

# *Mercy Advocacy*

*“If a child asks you for bread,  
would you give him a stone?”*

*- Mt 7:9-11*



*Seeding the Future with Others*

*May 2015*

Author **Tim Winton**, gave this speech in Perth on Palm Sunday. Can we celebrate the full joy of the Resurrection when others are given only little joy and the stone of despair?



## **This big, brash, rich nation trembles at the thought of strangers who come by boat.**



On Palm Sunday, perhaps it's worth remembering Jesus' question to his followers.

*“If a child asks you for bread,” he said  
“will you give him a stone?”*

On the face of it, the question is a no-brainer. And yet it continues to trouble us.

When children arrive on our shores pleading for bread and refuge do we give them what they desperately need? Or do we avert our gaze, turn them away, send them packing with nothing but a stone?

All across Australia, citizens gather on Palm Sunday to consider this troublesome question and with the example of Jesus of Nazareth, speak truth to power.

We're not here to praise the conventions of the day, but to dissent from them. We're here to call a spade a spade, to declare that what has become political commonsense in Australia over the past fifteen years is actually nonsense. And not just harmless nonsense – it's vicious, despicable nonsense. For something is festering the heart of our community, something shameful and rotten.

It's born of secret, something we don't like to acknowledge, something we hide at a terrible cost.

You see, we're afraid of strangers. We're even scared of



their traumatised children. Yes, this big, brash, rich nation – it trembles. When people arrive with nothing but the sweat on their backs and a crying need for safe refuge we're terrified. Especially if they arrive by boat. It seems the boat makes all the difference.

This fear has deranged us. It overturns all our moral standards, our pity, our tradition of decency, to the extent that we do everything in our power to deny these people their legal right to seek asylum. They're vilified as 'illegals'. And their suffering is scoffed at or obscured. Our leaders have taught us we need to harden our hearts against these people. The political slogans have done their work, the mantras of fear have been internalised. We can sleep at night because these creatures, these objects are gone. We didn't just turn them away. We made them disappear.

But will we sleep easy? I wonder.

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 fleeing Vietnamese. Back then we still took pity on suffering humans. No cages, no secret gulags. We had these people in our homes and halls and community centres. They became our neighbours, our schoolmates, our colleagues at work, and their calm, humane reception reflected the decency of this country. Malcolm Fraser asked the best of us and we rose to the challenge.

Now it's different. Fifteen years ago our leaders began to pander to our fears. And now they are at the mercy of them. Fear has turned us. Both mainstream political parties pursue asylum-seeker policies based on cruelty and secrecy. A hard-hearted response to the suffering of others is the common sense of our day.

In the days of Charles Dickens child labour was commonsense too. So was the routine degradation of impoverished women. Charity was punitive and the suffering of children inconsequential. The poor of Victorian England were



human garbage. Commonsense saw them exported – offshored – in chains to a gulag out of sight. These despised objects are our forebears.

My convict ancestor was a little boy – an ‘unaccompanied minor’ – consigned to oblivion. I’ve been thinking of him lately. And after reading of the degradation of defenceless women on Nauru and Manus Island I’ve been wondering how it could be that these things could happen in our time, on our watch, with our taxes, in our name.

From brutish past, from brutish conventions, Australia emerged to build something better than Victorian England. We distinguished ourselves with a tradition of equality, humanity, solidarity.

Until recently, we thought it low and cowardly to avert our gaze from someone in need, to turn our face from them as though they did not exist. That’s where our tradition of mateship comes from. Not from closing ranks against the outsider, but from lifting someone else up, resisting the cowardly urge to walk by.

When the first boat people arrived in the late 1970s we looked into their traumatised faces and took pity. Now we don’t see faces at all, and that’s no accident. The government hides them from us. In case we feel pity. Pity is no longer a virtue but a form of weakness.

Asylum-seekers are turned into cargo, contraband, criminals. And so, quite deliberately, the old commonsense 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 commonsense.

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. Why? Because we are exceptional and beyond reproach. We 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'll bully critics and whistleblowers into silence. We'll smear them. We'll shirtfront them.

To exile and cage children 'for their own good', to declare that the means will justify the end is to echo the lies of tyrants. If this is commonsense I refuse to accept it. I dissent. I have no special moral powers. But I know when something's wrong. And what my country is doing is wrong.

Prime Minister, turn us back from this path to brutality. Restore us to our best selves. 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 people to do likewise, to shun the weak and punish the oppressed, to cage children, and make criminals of refugees?

Children have asked us for bread and we gave them stones.

So turn back, my country. Turn back while there's still time. Truly, we are better than this.

*\*This is an edit of author **Tim Winton**'s speech at the Palm Sunday Walk for Justice4Refugees in Perth.*



## **Action**

Share the joy and hope of the Resurrection with your MP, your neighbour, friend, family member.....with the one(s) excluded



*“They are men and women like us, our brothers seeking a better life, starving, persecuted, wounded, exploited, victims of war. I make a heartfelt appeal to the international community to react decisively and quickly to see to it that such tragedies are not repeated”*

**- Pope Francis**

addressing tens of thousands of people in St Peter’s Square following the recent loss of seven hundred lives at sea – the worst migrant tragedy in the Mediterranean.





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