

# Jesus jujitsu

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 20 February 2022

A reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkipin

Epiphany 7C

Genesis 45: 3-11, 15; Luke 6: 27-38

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

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One of my favourite stories of transgender resistance to oppression comes from India. A group of hijra people were being harassed and humiliated. Of course, this was/is nothing new. Whilst hijra have their gender officially recognised on the Indian subcontinent, they are outcasts among outcasts, typically living on the margins, in the very poorest quarters, and they stir a range of reactions in others. Like all marginalised people, behind their own remarkable brave lives, lies terrible and very real fear, and many sad stories: of the sex trade and exploitation, of cruel and/or dangerous castrations, of being cast out and shamed.<sup>i</sup>

In one community this shaming grew intolerable. Exclusion, humiliation and actual physical and sexual violence grew exponentially. What could the hijra do? The law, politicians, even religious leaders, did not care. They were actually deeply complicit. Then, after one particularly awful day, the hijra hatched a plan. In the early hours of the morning, after stripping off their undergarments, they would walk, en masse, to the houses of the worst abusers, rattling pots and pans, bells and whistles, and anything they could put their hands on, seeking to wake up the whole neighbourhood, and make the maximum impact.

This they did, raising a mighty commotion. Then, they waited whilst the worst offenders, particularly the leading fathers of the community, opened their doors and windows, and came out to see what the terrible din was all about. Standing in line, shoulder to shoulder, the hijra together then took hold of the hems of their dresses, and, with an extraordinary shriek and song of pride, lifted them up, and displayed their genitalia, in all their glory. All those who watched on were taken aback, not only with shock, but with shame. For the hijra had turned the tables on them.

The shame now rested on those who were rightly shameful. The powerless had transformed the powers that oppressed them, into, at least temporary, tools of life and liberation.

Now, I am not necessarily recommending those particular actions as a model for transgender resistance in Australia, or elsewhere. Much as it might be tempting for some to imagine similar waking up certain politicians and religious leaders in that way here, the cultural context is different, apart from legal ramifications. However the creativity and dynamics of such protest and pride are relevant, especially as we come to consider Jesus' teachings in the Gospel passage today.

For what Jesus often embodied was what the theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid called 'indecent theology': namely models of living which subvert social expectations, in ways which turn the tables on the use of decency, shame, and purity codes by the powerful. How appropriate indeed, that we should have this Jesus teaching today, as the Sydney Mardi Gras season begins in earnest with its Fair Day in Victoria Park. For, with others who have been marginalised, the LGBTIQ+ community also continues to show us ways in which, to use our Epiphany theme, the world can be turned upside down, and crippling notions and practices of sin and shame transformed into flourishing and pride.

Let me come to the second half of Jesus' teaching in our Gospel passage in a while, together with the Hebrew story of Joseph with which it is twinned in our lectionary. For there can be a temptation to build an ethic of forgiveness from our readings which is too full of distortion and cheap grace. As we heard earlier this week, in our Prime Minister's remarks about forgiveness, there is a tendency among some Christians to soften, or even skip over, the very hard challenges of these passages.

Certainly, as I have indicated, we do well to understand Jesus' teaching today as expressions of 'indecent theology' and 'indecent' ethics. For, as Walter Wink helpfully illustrated in his book *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* we must locate today's Gospel passage in the context. Like the hijra today, Jesus lived amid great oppression, and their words were creative ways to subvert the power structures of the day. Injunctions such as '*turn the other cheek*' arise from Jesus' context, and, like the hijra's responses to oppression, they are not meant to be ethical commands for every age and situation, even though their spirit and imagination are to be taken on board. What is vital is to see how Jesus, as in the hijra story, here turns shame on its head, using the power of the seemingly entirely powerless. Like the best elements of Sydney Mardi Gras' history, human dignity is thus restored and the possibilities of new communities of freedom and love are created.

Jesus so plays with, transfigures, indecency - not just in today's reading, but in so many situations. For Jesus directly challenged those who thought they were 'decent', and the purity codes which marginalised others. Like the hijra in the story earlier, Jesus knew that appeal to law or political or religious leaders would do little to aid the immediate plight of the oppressed of their day. Yet direct violent responses to the violence experienced were unworkable, would simply be brutally crushed, and more than likely make things worse. Much smarter, more imaginative action was required, subverting the very ideas of decency, purity and power on which such violence was based and justified.

As Walter Wink traced therefore, the injunction to turn the other cheek (in Luke 6.29) was a brilliant tactic of nonviolent resistance. For in Jesus' context, it turned the shame and power inflicted on the oppressed back on to the oppressor - much like the hijra in the story earlier turned the shame heaped on them back on their oppressors. For, in Jesus' culture, striking a person deemed to be less worthy, a servant or of lower socioeconomic class, was a means of asserting authority and dominance. Crucially, it was done with the right hand - the hand of power and purity - and inflicted with the backhand. So, if the persecuted person "*turned the other cheek*," the oppressor was then faced with a real dilemma. They could not use their left hand, as this was regarded as weak and impure, particularly as it was typical used for toilet, and other hygienic, purposes. A back-hand strike on the opposite cheek would therefore not be possible. The alternative of course would be to slap the other person with the open hand. However to do so was something only done between equals, and would be regarded as marking equality of status. Therefore, by turning the other cheek, the oppressed and shamed person was reaffirming their pride and dignity and demanding equality.

If turning the cheek is about shame, pride and dignity, then the injunction about what to do if someone takes away your cloak is an even more striking example of Jesus' indecent theology and indecent ethics. For to give away 'your tunic' meant to become naked. As with the hijra story, in Jesus' day, the effects of such indecency fell more on those who saw the nakedness, and still more those who had forced the naked into nakedness, than on the naked person themselves.

Again, the shame heaped on the marginalised was turned back on those who inflicted the oppression. Those who had caused the shame now bore the shame themselves. The shamed restored their pride and self-worth. The true indecency of the powerful was revealed. The codes of purity and power were uncovered as tools of privilege and prejudice. No wonder that some have termed this 'Jesus jujitsu' – referring to the martial art practice which finds way for weaker combatants to overcome much more powerful opponents. 'Jesus jujitsu' is part, I would suggest, of Christian discipleship.

Now, as I have indicated, we cannot simply repeat Jesus' injunctions literally in very different contexts. Yet similar dynamics of shame and power play out among us today, don't they? We too, as the recent religious discrimination shambles has shown, have our own political and religious purity codes and promoters of pelvic orthodoxy to drive them. Meanwhile, all kinds of other people are marginalised and deliberately, actively, oppressed, particularly refugees and asylum seekers, upon whom all kinds of measures of shame and false threats of pollution are heaped. In many situations, violent resistance is not possible or is counter-productive.

So how do we reimagine positive theologies and ethics of nonviolent resistance today? How do we practise 'Jesus jujitsu'?

Let us now turn to the second half of today's Gospel passage, and to the story of Joseph and their forgiveness of the brothers who had inflicted such grievous wrong. How are we to sit with these? As I suggested earlier, there can be a tendency to turn those other words of Jesus into encouragement to Christians to be unrealistically pleasant. Coupled with a simplistic, literal, reading of '*turn the other cheek*' and '*give away your tunic*', they can even seem like commands to be doormats. That makes no sense, if we read seriously Jesus' earlier injunctions to offer active resistance to oppression. Rather, this is about the spirit in which we offer resistance when required and encouragement to loving relationships when we can.

Active nonviolence – and I stress the vital importance of the word active – has sometimes been described as 'the practice of the two hands'. In the face of oppression, abuse and violence, the first hand is held up, like a stop sign, and says 'no'. Symbolically, it is the role of the left hand too – the hand often culturally and historically associated with shame and weakness, impurity and lack of dignity. This hand has to be activated, and the stories of Jesus and the hijra show us how they did that, and encourage us to create our own ways.

There is a second hand however, which, even as the first, the left, hand says 'stop', offers the opportunity of new relationship. Note well, both that this new relationship is not on any terms and that it also requires understanding and a change of attitude and action from the oppressor, the privileged, the powerful. Symbolically that is the role of the right hand too – the hand that has often been associated with power and authority but which needs to learn to be offered in humility and mutual equality, not as a fist or with a false or dodgy handshake but with genuine openness to receive.

Now, I don't know about you, but I feel we have a long way to go in this country in practising the active nonviolence of the two hands, the indecent ethics of Jesus, Jesus jujitsu. We heard this week, for example, how our Prime Minister views forgiveness in relation to apologies to First Nations. He clearly has something more to learn. From a theological point of view, I therefore commend the response of Gary Worete Deverell<sup>i</sup>, speaking of how forgiveness cannot be simply expected, never mind demanded, and how Christian forgiveness involves what Anglicans call '*repentance and amendment of life*'.

Perhaps the story of Joseph we heard today may also offer a pointer. For one crucial feature of Joseph forgiving his brothers is surely Joseph's location as the second most powerful person in the rich, powerful and highly sophisticated ancient country of Egypt. Joseph was not a First Nations person, or a refugee in flight, or any other marginalised person fighting just to stay alive, for their dignity, and their pride.

For them, we must turn back to the teaching and model of Jesus on which we have earlier reflected. Yes, letting go of attachment to those who inflict pain may also help those seeking dignity and justice, but without such dignity and justice, forgiveness is ultimately meaningless or worse.

Joseph however offers a model of compassionate and generous leadership for which we may sometimes long, and, where we are powerful, seek to embody.

In the name of Jesus, who turned upside down and reimaged our understandings of power, decency and forgiveness, and calls us to do the same. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> See further for example <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/17/style/india-third-gender-hijras-transgender.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://uncommonprayers.blogspot.com/2022/02/on-pms-latest-lecture-to-indigenous.html>