

Wooden Spoon contenders or followers of Jesus?

West Epping Uniting Church
Sunday 21st October 2018

Mark 10:35-45

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Barry Cassidy, ABC commentator and presenter of the current affairs program, Insiders, gives out a “wooden spoon” during his show each Sunday morning for the biggest gaff or blunder of the week. This Sunday Cassidy is awarding multiple “wooden spoons” to 28 senators who voted in the Upper House on Monday for a motion claiming “It’s okay to be white”.

Now for some, this may seem like a storm in a tea cup. What’s wrong about being white? But the actual slogan “It’s okay to be white” is a seriously loaded and fraught one. For you see, the slogan has its origins in the rhetoric of some politically organised racist organisations. It has been used to promote discord, division and downright racism, particularly in the United States. Today the slogan is being promoted by white supremacist groups around the world to further their insidious cause.

For many people, including indigenous Australians and those who have migrated from Africa, Asia and the Pacific, the vote in the Senate last Monday was an affront. Supremacist intentions and supremacist rhetoric in any form surely does not have a place in Australian society!

Thankfully, those who voted for the motion acted to rescind it the next day. But for some, the damage was done. There is more pain and more hurt.

We all go through life making mistakes. And I like to think that the vote in the Senate last Monday was a mistake. Whether it’s simply because people are prone to “putting their foot in it” or whether their intentions were, in fact, more malicious, all of us can be quite blind to what we actually do. Whether acts are intentional or unintentional, most of us can be rather deaf to what we really say.

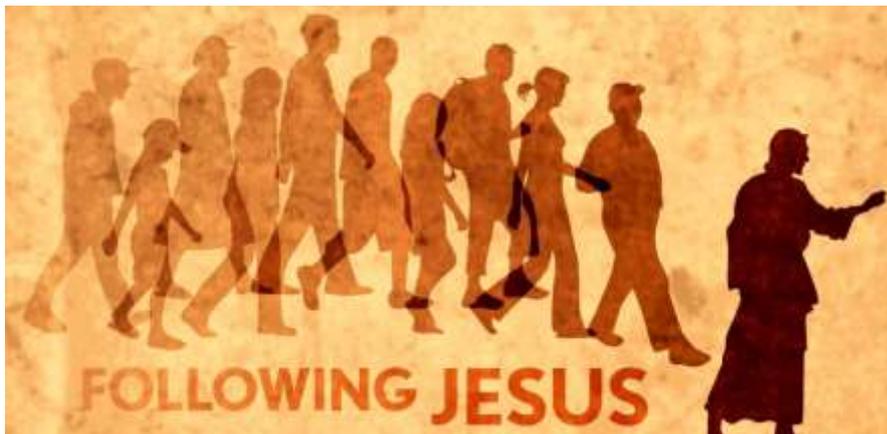
It’s interesting because many stories of healing in the New Testament relate to this business of seeing, hearing and, subsequently, understanding. I believe there is a reason here. Being a witness to Jesus involves learning to see clearly. Being a follower of Jesus involves being able to hear honestly. And with this comes the ability to fully understand.

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Friends being a follower of Jesus means having the things that obstruct our vision, the things that clog up our ears, the things twist and warp our understanding removed. Here our ability to get things wrong, whether they be naively honest or truly malicious, are dealt with.

And this matter is important especially in a world where authorities play to our prejudices, where lobbyists nudge our fears and massage our agendas by making allegations and firing accusations as though they are truth. This matter is vitally important where the very nature of truth seems to be constantly engineered and manipulated by many different groups with vested interests.

Friends, to follow Jesus is to have the lid on our prejudices, the plug on our fears and the cap our personal agendas lifted. It is to have our ears and our eyes opened to the truth of what is really happening, no matter how difficult, how challenging or how disturbing that truth may be. Following Jesus involves allowing ourselves to be open God's truth and to be fully responsive to that truth.



Consider those clumsy brothers, James and John. They were real “wooden spoon” contenders! As two of Jesus’ closest disciples they thought they were part of an “inner sanctum.” James and John were there with Peter when Jesus ascended a high mountain and, in a divine moment, was transfigured to appear alongside Moses and Elijah. Because of this James and John probably felt they were in “the know” so to speak.

Hence the question to Jesus: *“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory”*. James and John let their own agendas run here. They witnessed Jesus’s divinity and now they want to get on the band wagon. They want to enjoy the power and prestige they think goes with the job. In worldly terms, this seems obvious, logical and quite reasonable.

But James and John get it so wrong! Their request is out of order. It’s stupid, even absurd in terms of who Jesus is and what Jesus is called to do. So, Jesus responds most appropriately: *“You do not know what you are asking”*.

“You do not know what you are asking” - Jesus knows the road ahead is a tough one. It is one of humble self-giving and humble service. It will come at great cost.

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James and John, on the other hand, can only think and act on their own terms. Their commitment to Jesus is an easy ticket to glory!

The followers of Jesus actually get it wrong many times throughout the Gospels. They “putt their foot in it” quite often and this receives a lot of press. Mark’s Gospel is particularly clear here.

Jesus chastises the disciples because they fail to understand his parables (Mark 8:21). Then in another account the disciples are perplexed and confused when it comes to sharing food with the five thousand who gather to hear Jesus (Mark 6:30-44).

Meanwhile the disciples, in an act of ineptitude and ignorance, try to turn children away from Jesus (Mark 10:13). Then when a storm hits their boat on the Sea of Galilee the disciples panic, believing they are about to perish. They clearly do not understand what Jesus can do. (Mark 4:35-41). Later on these same people get it wrong, yet again, as they are terrified when Jesus walks on water, thinking he is a ghost (Mark 6:45-62).

The followers of Jesus don’t seem to get it right. And this begs the question: how about us? Do we really know what we are asking? Do we fully understand what we are looking for? Do we really have our acts together concerning what we are doing as Christians? And what about our calling as a church? Do we really know where we are going? James’ and John’s blunder suggests this may not always be the case!

Friends, the thing to remember is that our understanding of what is real, in our comprehension of what is true, we should never be dictated to by our prejudices. We should never to be shaped by our fears or be subject to our personal agendas. Rather, our understanding of what is real and our commitment to what is true is to be bound up in the person of Jesus.

Now this, in itself, seems simple. Why can’t we just obey Jesus’ commands and get on with it? But the reality Jesus points to and the truth Jesus embodies does not sit all that well in the world as we know it. James and John craved the spoils of power and prestige. But Jesus offered them something quite different. Jesus presented them with the task humble service. James and John wanted to sit on a throne in glory. Jesus offered them a cross!



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Friends, the kind of reality Jesus points to, the sort of truth Jesus embodies, is really difficult. It's hard. It's an anomaly. It's even the very antithesis of what we are encouraged to do with our lives.

Marks' Gospel sets this out clearly. Listen: the way for people to follow Jesus is to *"deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."* Jesus then goes on to say: *"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."* (Mark 8:34-36).

Then Jesus points out that: *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."* (Mark 9:34-35). Meanwhile in today's reading Jesus says: *"But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve....."* (Mark 10:43-45).

"Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel, will save it."

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

We are *"not to be served but to serve."*

This is extraordinary teaching. It introduces us to a reality and it presents us with a truth that is profoundly different to what we witness and experience in the business of many of our institutions today. Think about it. This is profoundly different to so much of what we see, of what we hear and of what we are subject to.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as a community who claim to follow Jesus and as a people who call ourselves Christian, let us try and get it right. Let us avoid making those blunders.

Rather, in everything we do, may we focus our attention on Jesus. May we sit before Jesus, listen to Jesus and let Jesus open our eyes and our ears fully to take in his word no matter how hard and challenging it may be - lest, we too, get it wrong - and end being yet contenders for that "wooden spoon"!

Amen.

