

The Soldiers

Most people just want to fit in. When we're young, we start to notice differences between us and others, which concerns us. What's wrong with me? And while some seem to value it more than others, most people want to go unnoticed for the unusual things about them.

That's something I wanted to do. I didn't want people to pay attention to my difference. I didn't want them to know I wasn't like the other boys my age. I was shy. I was uncoordinated. And when I became an adolescent, I realised I was even more different. I was gay, and I had worries about others finding out about that part of me.

So I did my best to get rid of, or hide, everything that was different about me. I began to mirror the behaviour of a group of people I thought looked normal and were well-liked. I wanted to be accepted by them.

Here's a picture of how that went.

This photo is of me in the sixth grade, about 12 years old. It sits on my parents' mantelpiece downstairs, and I see it every time I go home. Go ahead: laugh. I don't know why I thought this outfit would hide anything. But I thought it would.

As a pre-teen, it became apparent I had to wear corrective lenses. And that was a crisis because I didn't want to stand out. I wasn't going to let 'four-eyes' become another moniker added to my list of names, so I asked my parents if I could get a tint put on my glasses. I'd hoped this would help them pass for shades. That would make me look cool, right? And then, there's this outfit. Do you remember the television series Miami Vice? It was all the rage at the time. It starred the pinnacle of masculinity and self-confidence: Don Johnson. He, unsurprisingly, wore sunglasses (like me) and paired them with a signature white blazer rolled up at the arms. If only I looked like Don Johnson.

Looking back at this picture, I'm not surprised my disguise didn't work. It's a bit strange to look at now. I see something suppressed, and so did a lot of my classmates. A weirdo is poking through this costume. Those who saw through that smokescreen mocked, made fun of, ostracised and made me feel supremely aware of my difference—not because of this outfit (although I bet it didn't help) but because of something this outfit couldn't cover-up.

As we read the gospel accounts, we hear of Jesus trying to go unnoticed, too. He was worried about being found out and sometimes attempted to throw people off the scent of who he really was. After healing a man of leprosy, Jesus told him not to tell anyone (Mark 1:43-44). After teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus 'passed through the midst of [the crowd] and went on his way' (Luke 4:30). And later, when they tried to arrest him, Jesus evaded his persecutors' hands (John 10:39). But Jesus could only manage so many close calls and narrow escapes. This camouflage wasn't working; word started to get around. And eventually, no matter how hard Jesus tried to hide it, who he was shone through.

So, when Jesus came before Pilate in the governor's headquarters, the soldiers there mocked him. Who does this guy think he is? Folk call him a king? That's ridiculous! 'Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace ... and they called together the whole cohort' (Mark 15:16).

Jesus had worn regular clothes that day. He was dressed probably just like everyone else, but it didn't fool the soldiers. '... they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him' (Mark 15:17). This! This is who you are. This is how you should be dressing, you deluded moron! 'And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him' (Mark 15:18-19). They dressed Jesus up in the outfit they thought he should've been wearing—one that revealed his true self. The taunting soldiers recognised it.

And no more powerfully or extraordinarily did military personnel recognise Jesus as a king than the Centurion. What did he know of Jesus? Well, he knew enough to see something others couldn't or wouldn't. The leader of 100 soldiers—a regulator of consistency—had insight. On seeing Jesus' dead body, he declared, 'Truly this man was God's Son!' (Mark 15:39).

As I look back at this picture of me from former times, I think about how I was trying to blend in. While I'm not sure my tactics worked, I hoped no one would see parts of me I wasn't comfortable with or wasn't ready to show. However, my youth's bullies knew what outfit I should be wearing, and it wasn't one like theirs. Somehow my tormenters could see through my façade. There wasn't any amount of keeping my head down or staying out of the spotlight that could hide it.

Jesus couldn't hide who he was either, and his tormenters named it. They put on him the clothes he was meant to wear. As cruel as they were, they had vision.

If I had a chance to speak to my younger self, I would want to say something. 'All those bullies, all the people making fun of you, they do see something. Although you can't see it right now, they can. The popular kids—the most unkind and brutal ones—know who you are. They can see you're fabulous.'