over the meal like old friends, even if they may have just met. No social distinctions here, just the need for nourishment and for connection.

There's are similar places in the UK. The manager of one wrote: *Breaking bread together: this is still the best and simplest way of reconnecting. If there is an irrepressible human trait it's the determination, against all odds, to reconnect. Though governments seek to atomise and rule, we will keep finding ways to come together. Our social brains forbid any other outcome. They urge us to reach out, even when the world seems hostile.*

If that is true, our social brains must be working overtime at present. There have always been different approaches, different ways of doing things and seeing things but using them to create division, to polarise is a very different matter. Our public conversations are so often marred by bitterness and lack of respect, especially to those who may think differently than 'we' do. Such a mean-spirited approach is not healthy, it does not promote understanding and co-operation. Some have become experts in exploiting differences, playing on the fears of others, fostering an anger, a paranoia about the other. Do we listen to and respect only our own kind? That creates deeper divisions, more suspicion while empathy, compassion, understanding become highly selective, available only to 'our own'.

Are we no longer capable of having a respectful conversation with each other?

Surely as people of faith, followers of Jesus, we are meant to be builders of community, people who work to bring people together, people who personify what it is to love one another as Jesus loved us. At a time when divisions are being manipulated, in a climate which almost promotes misunderstanding, is it any wonder that anger, intolerance, impatience, lack of respect, and lack of charity are so rampant and dividing communities. It is time for those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus to take a lead in

imitating his acceptance of others, his empathy and compassion, his openness to those who were different or suffering or poor or outcast from society. Surely it is time to show, to personify what the Gospel says about respect, charity, understanding, patience, and gentleness towards those who oppose us. As St Paul urged the people of Corinth: "When we are ridiculed, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we respond gently." (1 Corinthians 4, 12-13)

Surely this bruised and wounded church that we live in today may be still able to stand up once again, to be people who build bridges, who grow community and grow in community, to be people of graciousness and encouragement, compassion and empathy, people who don't seek to dominate but who encourage dialogue and understanding, to be people who meet intolerance with patience, to seek out what promotes justice and fairness, but people who have the courage to challenge those people and ideas that seek to divide us. Do we ever ask ourselves as faith communities what are we doing to soften hearts rather than harden them, to replace the strident language with the language of inclusion and understanding?

When we are estranged from each other, when we are lonely or feel threatened, we become vulnerable and easy to manipulate. Underneath that, however, the urge to connect is overwhelming. It can be transformative.

This café, by providing opportunities to talk together, to listen to others, by trying to imagine what it might mean to walk in their shoes, we find our common voice. Jesus often broke bread together, with those who shared his ideas, shared his passions and beliefs but he also tried to connect with those who opposed him, those whom society had abandoned, those who did not share his faith and his way of seeing the world. In these polarised times, his example of reconnecting, of building community is a challenge for all of us.

Regards  
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