



Living with appropriate ambiguity

John 10:22-30

I am always fascinated by the use of words. My sermon title introduces a very interesting word – and that is Ambiguity. It has its root in the concept of multiple meanings. Whenever I am confronted with an unusual word, I long to explore what it means and how it can be used or misused.

When we handle the word ambiguity, I suspect we usually think of it in relation to the definition of a term, idea or situation which is open to a different interpretation. It can also be related to the thought of doubtfulness, uncertainty or even evasive speech.

As we mature in life, we recognise that there are ideas which offer several plausible alternatives for our understanding. But equally there are areas where vagueness is not a helpful path of interpretation.

In John 10:22-30 there is ambiguity or disagreement about the true identity of Jesus Christ. This is placed within the setting of some Jews who came to Jesus demanding clarity about who he is. “The Jews” in this context are not to be understood as a nation, but a small group of leaders who are appealing to Jesus to declare himself.

Text: John 10:22-24

“Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon’s Colonnade. The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’”

This occurred in a particular setting:-

- The time of the year, which was winter, and this particular area was more sheltered than other parts of the temple courts.
- The geographical location – Jerusalem and Solomon’s Colonnade.
- The religious context – which was the Feast of Dedication.

It is also worth noting that Solomon’s Colonnade became one of the first meeting places of the early Christians. In this season of Easter, you would expect me to focus upon those things we are sure about, which are made clear in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I want to do that, but also to acknowledge that we live in a world where we must establish what we are sure about, when there are still many things we do not know, or about which we have differences of opinion.

- We are very soon to have a Federal Election here in Australia and, although some Christians suggest there are only certain political ideas that we can embrace, most of the parties will have Christians supporting them.
- There are differences in the way people live, with which some of us feel uncomfortable, but recognise that they are not easily understood as unambiguous. We remind ourselves that it was only a relatively short time ago in the longer context of history that we confirmed a healthy appreciation of the role of women in our society.



- Christians have very different views about peace and war. The whole debate about pacifism opens up a wide variety of views. An equally broad discussion occurs when we talk about a “just war”.

In this conversation with Jesus Christ, there were those who felt they knew exactly who he was. This was not one of those debatable matters and they wanted him to clear up the situation once and for all. Hence they ask him to speak “plainly”. His answer would have given them intellectual and spiritual ammunition to harness against him.

This passage comes in what has often been described as “the fifty days of joy” which follow Easter and prepare us for the gift of the Holy Spirit. I also find it interesting that in the wider passage we have a picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, both before and following this particular section.

The wolf is an animal that has had a bad press. Therefore, it has been used in the most negative of ways, even in the teaching of Jesus. It is thought-provoking, therefore, that wolves are being reintroduced in Yellowstone Park, Scotland and Eastern Europe. We need to understand the concept of wolves in its New Testament setting.

The thought of being “snatched out of my hand” opens up a picture which is disturbing. The call of Christ does not protect us from experiencing difficult moments, for example:-

- Sorrow will visit many of us
- Suffering will knock on many doors
- Death is the most certain of visitors

Even when Christians experience such sad moments, there is the assurance of God's presence. Living in an ambiguous world does not mean we cannot exercise meaningful faith.

Faith does not ensure that all uncertainty disappears

Christians in every age have tumbled when they find themselves struggling with uncertainty.

- Seeking to understand health and healing
- Seeking to be certain about God's purposes
- Seeking to come to terms with evil and wrong

Jesus' reply to those questioning him reminds us all that an understanding of who Jesus is cannot be as one writer put it, “... whether Jesus measures up to some preconceived notion of how a divine figure ought to act.”

- Jesus eludes prior categories
- Jesus redefines cherished titles from Israel's past, eg Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God
- Jesus resists our contemporary obsession with everything working out well, eg superman, questions of happiness, and religion as the peace-giver in our many turmoils.



From time to time, we are brought face to face with reality. In the 2007 film *The Bucket List*, two terminally ill men – played by Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman – take a road trip to do the things they always said they would do before they “kicked the bucket”. Before the film’s release, Nicholson was interviewed by *Parade* magazine. Reflecting on his personal life, Nicholson said, “I used to live so freely. The mantra for my generation was “Be your own man!” I always said, “Hey, you can have whatever rules you want – I’m going to have mine. I’ll accept the guilt. I’ll pay the check. I’ll do the time.” I chose my own way. That was my philosophical position well into my fifties. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve had to adjust.”

But reality has a way of getting the attention of even Jack Nicholson. Later in the interview, he adds, “We all want to go on forever, don’t we? We fear the unknown. Everybody goes to that wall, yet nobody knows what’s on the other side. That’s why we fear death.”

Uncertainty is not an end to faith. We need to get beyond the position which suggests that we are in charge of all that we understand.

Sadhu Sundar Singh, the wonderful Indian preacher, said, “From time immemorial people have quenched their thirst with water without knowing anything about its chemical constituents. In like manner, we do not need to be instructed in all the mysteries of doctrine, but we do need to receive the Living Water which Jesus Christ will give us and which alone can satisfy.”

Faith self-evidently points us to those things which we can embrace with assurance

It is of interest in our biblical study that the hostility of “the Jews” meant that he withdrew from the city. He heads off in a north-easterly direction into the place where John the Baptist had been baptising. It was a place where Jesus’ own ministry had begun.

We are told:-

- There he stayed, and many people came to him (v.40)
- They understood that what John had said was true (v.41)
- Many believed in Jesus (v.42)

I am convinced that we gain most on this particular theme by revisiting Wesley’s teaching on assurance, which is not the same as certainty, but far more helpful. Christian assurance needs to be separated from what I have often described as “toothpaste grin religion”. Part of the challenge is the way we interpret the word “know”. We tend to relate it to a kind of understanding. Though it is an understanding, it is far more than a mere academic or cerebral conviction.

We must be very careful to ensure that our convictions do not become a cloak for arrogance in its many forms. For example, the vain person claiming honour, the arrogance of the wealthy showing off, the ostentatious hypocrite or the proud person who rejects all dependence and aspires to be equal with God. Jesus’ teaching addresses many of these issues.



John Wesley believed all Christians have a faith which implies an assurance of God, based upon the forgiveness of sins and the witness of the Spirit, as confirmed in Romans 8:15-16.

It has been fascinating to observe the obsession with tattoos reappearing. They hold many dangers. Having ministered in a West of England naval port, I saw them on many sailors' arms. However, it has unfortunate implications if the name of a sweetheart is tattooed and then the relationship ends. There is now a whole industry involved in the removal of tattoos.

What marks upon our lives indicate Christian assurance?

- The mark of a denominational ticket? No.
- The importance of a family link? No.
- A certain kind of religious experience? No.

The only thing that really matters is a confidence that flows from our life in Christ. Christian assurance is not an internal pietism, but a reality that transforms the whole of our lives.

It was Charles Wesley who penned these powerful words:-
My God, I know, I feel Thee mine
And will not quit the claim.

Christian assurance, in the final analysis, is a privilege and a gift, which God bestows upon us. It gives confidence and comfort, but not presumption and self-righteousness.

A renewal of this kind of faith would do a number of things that would help us enormously:-

- It would empower a new theology
- It would form a committed church
- It would finely tune that church for mission

Sadly, divisions between Christians are not a scandal but the norm. Often people are accustomed to going their own way. In my own experience, one of the factors that is most often cited to defend a separation is the question of truth. It is most helpful if we can accuse someone of being in error or false. However, my own understanding is that Christian assurance leads us to a fresh understanding of holiness, which brings people together rather than separate – and that enables us to confront our fears which feed separation.

Faith draws us all into a place where we make distinction between the ambiguous and the unambiguous

I think it is fair to say that a large number of people look for a faith devoid of ambiguity and uncertainty, but such faith is not to be found this side of eternity.

We might even consider that if we had been witnesses to Jesus' words or miracles, our faith would be totally unambiguous. That position has to be measured against the fact that:-



- Many of Jesus contemporaries were divided concerning his identity
- Even John the Baptist had doubts about Jesus as he lingered in prison
- Jesus said the evidence is there, but it doesn't jump out and overwhelm you. That's why we are about faith.

There is a clear distinction made between those who belong to Jesus and those who do not as yet belong. Those who belong:-

- Listen to his voice (v.27)
- He knows them (v.27)
- They follow him (v.27)
- He gives them eternal life (v.28)
- They will never perish (v.28)
- No-one can snatch them out of his hand (v.28)

Wrong convictions about our certainties can lead to such dangerous positions in life. Those who came to Jesus at this time are described as opponents and they were willing to consider stoning Jesus. But Jesus challenged them with a question, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" (v.32)

They wanted to separate his words and deeds. "We are not stoning you for any good work," they replied, "but for blaspheming, because you, a mere man, claim to be God." (v.33)

Ideas are always easier to stone than real people! In a commentary, Ian Barclay commented, "Because there certainly wouldn't be any stones just lying around within the sacred precincts, they must have planned to lynch Jesus before they had heard what he said."

The unambiguous truth comes where:-

- Words and deeds hold together
- Revelation and understanding are both operative
- God's complete affirmation of people and life are perceived

When we read the New Testament, two ideas are constantly before us. They could easily be seen as opposites, but I believe they are both important and need to be kept in a healthy balance.

One idea is that everything happens within the purposes of God – and yet the other is that we have free will and are responsible for our thoughts and actions.

In our uncertain world, Jesus promised appropriate confidence that we have:-

- Eternal life (10:10)
- Life that would go beyond death
- Life that would be secure

I return to our text and the confrontational question that is asked of Jesus, "How long will you keep us in suspense?" A better translation might be, "How long do you intend to



annoy us?" There were those who had made their minds up about who Jesus was, without full consideration of his ministry and mission.

The Messianic Secret is a feature in the Synoptic Gospels, particularly Mark, but here in John we have Jesus refusing to state categorically those things that people wanted from him.

One of the reasons why this was the case might be the current misunderstandings about messiahship, but Jesus does point to the fact that he has told people by the way he has acted and the works which testify to him.

One writer refers to some of the supreme privileges of those who believe in and belong to Christ. He describes them as:-

- A summoned group who listen to the Lord's voice
- A gifted group who have received eternal life
- A secured group who are God's possession

There is nothing more positive than the assurance of this kind of faith. It will not take away the ambiguities of life and the deep questions to which we do not know the answers. But we can hold strong to this faith.

This is the wellspring of all Christian living and the motive that inspires all service in the Lord's way. God's promise is that, though we feel far away, he will never leave us nor let us down.