

Tim Winton's Palm Sunday plea: Start the soul-searching Australia

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Palm Sunday commemorates the day an itinerant prophet spoke truth to power. Jesus of Nazareth arrived at the gates of Jerusalem in a parody of imperial pomp. But he was a nobody. Instead of a stallion, he rode up on a borrowed donkey. In place of an army, he had a bunch of lily-livered misfits throwing down their cloaks and palm branches as if he was a big shot. Street theatre, if you like. And a week later he was dead. He was there to challenge the commonsense of the day. Armed with only an idea.

Jesus used to say things like this. *If a child asks you for bread, will you give him a stone?* Awkward things like that.

His followers called his idea The Way. Many of us are here today because the idea has stuck. We try to follow the Way of Peace and Love. Just another bunch of lily-livered misfits.

For generations, in communities all over the globe, Palm Sunday has been a day when people walk for peace and reconciliation. And not just Christians. People of every faith and of no faith at all come together as we have today in solidarity. To express our communal values and yearnings, the things that bind us rather than those that separate us.

We belong to a prosperous country, a place where prosperity and good fortune have made us powerful. Yes, whether we feel it or not, we are exceptionally powerful as individuals and as a community. We have the power of safety. We're richer, more mobile, with more choices than most of our fellow citizens worldwide. Not because we're virtuous, but because we're lucky. But we don't come here to gloat. We're here to reflect. To hold ourselves to account. We didn't come here today to celebrate power or to hide in its privileged shadow. We're here to speak for the powerless. We're not here to praise the conventions of the day, but to examine them and expose them to the truth. We're not here to reinforce the status quo. We gather to dissent from it. To register our dismay at it. **We're here to call a spade a spade, to declare that what has become political common sense in Australia over the past 15 years is actually nonsense. And not just harmless nonsense; it's vicious, despicable nonsense. For something foul is festering in the heart of our community, something shameful and rotten.**

It's a secret we don't want to acknowledge. We hide it from ourselves. At times, it seems we're content to have others hide it *from* us and *for* us. But we hide this dark secret at great cost. To faceless strangers. To innocent people. To powerless children. We hide this dirty secret at a terrible cost to ourselves as individuals and as a community.

What secret are we hiding? Well, it's awkward, and kind of embarrassing. You see, we're afraid. Terrified. This big, brash wealthy country. We have an irrational phobia. We're afraid of strangers. Not *rich* strangers. No. The ones who frighten us out of our wits are the *poor* strangers. People displaced by war and persecution. We're even scared of their traumatised children. And if they flee their war-torn countries in boats, well, then, they're twice as threatening. They send us into wild-eyed conniptions. As if they're armed invaders. But these people arrive with nothing but the sweat on their backs and a crying need for safe refuge. Yet, they terrify us. So great and so wild is our fear, we can no longer see them as people, as fellow humans.

First, we criminalised them. Then, we turned them into faceless objects. Cattle. Well, maybe that's not quite right. You see we're sentimental about cattle. Especially cattle on boats. We have values, you see, standards of decency. We hate to see suffering. We're moved to pity.

But for someone seeking asylum, someone arriving by boat, this special species of creature called a "boat person", the pity isn't there. Pity is forbidden. All the usual standards are overturned. Their legal right to seek asylum is denied. They're vilified as "illegals". And their suffering is denied. As if they're not our brothers and sisters. Yes, we hate suffering. But apparently *their* kind of suffering is no longer legitimate. And therefore, it's no longer our problem. Our moral and legal obligations to help them are null and void.

Since August 2001, Australians have gradually let themselves be convinced that asylum seekers have brought their suffering and persecution and homelessness and poverty on themselves. Our leaders have taught us we need to harden our hearts against them. And how obedient we've been, how compliant we are, this free-thinking, high-minded egalitarian people.

We're afraid. But the government has made them go away. They have stopped the boats. And spirited the victims away. Now, we don't have to see their suffering. In fact, we're not allowed to see it. They're out of sight, and out of mind. And here at home, all is well, all is calm again. For the past few years, as traumatised people have fled towards safety, towards what they believed was a civilised and compassionate haven, our national peace of mind has been built upon the hidden, silent suffering of others.

And that, my friends, is what our elected representatives have done. Using the military, using warships. Using spin and deception in Parliament. Shielding its deeds from media scrutiny. With the collusion of our poorer neighbours, the client states of Nauru and PNG. The political slogans have ground their way into our hearts and minds. The mantras of fear have been internalised. We can sleep at night because these *creatures* are gone. It wasn't enough to turn these people away. We had to make them disappear.

So. All is well. Nothing to be afraid of any more. Until we find other poor people to be afraid of. Folks who are here already. Australians who are poor and powerless and, therefore, somehow troublesome, embarrassing, even dangerous. Because that's the thing. Once you start the cycle of fear, there's always someone new and different to be afraid of, some new group to crack down on.

But will we ever sleep easy? I wonder. Because there'll always be the creeping suspicion that some poor person could be white-anting our prosperity, our privilege, our Australian specialness. Or maybe we won't sleep because, deep in the back of our heads, somewhere in our spirit, we'll feel a flicker of shame, a twinge of conscience. Maybe I caught a glimpse of a child's face behind the wire. For a second, I saw a resemblance. Could have been my kid, my grandkid, the little girl next door. Just a kid. A face behind the wire.

My friends, we weren't always this scared. We used to be better than this. I remember because I was a young man when we opened our arms and hearts to tens of thousands of Vietnamese. Australians were poorer then, more awkward, less well travelled as a people. And yet, we took pity on suffering humans. No cages, no secret gulags. We had these people in our homes and hostels and halls and community centres. They became our neighbours, our schoolmates, our colleagues at work. I was proud of my country,

then, proud of the man who made it happen, Malcolm Fraser, whose greatness shames those who've followed him in the job.

Those were the days when a leader drew the people up and asked the best of them and despite their misgivings, Australians rose to the challenge. And I want to honour his memory today. It breaks my heart to say it, but fear has turned us. In the past 15 years, it's eaten into our public spirit and made a travesty of our most sacred values, the very things we thought we stood for as a society: our sense of decency, fairness, justice, compassion, openness.

In our own time, we have seen what is plainly wrong, what is demonstrably immoral, celebrated as not simply pragmatic but right and fair. It's no accident that both mainstream political parties have pursued asylum seeker policies based on cruelty and secrecy. First, pandering to irrational public fear and then at the mercy of it. Because these policies are popular. I don't deny it. It hurts me to acknowledge it. But it's a fact. A hard-hearted response to the suffering of others has calcified and become the common sense of our day.

We used to be better than this. I still believe we're better than this.

So what's happened to this country? I'm confused. I read the news. But as events unfold, I don't always recognise my own people. This still *looks* like the country I was brought up in but it doesn't always *feel* like it. You think mining royalties have had a dip? Well, spare a thought for the Fair Go. Because that currency has taken a flogging. There's a punitive spirit abroad, something closer to Victorian England than the modern, secular, egalitarian country I love.

In the days of Charles Dickens, child labour was acceptable, respectable. It was common sense. So was the routine degradation of impoverished women. Charity was punitive. Until Victorian reformers like Dickens exposed the common sense of his era as brutal nonsense, the suffering of children was inconsequential. The poor were human garbage. They were fuel. Victorian England extracted energy and sexual pleasure from the faceless bodies of the poor. When they became a nuisance, they were exported, "offshored". In chains. Some of these faceless, degraded people were our ancestors. Mine was an unaccompanied minor, a little boy. A boy consigned to oblivion. A

boy without a face. I've been thinking of him lately. Public events have made it unavoidable.

And yet from this brutish convention, this hellish common sense, we made something new here in this country, something better. Where Jack was as good as his master. We turned away from the callous feudalism of the Old World and made this place a haven for decency. We granted everyone a face. Some, to our shame, later than others.

The face is the window of the soul. It's the means by which we make ourselves known. To those of us of religious faith, it's the means by which we recognise the Divine spark in each other, the presence of God. To those who aren't religious, it's the way we apprehend the sacred dignity of the individual. We present ourselves to one another face-to-face, as equals. When you rob someone of their face, of their humanity, you render them an object.

In this country, a nation built upon people fleeing brutes and brutality for 200 years, we have a tradition of fairness and decency and openness of which we're rightly proud. Whether we're inspired by the Christian parable of the Good Samaritan, the universal dignity of humankind, or the sanctity of the individual, we've always thought it low and cowardly to avert our gaze from someone in trouble or need, to turn our face from them as though they did not exist. When I was a kid, there were a few salty names for people like that. You didn't want to be called out as one of those. That's where our tradition of mateship comes from. Not from closing ranks against the outsider, but from lifting someone else up, helping them out, resisting the cowardly urge to walk by. It distinguished this country from the feudalism and patronage of the Old World. When the first boat people arrived in the late '70s, we looked into their traumatised faces on the TV and took pity despite our misgivings.

Now, of course, we don't see faces. And that's no accident. The government hides them from us. In case we feel the pity that's only natural. Asylum seekers are rendered as objects, creatures, cargo, contraband, and criminals. And so, quite deliberately, the old common sense of human decency is supplanted by a new consensus. Built on hidden suffering, maintained by secrecy. Cordoned at every turn by institutional deception. This, my friends, is the new common sense. According to this new dispensation,

Australia does not belong to the wider world. We're nobody's fool. We have no obligations to our fellow suffering humans. Unless it suits us. Because we are exceptional. And beyond reproach. It seems we are set to distinguish ourselves by our callousness, by our unwavering hardness of heart. We will not be lectured to by outsiders. Or, come to think of it, by insiders, either. Not about human rights, not about torture, not about the incarceration of children. We will bully critics and whistleblowers into silence. We will smear them. We will shirtfront them.

Which is to say that we live now as hostages to our lowest fears. But to assent to this newly manufactured common sense is to surrender things that are sacred: our human decency, our moral right, our self-respect, our inner peace. To passively assent to this is to set out together on a road that leads to horrors, a path from which we must turn back before we lose our way entirely. To those in power who say they're exiling and caging children for their own good, I say we've heard that nonsense before. So, don't do it in my name.

To those who say they're prolonging misery to save life, I say I've heard that nonsense before. You don't speak for me; I don't recognise your perverse accountancy.

To those in power who say the means will justify the end, I say I've heard that nonsense before. It's the tyrant's lie. Don't you dare utter it in my name.

To those who say this matter is resolved, I say no. For pity's sake, no. For the love of God, no. A settlement built on suffering will never be settled. An economy built on cruelty is a swindle. A sense of comfort built upon the crushed spirits of children is but a delusion that feeds ghosts and unleashes fresh terrors.

If current refugee policy is common sense, then I refuse to accept it. I dissent. And many of my countrymen and women dissent alongside me. I don't pretend to have a geopolitical answer to the worldwide problem of asylum seekers. Fifty million people are currently displaced by war and famine and persecution. I don't envy those who make the decisions in these matters, those who've sought and gained the power to make decisions in this matter. I'm no expert, no politician. But I know when something's wrong. And what my country is doing is wrong.

Prime Minister, forget the boats for a moment. Turn back your heart. Turn back from this path to brutality. Turn back from piling trauma upon the traumatised. Because it shames us. It grinds innocent people to despair and self-harm and suicide. It ruins the lives of children. Give these people back their faces, their humanity. Don't avert your gaze and don't hide them from us. Because the secret won't hold. It's out already. There are witnesses. There will be testimony. We will remember. In another time, and very soon, I think, our common sense will be nonsense. And you'll have to ask yourself, was it worth it? This false piece of mind, this stopping of the boats. Was it worth the price paid in human suffering? You're not alone; the rest of us will have to face it, too.

Jesus said: "What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world only to lose his soul?" And I wonder: What does it profit a people to do likewise, to shun the weak and punish the oppressed, to cage children, and make criminals out of refugees? What about our soul as a people?

We're losing our way. We have hardened our hearts. I fear we have devalued the currency of mercy. Children have asked for bread and we gave them stones. So turn back. I beg you. For the children's sake. For the sake of this nation's spirit. Raise us back up to our best selves. Turn back while there's still time.

This is author Tim Winton's speech at the Palm Sunday Walk for Justice4Refugees in Perth.