



Listening Post

Earlier this week, I visited my local hairdresser for a haircut.

There's nothing unusual in this, of course. It's an everyday event that happens all over the world. Indeed, I have been attending this particular hairdresser for a number of years now, and it has gotten to the point where I know a number of the staff on sight - and they obviously recognise me as a "regular".

Of course, like most hairdressers, the place I go to has a core of full-time staff supplemented by a larger group of part-timers and a floating population of apprentices, trainees, and so forth. And so it was that on this particular occasion, I noticed that, in addition to the staff with whom I was familiar, there was another hairdresser, one I had not seen before.

To say he was eye-catching would be an understatement. Although not especially tall, he was very large of build. He also was covered in tattoos, and on his right hand he wore a number of thick, chunky silver rings. He looked like a movie stereotype of a biker, or a "gangsta" rapper.

And, as it turned out, when my turn came, he was the hairdresser who called me over to his station. We said hello, exchanged the usual pleasantries, and then I told him what I wanted done. He set to work, and I could tell by his mannerisms that he was no apprentice or novice hairdresser. On the contrary, he went about his business with the practiced ease of someone who was

completely familiar with their trade.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that this man, like most hairdressers, was a gregarious soul. We chatted away, and then eventually, he asked me the question that always gets asked in these types of situations: what did I do for a living? This is always an interesting conversational intersection for me, because me telling people I'm an ordained Uniting Church minister always elicits one of two responses.

The first is: "Oh - you don't look like a minister!". This suggests to me that an awful lot of people have a stereotypical "vision" of what a clergyman looks like. Maybe a grandfatherly figure dressed in slacks and a comfy jumper. Or maybe a more austere personage, attired in some kind of plain religious uniform. Perhaps they don't suspect a big, boofy bloke wearing jeans and a t-shirt could also be a minister, too.

The second is: "Oh - how interesting!", usually spoken at a pitch an octave higher than the speaker's normal register. This usually indicates that the other person has no idea what to "do" with the fact that they are talking to a clergyman - and are probably frantically trying to remember if they've sworn or told an off-colour joke in my hearing! It also usually signals the conversation is at an end as my would-be interlocutor stammers into embarrassed silence.

On this particular occasion, however, the hairdresser seemed delighted to be encountering a clergyman. He proceeded to tell me - quite unselfconsciously - how he had once been a member of an outlaw motorcycle gang. However, after about seven years of this life, he decided that he didn't want to be involved in it anymore - he wanted out. The problem, however, is that one can't just leave an outlaw gang; like other criminal organisations, they are reluctant to let people go once they have joined. Ex-members are viewed as potential informants for the police and other law-enforcement authorities.

My hairdresser's dilemma was solved, however, when he encountered a former Hell's Angel, who in turn got him in touch with the God Squad. As most of you are aware, the God Squad is a Christian motorcycle group founded by the late Rev Dr John Smith. The God Squad ministers to people involved in, or living on the fringes of, outlaw motorcycle gangs, and is a recognised "patched" motorcycle organisation. The ex-Hells Angel was able to refer my hairdresser to the God Squad, who in turn negotiated the conditions under which he would be allowed to leave the outlaw motorcycle gang of which he'd been a member. This had left the hairdresser free to pursue a new life free from any fear of repercussions.

It was a fascinating story, and a practical example of Christian ministry that had helped someone in extremely difficult circumstances. But the hairdresser wasn't finished talking. His expression clouding, he told me that he'd been having troubles with some of his colleagues who were giving him a hard time - he was struggling to deal with the situation and not resort to the kinds of "solutions" that characterised his time in the motorcycle gang.

Fortunately, I was able to draw on my past experience as a union official. I asked him to describe the type of behaviour he was experiencing; and when he detailed to me some of the incidents that had occurred, I was able to tell him that those incidents constituted both workplace bullying and a violation of workplace OHS laws. I told him he should speak to his employer, detail what had been happening, and ask for the behaviour to stop. I also counselled him not to do anything in response to his colleagues' behaviour that might imperil his own employment; because if he did, their conduct would no longer be the issue. The hairdresser looked relieved and said he would follow my advice.

This incident brought home to me the need to be present to others in their context - and the fact that none of us ever know when we will be required to be

present to someone who makes themselves vulnerable to us. Jesus was always listening to others, not because he wanted to elicit information from them or engage in gossip, but because he was deeply engaged with their humanity and deeply concerned to be present to them in the context in which they presented themselves to him. Whether they were a prostitute or a tax collector or a lawyer or a religious leader, Jesus was deeply attentive to the people he encountered in and on the ground in which they existed - and not in some theoretical ground on which he thought they ought to exist. Jesus took people as they were - and then demonstrated how they were seen and loved by God.

I have no idea whether I will meet this person again. I hope the suggestions I made were useful and helps them constructively deal with their situation. Clearly, however, this person had been listened to in the past by the ministry of the God Squad. It is a reminder to us all that we may be called on at a moment's notice to be God's agents in the world - and that the call may come in the most mundane - and most unexpected - of circumstances.

Combined Service This Sunday

A reminder that **this Sunday is a combined service** with our friends and neighbours at Ringwood UCA. **The service will be hosted by Ringwood and will commence at 10am.** Please join us at Ringwood for this time of shared worship and fellowship.

4U November Event

The final 4U gathering will be its annual evening extravaganza, to be held at **6pm in the Centre Hall on Saturday November 11.** Entertainment will be supplied by the wonderful **Savoy Singers.** For full details about the evening and the Savoy Singers please [click this link](#) and [this link](#).

Blessings,

Brendan



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