

# Enabling different voices

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 7 November, 2021

A Conversation with Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin and Benjamin Oh

Pentecost 24B

Ruth 1: 1-18; Mark 12: verses 38-44

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

---

Josephine

For our reflection today, I'm going to share a conversation that I had last week with Benjamin Oh. Some of you will know Benjamin, a remarkable leader in our community in Sydney, a co-convenor of the Asian Australian Rainbow Alliance, also of the Rainbow Catholic Interagency For Ministry; a co-chair of the GLBTIQ Intercultural and Interfaith Network and also founder member and continuing board member of Equal Voices. A personal friend from many years ago, but someone who enriches us in different ways. And we're talking about the two texts from today

Benjamin

Well just to begin with, I live on Gadigal land. And like you I pay respects to our elders, past, present and emerging. My pronouns are he, his, them. I'm very fortunate to have been working, connecting, having a wonderful friendship with you, Jo, and with Pitt Street. Pitt Street is a sanctuary for me. It's one of the few sanctuaries in Sydney that I can hide my spirit to replenish my soul a bit, and then go out there and deal with all the, you know, all the insanity that sometimes life can be.

One other point. You're a member of the Catholic Church, right?

Yes. Still! (laughs). You know, my friends who say: "*why don't you just give up*", well it's not for me to give up, that's the thing!

We're going to talk today a little bit about hospitality. And particularly and partly from a queer perspective a little bit. But particularly in terms of multiculturalism and the challenges that we face in Australia and in the Asia Pacific - and how the Bible's wrestling with some of those things. So what does hospitality mean to you from a faith perspective?

I think of me growing up, that when we had my own family home, it did not matter who came into our home first. You take off the slippers or your shoes at the doorstep. It is both practical and spiritual as a ritual. It is a sign of reverence for the home - and it doesn't matter if you're the sovereign of that land or if you are someone that is least, you're in the margins. We all do that. And when you are seated, you offer tea or water. We all share that same dignity. There is this acknowledgement of reverence and that we all need water. And I think that that forms a bit of that foundation of what I sense hospitality is.

I remember when I was growing up, I grew up in Malaysia. It's permanently 33 degrees and the humidity is 140 degrees. You just walk out and water just starts forming on you. And my mother would offer a glass of water; my father would offer a glass of water to the post person that's delivering the mail. It's just this constant - you go out of your way intentionally.

Even if he's striking! I think that's beautiful that Jesus says again, doesn't he, those who give a glass of water to one of my little ones. That attitude of reverence. And because we have today the two texts, with the fabulous from the gospel about the temple and what you're saying about approaching the temple. But Jesus is clearly extremely unhappy, isn't he, about the lack of reverence. I mean we get the turning over the tables and so on as well with that because it's been turned into something very irreverent. How do you look at that gospel text that we have?

The account of Mark, this gospel, is really interesting because it frames, it sets up the scene to speak to the privileged establishment. The religious establishment, how they present. So it paints that picture first about respectability, and about places of honour. It's such a deliberate juxtaposition that's deliberately done, isn't it, to if you like, the least powerful person, or at least the person we assume has the least agency.

But yet this woman, by her commitment to hospitality, she is providing hospitality to the scribes. She is paying to make sure that they have those things. I mean, it's such a naughty juxtaposition. And in her role she gives it all. And Jesus rebukes the powerful by saying, by juxtaposing this, and he goes - this person, in her poverty has put everything that she has lived on. The opposite of it is this scribe who has everything has put out nothing.

Huge power differential isn't there? I'm thinking about church history as well. Early church history and the widows in particular. You know there was an 'order of widows' and one of the things the church was very strong on was looking after women. Young women as well, but also widows, because of course there was no social security system. It really was such a huge thing.

I don't know what you feel about this in terms of that power which you've identified very well, is the way in which the contrast about this money stuff that it is called to certain tables as well, that there is this element in this of Jesus expressing his anger at the injustice that this woman is also, in a way, that the danger of churches is that we're ripping off the poor and the marginalized. Misused hospitality! Instead of them being the people who need to be empowered and given resources to be able to change their circumstances, rather than this is the only space that they can find some kind of value.

Mm. The scripture deliberately, in a short sentence within chapter 12, deliberately - it doesn't need to say that - but deliberately in that short sentence says '*many rich people put in large sums*'. It's almost emphasizing again about the crowd putting money into the treasury, but deliberately in one sentence: '*many rich people put in large sums*'.

I think about rich people in our country and around the world who put in large sums to - advertising political boards. They're not necessarily utilizing it for lifting justice, or upholding justice, but to nestle the status quo. So that it's even more feathered. And I think part of the rebuild that Jesus, the Christ, tries to juxtapose is: '*you've got all of this money and, yes, you put it into a good cause. But again to feather your own nest, so that you have places of honour in high places*'.

I'm thinking about church leaders in our various churches and different denominations who put in money to nestle their power, to pander to the status quo instead of offering radical hospitality to make sure that God, Jesus of the poor, God of the poor is centred. And so I think that deliberate juxtaposition talks about using wealth, or abusing wealth and misplacing wealth, actually wilfully misplacing wealth for their own purposes. In some ways that might be the ultimate abomination if you like, that gift that's been given misuse.

That's a big challenge, isn't it really as a white person? The power of money and where we put it. It is lovely, in a way, that we can have vaccine boosters for example. Or some people can have. But when I think about the injustices of the number of people who don't have any vaccine at all, that's just one star example of the way in which we are using our money. So it really does challenge us.

---

A conversation with Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin and Benjamin Oh.

Sunday 07 Nov, 2021 Pentecost 24B

© Pitt Street Uniting Church, 264 Pitt Street, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia

Page 2 of 5

The other thing I'm conscious of as well, and I think it comes out particularly in that second story we've had today about Ruth, is how these things are all so mixed up. It's money and power with race, and also with gender, which is touched on in the gospel. And there have been quite a few people, like post-colonial theologians who've written about that Ruth text as well as queer theologians. But this is a text that is easily forgotten, isn't it really! I mean how do you approach that story of Ruth and the coming together of a woman who comes from one very different culture and race, one that's quite despised actually. Yet she makes this commitment and received Naomi. It's a symbol isn't it, of a different sort of hospitality operating. Not race power and money.

I think for our limited human mind, and of course our limited experience, I wonder whether 100 years from now, people will look back and say: '*Oh that was the point of these acts*'. Many of us are still struggling on the relationship of Naomi and Ruth - and I think that's wonderful. That's the point of stories. They are meant to puzzle us. What's the point of telling a story that doesn't challenge? I'm thinking of the Syrophenician woman. I'm thinking about, in Jesus' times, the Syrophenician woman, the Samaritan woman at the well. This widow that is centred in this story of Jesus is about the absolutely subversive radical hospitality of God.

There's so many marginal people aren't there? Well one woman in general, but also people of different race, because you know in the Samaritan woman...

That's right and class! And class!

One of the interesting things of course is (and in Matthew's gospel as well as we come towards Christmas) is that in Jesus' genealogy, women who come before Mary (and Bathsheba maybe! No, not maybe.) She was a Judean but she was married, and it's quite clear to the Hittites. So they're making quite clear - the racial thing, and the sex. Some of these figures are quite sexual: Tamar and Onan are questionable from certain people's morality. Yes the fore-mothers of Jesus! So this group is really, really powerful and maybe that's part of the reason it stayed in the bible, because there's so few books by women aren't there? Ruth and Esther, I think that's it isn't it for women.

And of course, the mother of Jesus.

But it's not, it's not because they're women as such, you know. It's their location isn't it? Marginality. In that story, both Naomi and Ruth seem to me to be living in this hugely patriarchal culture. So when the men disappear, they're left. So what is Ruth to do? She could go home, but she's going to live in another country and probably be tolerated for her background perhaps. But if she leaves, she leaves behind this older woman who probably won't ever get married again. It's a big commitment to leave your country isn't it your culture and working.

A while ago I wrote a piece about my own feelings. About me feeling constantly displaced. It's not meant to be a piece about feeling bad about oneself. It was trying to reflect on what does that actually mean? To feel displaced culturally. To feel displaced. Earlier you were talking about '*where they are*' is about their place. Well it's all about displacement! All of this, all of the stories, if there is one constancy about them it's how these people are all displaced. But if but God nestles right there, in this displacement....

You're going to find divine hospitality in the displacement. Even if it can't be restored - the effects of colonialism for example, cannot be eradicated. They may be transfigured but not eradicated. And that's where divine hospitality sits for us, do you think?

Yes, yes! And I think the bit that you mention when you're speaking about divine hospitality - often it's things that we are doing good to another. There's something about radical hospitality, divine hospitality, when you offer that hospitality to another who is different - demonized, marginalized, displaced - it is actually good for oneself.

It's this reciprocity with the soul of oneself. Because there is the displacement that we all feel within ourselves. *Who are we?* That is the eternal question. *'Who am I and who are you, God?'* That's what Francis of Assisi often apparently asked in his prayers. *'Who am I and who are you God?'*

And I think the practice of this hospitality - it's not about charity, or this paternalistic patronizing charity. It is deeper. It is about us flourishing fully when we get what divine hospitality looks like. Earlier you mentioned about, for example, the Ruth and Naomi story. And you mentioned about Christmas earlier. I must say, very often recently anyway, when I read the paragraph, that famous quote from Ruth that's often used in wedding vows: *'wherever you go I will go. Where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, your God my God. Where you die I will die, there I will be buried!'*

It's obvious a huge human commitment relationship is one of the deepest expressions about love. It's like *'how can you not see that?'* not see that this love, this divine love, the Hebrew words in it are in this relationship, and therefore the basis of it - irrespective of what class, race, background, culture you come from. That's the core thing isn't it?

Yes! I don't know what you think about this, but recent recently, as I read, I often think of Christmas. It reminds me of the theology of the word incarnate: *'that the word became flesh, and we have seen the glory! The glory of the first and only child, full of grace and truth.'* You know, John 1: 14. You know that passage! Jesus is directly connected to that ancestry of Ruth, of course, and Naomi. That is how the word incarnate happened!

Yes, of course, that's the love of Christmas.

That's right. God saves the human. That's this whole cosmic theology, right? That in that word that became flesh and came among us full of grace and truth. It's where God says, as if repeating Ruth's words, that wherever you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people. And wherever you die, I will be buried. Jesus died, got buried. If we believe in the anointed one, the Christ who came amongst us, that's what happened. That's the connection!

Thank you for that link of leading into Christmas. Now we can talk a long while, and we've opened up so much and I hope that it helps for other people. But in thinking about the Christmas project that you've been working on - and that I've been happy to support through Equal Voices, called the Asia Pacific Songs Project, would you like to say something about that? Because I think a lot of people would be delighted to hear about this - and to be able to share in this.

Thank you for the community support. My good friend and colleague, Kevin Bathman and I, floated this idea about all this xenophobia that's coming out, because as you know I'm part of the Asian Australian Alliance as a convener. We've been receiving reports of all of this corona racism, we call it. Corona virus racism. And it's horrible. We hear all of this xenophobia.

In addition to that of course you've got politicians cashing in on xenophobia. We've got Indian Australians being locked out of the country. We've got migrants being displaced. People who are here who we welcome to our care - students, international students, migrant workers. We tell them: *'go back to where you come from. We don't want you here'*. It is the exact opposite of the gospel's call for care and hospitality.

That's what these readings are speaking about today!

Absolutely! And then you have One Nation proposing all of these horrible bills against our Trump siblings. And we've got a national government who covers up abuse against women. Who are inhospitable towards asylum seekers, refugees, siblings. And of course that federal bill that they're going to propose about using religion as a front to discriminate against other people. That is the ultimate blasphemy in my mind. It's heresy. Anyway sorry, I rant!

The project. I was thinking, *I can't cope for one more second of doing some of this policy advocacy stuff! Is there any way that I could use something positive?* So this was how it happened. Sounds of Christmas from Asia Pacific Region. We came up with that. We thought, *'let's bring together all of these diaspora communities who are Australians, who are here, who are doing amazing things. Let's ask them to perhaps use their own language to sing the radical hospitality that is in the Christmas story.'*

These are people who have committed themselves to human rights, to being welcoming of refugees and asylum seekers, who are committed to LGBTIQ affirming. Sometimes you have heard, since the plebiscite on marriage equality, that Western Suburbs people are particularly bigoted. That people of colour, migrant communities are the one. Again blaming the outsider. So this album is to debunk them. These are people who are out there offering radical hospitality.

And we also know that Christmas is a lonely time for a lot of people who struggle, who economically are really challenged because of our systemic problems. We also think about people who are separated from their loved ones. We thought let's sing. Let's sing together with all these diverse languages, in our own diverse tongue. Let's de-centre the usual image of Christmas.

So this was how the 'Sounds of Christmas from Asia Pacific' was born. That was how we came and applied to the City of Sydney to do a project like that and they came back and said *'yes we're going to give you a matching grant!'* And here we are.

I know, early on, we did talk about launching it in Pitt Street or something. But there's going to be an online launch, probably in November?

Friday 26th of November at 8pm on Zoom, yeah.

So you're wanting people to join and also to share the music?

Yes. Oh, the CD. Just to let you know we have only limited edition of the CD, not because we did it to put up the price, but we have no budget to do more CD s, so by default we have limited edition. We know some people are buying for their organizations, their staff, their family and stuff. I think pre-sale is going to start in the middle of November, so just watch this space.

That's savvy, and it's that just one of the many things that you bring to us and encourage us. I hope that we will have many more conversations, not just between the two of us, but with all the different people that we connect with. And that we can place this radical hospitality back in the heart of not just our lives and lives of churches, but the lives of our community in the world which is so desperately needed.

So thank you so much Benjamin and God bless you and all that you do.

And all of you. God bless all of you for your ministry at Pitt Street. Go forth and help you help create human flourishing as you always have.

Amen.