

# Cultural Cringe and Jesus the Way

*A sermon on John 14:6 by Nathan Nettleton, 7 May 2023*

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## Message

In the face of the cultural call for an all-tolerating lack of conviction, we are called to be a particular people who follow and champion a distinctive way - the way found in Jesus.

## Sermon

It used to be common to hear talk of the Australian ‘cultural cringe’. Cultural cringe is the feeling that although we are comfortable living our way, we’d be a bit embarrassed to have our way held up for comparison to other ways, because we’re not so sure that it’s really got that much to commend it. One of the symptoms of cultural cringe is that when you are with people from another culture, you try hard to suppress your distinctives and conform to their way of doing things so as not to be seen as uncultured and inferior.

I think that many of us in the church often experience our own Christian cultural cringe. We are not giving up being Christian, but we are a bit embarrassed about it all the same. And we are especially embarrassed about anything that smacks of Christian supremacy with claims to exclusivity or ultimate truth. It’s bad enough having to endure the way such supremacist theology is blended with blatant empire worship in the coronation ritual, let alone letting it leak out anywhere else. And because of that, there are big chunks of John’s gospel, and tonight’s extract in particular, that send us ducking under the table, afraid to show our heads.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

But the problem we have with hearing that statement from Jesus, is that it is not actually Jesus we have usually heard it from. We have heard it from fiery eyed zealots who use it as a weapon to bludgeon their opponents into submission and as a proof that everyone who doesn’t share their view of Jesus is going straight to hell; people whose arrogant fanaticism we shy away from.

And living as we do in the midst of a culture that asserts that the way to peace and love is found in treating everybody’s beliefs as equally worthy and that any attempt to persuade anybody to change their beliefs is therefore dangerously disrespectful, we are understandably anxious to avoid being associated with any sort of Christian supremacist ideologies. Religious intolerance has a lot to answer for, and we rightly want to have nothing to do with it.

But if we allow that concern to prevent us from hearing this saying of Jesus, we may be cutting off our nose to spite our face. We are allowing those who try to force it to say what they want it to say, to dictate whether we will listen to it for what it might really be trying to say.

You see, one of the few things about which I am dead-set certain is that when this saying was first uttered and when it was first written down, it was not attempting to answer anybody’s questions about the value of other religions or the fate of their followers. To take any statement out of its context and try to get it to answer entirely different questions in a completely different context is always to risk distorting it.

If we want to hear what is really being said when Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me,” then we need to hear it in the context of John’s gospel.

Jesus is speaking to his closest followers in private as they faced the uncertainty of life without him around. They are not sure if they’ve got what it takes to continue in the way he has shown them. Peter thinks he probably does, but in the verse immediately before we picked up the story, Jesus has just told him that within hours he’ll be pretending he’s never even heard of him.

When John writes these words down, he is writing for a Christian community who has now been forced out of their home within Judaism, and who are under increasing pressure, sometimes even on pain of death as we heard in the reading from Acts, to give up the distinctive claims of their faith and conform with the religious norms of their day.

In the midst of that, Jesus’s words are addressing questions of Christian identity; of what it means to be followers of Jesus. Analysis of where the faithful adherents of other religions might be at is not even on the radar.

Now I would venture to suggest that our situation is increasingly like that of those to whom these words were addressed. Gone are the days when Christianity was the taken-for-granted dominant religious world view, whatever the deluded weirdness at Westminster Abbey yesterday might have tried to pretend. Those were the days of Christian triumphalism that produced the arrogant mind-set we are so wary of. Increasingly we are again finding ourselves to be adherents of a minority faith in a world that is awash with different values and beliefs. And again the prevalent temptation is to suppress our Christian distinctiveness in favour of a broadly inclusive humanitarianism in order to win ourselves the privilege of being considered respectable contributors to society’s debates about social policy and direction.

And so it is to us, as we wrestle with how to live as people of love and faith and peace and justice in the world we find ourselves in, that Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. None of you comes to the Father except through me.”

He did not address these words to the Hindus or the Muslims or even to those Jews who did not believe in him. He addressed them to those of us who were already his followers and who were anxious and uncertain about the way forward. “I am the way. Follow me.”

He addressed them to those of us who were already his followers and who were confused about what to believe. “I am the truth. Believe in me.”

He addressed them to those of us who were already his followers and who were fearful for the future. “I am the life. Live in union with me.”

“None of you comes to the Father except through me.” Only through one who knows God as Father, namely a child of God, can you come to know God as Father. Far from being an arrogant claim that negates every other way of relating to God, it is little more than an obvious truism about a particular way of relating to God: if you want to approach God in the same unique and unprecedented manner that Jesus did, then you’ll have follow him and do it his way. No one but Jesus can show you how Jesus does it.

But before you write me off as just another cringing liberal who has found a clever way to explain away the radical and confronting claims of the gospel, let me make a couple of points that need to be made in light of that.

Firstly, while that reading of the verse does not assert the supremacy of Christian faith over other faiths, it also does not say that everyone is free to choose their own pathway to God and that all faiths are therefore equally valid. It simply says that the passage is not addressing that question, so don't try to get it to answer it.

We do live in a time of unprecedented pluralism. The reason the Christian world view is no longer taken for granted is that it is no longer the only world view people grow up knowing. There are a multitude of world views with competing claims for the hearts and minds of the people and the shape and direction of society.

But, and this is my second point, it is in the face of such pluralism that Jesus says to us who have identified ourselves with him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. None of you comes to the Father except through me."

It is not our job to discern whether or not faithful Buddhism offers a genuine way to life in God. It is our job to live faithfully the way we have been called to follow. And faithfully taking the way of Jesus is done by following Jesus, not by worrying about where the edges of the path might be. Faithful following of the way of Jesus will not make us hostile to people of other faiths or no faith, but it will make us distinctly and boldly different from them, and that may even sometimes evoke some hostility from them.

If we are boldly and faithfully following Jesus, we will be seeking above all else depth and intimacy of communion with God and one another, and that will stand in stark and confronting contrast to the more prevalent quests for image, power and prosperity.

If we are boldly and faithfully following Jesus, we will be growing into a radical hospitality that welcomes the stranger as an icon of the risen Christ and that will stand in stark and confronting contrast to the selfish and xenophobic stance that has so many Australians calling for border protection and mandatory detention of those who come seeking refuge.

If we are boldly and faithfully following Jesus, we will be investing in treasures of the spirit, and that will stand in stark and confronting contrast to the growing obsession with share prices and property values and profit maximisation strategies.

Whereas, if we just bow to the pressure to suppress the distinctive beliefs and values of our faith and act as though our faith and all faiths are essentially just differently clothed versions of the imperative to respect and be nice to each other, then we will not be following the radical way of Jesus. We will instead be following the lowest common denominator approach of the current fashion for do-it-yourself spirituality. And while we might then be considered respectable enough to be welcomed into the social discussions, it will be at the expense of having anything to offer that isn't already being said.

The fashionable idea that the ultimate way, truth and life will be found by each person picking and choosing whatever best suits their own personality and needs from the various faiths on

offer is a recipe for nothing but confusion. It's like trying to replace the wheels on your car with the legs of a horse. You can choose to go by horse without denying that cars are legitimate means of transport. But if you're embarrassed that your horse isn't a car, go get a car; don't try chopping them up to mix and match their body parts.

What we are doing when we gather here is unapologetically an endeavour to faithfully follow Jesus and no other. We listen to the scriptures that have shaped the Christian tradition so that we might be shaped in that tradition. We gather around the Lord's table as the body of Christ, in the power of his Holy Spirit, to the glory and praise of his Father so that we might be fed and strengthened and inspired to live our whole lives as the body of Christ, in the power of his Holy Spirit, to the glory and praise of his Father.

Whether other ways might also lead to God is none of our concern. Our call is to live the way, the truth and the life that have been made known to us in Jesus. And that's nothing to cringe about!