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One of the most unlikely publishing phenomena of recent years is a series of books by a young Japanese man with a severe form of autism called Naoki Higashida. In these books he gives a unique insight into a condition that has perplexed even the smartest of physicians.

One reviewer points out how Naoki made a gentle but devastating case that autism had been misunderstood. It is not a cognitive disability, but a communicative and sensory one. With help from his parents Naoki has shown that even though he may be unable to behave in what is usually regarded as a normal way, he still understands everything around him, and has an uncanny ability to analyze not only his own emotions but also those of other people.

Again to quote the reviewer: “at 13, Naoki had a better understanding of his place in the world than most ‘neurotypical’ 30 year-olds.”

His family and his mother in particular were the first to spot his potential and found a way to help him in his determination to communicate.

Parents like this are found in every community. They stick by their children when others would write them off. They are tireless in giving physical, emotional and practical support. All too often sadly, they struggle to get the support they need. Even after persevering with excessive bureaucracy and form filling they face disappointment, frustration, and anger when budgets and services are rationed & cut.

The Canaanite mother in today’s gospel comes to mind when thinking about these parents. She was probably well used to being ignored. She had developed a thick skin and refused to take no for an answer when it came to getting help for her daughter. She even had the audacity to have a verbal joust with Jesus. Imagine if she had taken Jesus first response as a final answer. But she didn’t. She persisted and challenged his claim to be concerned only with the children of Israel.

She persuaded Jesus to widen his remit, to allow his compassion to override a narrow interpretation of his mission. She represents all those who are pushed to the margins and Jesus’ response to her faith reassures us that the margins are where God’s love is destined to work its greatest miracles. This aspect of Jesus mission was taken up with great enthusiasm by Saint Paul although as we heard in the second reading; he always understood that the people of Israel were never to be excluded.

As he says: “God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice.”

Some people have immense determination and compassion in the face of life’s difficulties. They are beacons of hope for a far more compassionate and harmonious society.

Naoki makes the very telling observation that people like his mum may hold the secret to the survival of humanity. He says “Those who are determined to live with us and not give up are deeply compassionate people, and this kind of compassion must be a key to humanity’s long-term survival.”

These are the people who fulfil the prophesy of Isaiah, people who “have a care for justice, and act with integrity… who regardless of ethnicity attach themselves to the Lord… and who are destined to be joyful in God’s house of prayer.”

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