

Divine hugs in all that we are

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Saturday 20 November 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin for the Transgender Day of Remembrance

Mark 12: 28 - 34

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

'*The Body doesn't lie*', they say. Well, certainly it can powerfully reveal and prompt us to the truth.

Years ago, for example, I remember a yoga teacher asking me to curl up into the foetal position and give myself a hug, expressing my love for myself.

But I simply couldn't manage it. I took up position, but my arms just wouldn't do it. Even when I actively exercised my mind to give myself the appearance of a hug, my body would not obey.

For you cannot simply command love. It has to be received, acknowledged, and embodied. Or, to put it another way, love has to be breathed in and breathed out.

All of this takes us to the heart of Jesus' teaching about the commandments (in Mark 12.28-34), and to the core of the Biblical tradition...

Today, 20th November, is the Transgender Day of Remembrance, when we are invited to remember the taking of transgender lives. For transphobia is very real and it can be utterly brutal. It is also worsening, in many ways. Indeed, according to the Human Rights Campaign in the USA, last year was the worst for recorded murders of transgender people and this year is about to pass that number.ⁱ

It is but the tip of a horribly destructive iceberg of violence. Notably, transgender women, and those who are other than white, are by far the majority of the murdered. For transphobia is intimately linked to poverty, powerlessness, and other forms of oppression.

It is the very opposite of Jesus' teaching in our Gospel today. It is about the denial of love and, in the taking of transgender lives, the denial of breath itself. Addressing transphobia is therefore core to loving our neighbour today.

It is significant that Jesus' two-sided commandment to *love God and our neighbour as ourselves* has always been central to the Sibyls, a long-standing Christian Transgender support group, based in the UK, of which I have been blessed to be a member. For it speaks powerfully of the spiritual pathway in which so many gender diverse people live out of their/our oppression and live into the fullness of life which God seeks for them/us.

In living this two-sided commandment, they/we breathe again – gloriously – and breathe new life into others too.

Both sides of the commandment are vital. It is easy to focus on the second half, and that is certainly important. Indeed, I once had a supervisor, an Augustinian priest, who used to say to me:

'the problem with people like you and I is that there are more than seven billion people in the world, and we, as Christians, have been taught to love them all, except one – ourselves.'

That is bad Christian teaching of course, which lops off the words 'as yourself' from 'love your neighbour'.

Without fully loving ourselves, as we are, our love for our neighbour is also limited. Indeed, such love can become suffocating, angry, even violent, as some of us know from relationships where others who seek to love us actually hurt us, for they do not really love themselves.

Sadly, we see that so often in some religious people, where others are hurt because of the so-called 'love' of those who have yet to love themselves. For, in my view (for example in churches), the body dysphoria of transgender people should be no real problem. It is wonderfully transformed, even into gender euphoria, by loving affirmation and action.

Yet the wider Church, the so-called Body of Christ, often fails to see the widespread dysmorphia it carries. Many Christians, as individuals, and as a Body together, would therefore do well to learn how they/we are loved, just as they/we are, and hug them/ourselves – and all of the body, of the world, accordingly.

This brings us back to the first half of the central twin commandment to love. For what held me back, years ago, from hugging myself were the thoughts and feelings that something in me, a vital part of me - my gender identity - could not be loved, and could not be offered in love. It had to be hidden.

That is the devastating cruelty of spiritually-based transphobia. Even when it is not embodied in other 'conversion therapy', or orientation change practices, it is a life-denying, breath-taking lie – sometimes literally.

That is so not the Gospel of Jesus!

For, shout it from the rooftops everyone – especially any of us who have ever believed that our bodies are in some way unacceptable, unlovable - whether because of our gender, our sexuality, our shape, our abilities: God, says Jesus, in his teaching on the great commandment – the God of inexhaustible love, wants all of us, just as we are: gender diverse, sexually diverse, bodily diverse, ability diverse, any way we are honestly diverse – and, yes, carrying the remaining shame, and struggle we've taken on, or created for ourselves.

God loves us, better than we can ever love ourselves. In this is life, and breath, and the power to hug (ourselves and others). For this is true, pentecostal, life, and breath, and love.

Like the Sibyls, I believe, passionately, that the great commandment is the foundation for living, and breathing, and hugging our world in God's love – beginning with ourselves.

This is a vibrant pathway forward for us all. It is so utterly transformative - in contrast to the body-denying, breath-taking, love-rejecting paths of transphobia and other forms of oppression.

For it begins, as any good yoga teacher does, with teaching us to breathe properly, by inhaling the life and love of God.

I often used to find both parts of that great commandment challenging, as well as beguiling.

It can still be, if we see it as an instruction from outside, rather than an invitation, to the inside.

As an invitation to breathe in the love of God, which first breathed us into life - just as we are.

An invitation which continues to breathe through us, infinite compassion, infinite hospitality, and infinite hope in the glorious diversity of creation, for all our neighbours.

Amen

ⁱ See further, and for some of the murders in 2021: <https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2021>