

# Coming Home with Generous Hospitality

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 27 March 2022

Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin in conversation with Mikali Anagnostis

Lent 4C

**2 Corinthians 5: 16-21; Contemporary Reading inspired by Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32: *The Story of the Prodigal Transgender Daughter* by Susan Cottrell.**

(Read this story at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/freedhearts/2016/03/08/prodigal-trans/>)

The video of this worship service can be viewed on YouTube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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JOSEPHINE

It is a huge pleasure today to welcome Mikali amongst us. You might like to give a round of applause.

So we're going to have a little chat and talk a little bit about Mikali's journey at the moment and what they're up to. I think we could be here for quite a long while actually, but Mikali we're not going to, because there's so many different things about yourself and the things you're involved in. It's one of the huge delights to me of coming into the Uniting Church, of meeting so many different people, not just at Pitt Street, but in other spaces, not least at Leichhardt Uniting Church where Mikali usually worships.

But I've asked Mikali particularly to speak and talk today because, as we think about relationships and that amazing story that Susan Cottrell wrote to rework the gospel text for today, as we think about what it is to come home to know God's extraordinary generous love for each and every one of us. And particularly for people like Mikali and myself who are known roughly in the broad band of gender diverse people and a lot of uncertainty about that.

One of the great things about Pitt Street and Leichhardt and one or two other spaces, is the way in which we we're leading in helping people to understand and affirm. So that's why we shared that story today and hopefully, Mikali, you can share a little bit yourself. As an "older" trans person, as someone who comes from another space, as part of the enrichment of our understanding of our human diversity. So please come and join us. I'm hoping this work as well.

So Mikali you might like just to introduce yourself, just say a little bit about your personal journey maybe your faith journey as well, and how you might identify at the moment.

MIKALI

Thanks for having me everyone. It's really lovely to be here. So I identify as trans non-binary - and as a follower of Jesus. And those journeys feel very intertwined, and feel like they always have always have been really.

So I grew up Catholic. My Mum converted to Christianity from a secular family when she was quite young. My Dad's quite spiritual but not religious. So I grew up in a fairly open-minded faith environment, which I was really lucky to be in.

I grew up going to mass and I also grew up with a twin sister. So I always had girls' clothes and toys very available to me. I was very lucky that that Mum and Dad, for a long time, were really fine with me taking to those things and expressing myself intuitively with those things more than masculine things.

When I got a bit older I think they were concerned that that wouldn't go down too well at school and generally, so they encouraged me to be a bit more gender typical. It would be a long time before I allowed myself to revisit those feelings. I spent a long time convincing myself that I wasn't feeling those things, and wasn't able to go there.

When I moved to Sydney in 2019, I joined Leichhardt Uniting Church and moved into the Intentional Community there, Epworth House. And I think at that point, I was in a space where I knew that I was so unconditionally loved, and knew that I would be loved as myself - no matter who that was. That really allowed me to start to revisit those feelings that I had been running from, and confront what that meant for who I was, and how I was going to live my life!

That started a journey of identifying as trans non-binary, not that long ago. I'm still quite early on in my journey. I've only been identifying as trans non-binary for a bit over a year, so I feel very lucky. I feel very grateful for that.

JOSEPHINE

Leichhardt's a great space for that. You mentioned the Intentional Community - and also Christian Students Uniting that you're part of. Can you say a little bit about that and about how Christian Students Uniting is helping to affirm human diversity?

MIKALI

Yeah, it's been a really important space for me, Christian Students Uniting. It's very special. So Christian Students Uniting, for those who don't know, is an ecumenical group on campuses, at university campuses, but it's closely associated with the Uniting Church. It's quite unique. Most bible studies on campus are very conservative. Christian Students Uniting really stands out as one that isn't - and is quite affirming of gender diverse people and has been for a really long time.

So these places are safe spaces for gender diverse people in the church. We go to those places and it ends up being quite a lot of us there, because of the lack of other places where we can go. So, for me it's been a really wonderful place and a safe space on campus to explore my faith and to be safe.

I think Christian Students Uniting has also done a bit of community organizing with this current cohort, particularly since the 2019 climate strike. So, when the Mardi Gras parade was moved to the SCG last year, David Barrow, who is a community organizer - many of you will probably know him - got a group of people from Christian Students Uniting together and mentored us to help put a contingent together to go to that that rally. Since then, I've been with Uniting Church and CSU groups to other trans rights and queer rights rallies.

JOSEPHINE

Yes, that's wonderful. I mean, one of things I think is terrific is that, Pitt Street's got a long history of affirming ministries, but it's wonderful to see in, not just the Uniting Church, but particularly Uniting Church South Sydney, Paddington and Leichhardt amongst that. And we're hoping in the coming year, with World Pride coming up next year, to have a particular focus. And I know Radhika, Leichhardt's minister is involved with the group that's trying to build things up. But Christian Students Uniting, I think, is really vital isn't it, for enabling young people who otherwise might be turned away from churches. Because the noise that we get is a very different one.

So, are there things you think that we can do better? And you see that we could move forward in the next year? For example, in terms of affirming and celebrating human diversity, are there things you would like to see happening?

MIKALI

Well I think, to start with Christian Students Uniting, lots of people don't even realize that there are parts of the church where gender diverse people are welcomed celebrated. And there are so many moments where we'll be at O-week or doing events and people will double-take and be really enjoyed or shocked. So much of the change that is happening with the way that gender diverse people are viewed by the public has been to do with representation. And gender diverse people being able to say for ourselves who we are. I think a really beautiful thing that's happening right now is that affirming spaces, like Pitt Street and Christian Students Uniting, are becoming places where gender diverse people can meet each other and create networks where we are able to tell our own stories - like this today and like at the Trans Day of Visibility coming up. So I'm really hopeful that there's more.

JOSEPHINE

So what are the things you would like people to know generally? Pronouns is one isn't it? And language is helpful, especially from a non-binary point of view, isn't it? But are there things that you think - I mean there's been so much nonsense - you know, these bills in parliaments. But there are things we can do that are actually positive, aren't there, as we come to the Trans Day of Visibility next week to affirm people, like we heard in the gospel story today?

MIKALI

Yeah, absolutely. I think that listening is the biggest thing. And again, I'm very grateful to be able to share here today. But I think that the way that gender diverse people are spoken about is often very different to the experience of being trans and gender diverse. So, listening to what that experience actually is like for people like us. Every trans or gender diverse person has a very different experience. So listening!

JOSEPHINE

I know! Have you heard people talk about a transgender ideology - and I'm trying to work out what it is. The only transgender ideology I can see is from the right wing! Because my experience is this is one of the most marvellous things about gender diverse people. Just transgender women - we're so different we are like a bunch of cats. Trying to get us together to agree on anything would be impossible. But when we come we look at the breadth of gender diversity there is now, it's quite extraordinary isn't it?

MIKALI

It's a beautiful and a wonderful thing, and there's just so much beauty and colour that can come out of allowing people to tell the world who they are, each in their unique way. Allowing them to show God in them in their unique way. That God is in them.

JOSEPHINE

Yes well Susan Cottrell's story we heard today, reworking that story known often as the Prodigal Son, I think it's very real actually. I mean it almost brought tears to my eyes, thinking about my journey with my parents a few years ago. But also the struggles often that family have - and friends and people we know - to grow. But do you think things are changing and improving in that way? Because it makes such a difference, doesn't it, where people affirm and celebrate and support us? Especially those who are struggling with their identity.

MIKALI

Yeah, I feel really lucky to be coming of age as a gender diverse person right now, when there is the work that trans and gender diverse people like yourself, Jo, have been doing for decades is really starting to change the way that we're viewed. And I think that now, an experience that really epitomizes how grateful I feel is that I started a new job at the end of last year - and it was the first time that I was able to enter a new space and introduce myself using my pronouns. And it was just such a wonderful positive response. Everyone was quite a young team. Everyone was just so fine with it. So, yeah, the world is changing. It's really wonderful and exciting.

JOSEPHINE

Yes, well we could talk for a long while but we're not going to, because you're going to sing in a moment. But I wanted to ask you just a little bit about - one of the things I think is really exciting is, whenever people who haven't been heard very much start reading the bible, and allowed to read it our own way, how our faith comes alive from those perspective. Things we see in it that may be a loss. Are there other particular texts in the bible or themes that, for you, have been important for you in your journey, that you might like to share with others?

MIKALI

Yeah the main ones, I think are different at different times. One, at the moment that is really giving me a lot of strength and peace, is the story of the exodus. You know, that classic liberation story that is used in many different liberation movements. What's really been resonating with me lately has been the image of the sea being pulled back and being able to walk through it out of captivity. In my life, I really feel like my community, and the people around me who have loved me and affirmed me, have really acted as the hand of God pulling back the sea and allowing me to walk out of captivity.

And the other element of that story that I find really profound, and that really resonates with my experience of gender, is coming into Canaan and this idea of a promise of a place on the earth that is ours, like a body. And that that was somewhere that they got to make a home in. It was promised to them, and it was somewhere that was new, and where there was change that they had to make to that place to make it a home. But it was their home and they got to make it into a place that was home for them.

JOSEPHINE

Thank you. That's so rich and so beautiful and it ties in, I think, with the readings we had today. That amazing reading from 2 Corinthians about the ministry of reconciliation we share, because God does reconcile us.

So we share in that, and we are a new creation. And the invitation to create a home and a land with others with all our diversity that, that enables us all to thrive.