

On dragonflies drawing flame

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 20 November 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 24c; (Transgender Day of Remembrance)

Contemporary Reading: *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*
by Gerard Manley Hopkins; Luke 23: 33-43

The video of this reflection 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.

How do you regard dragonflies? In the poem we heard earlier (*As Kingfishers Catch Fire*), the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins not only encourages us to be like them, but, in so doing, to be like Christ.

Not everyone has always agreed however. In early colonial Australia for example, white fellas tried to kill dragonflies, just as they/we tried to kill so many other life-giving things that they/we did not understand. Those early colonialists saw dragonflies flying around and landing on their valuable horses, and they saw the horses moving and flicking their tails. So they thought the dragonflies were biting and making them crook. The colonialists were making things worse. The dragonflies were actually eating the mosquitoes and the gnats that were troubling the horses. They were life-givers, saviours even, not devils in disguise.

In so many positive ways, dragonflies are thus evocative symbols for transgender people today. For, on this Transgender Day of Remembrance, we do well to attend to how bearers of light have been treated as embodiments of darkness. We do well, as our Gospel today reminds us, to remember how Jesus was not crucified alone, and how others are also crucified today. And above all, we do well to affirm that it is only in recognising the light, in strange places, that we find salvation and hope for us all...

I want to speak personally in a moment, and what I have to say is not easy, either to say or for some of us to hear. For the Trans Day of Remembrance raises human suffering of various kinds. Therefore, I want to give a trigger warning, not least for those who know the pain which comes, and lies behind, murder and self-harm. This memorial day is not about gender identity alone. For there are so many positive reasons why transgender people are like dragonflies, even though we are sometimes treated as devils. However, we also reveal many aspects of wider human suffering in the negativity we experience.

Let me begin with some statistics.^[1] We actually do not know how many transgender people are killed across the world because of who we are. As in this country until quite recently, transgender people have thus been made invisible in so many official records. Enabling invisibility is after all the easiest way to erase people. We whitefellas did that with Aboriginal people, as when we proclaimed that Truganini was the last of her people in Tasmania.

In this country, many bodies fail to record us properly. We therefore have no really adequate picture of who and what transgender people really are and experience. Yet the records we do have highlight suffering - which is not only quite unnecessary, but which also highlights other key human concerns. Not only have the numbers of recorded murders of transgender people across the world been rising, but the issues behind the Trans Day of Remembrance are nothing if not intersectional.

The statistics state global inequalities starkly. Let me highlight four aspects. Firstly, of those transgender people known to have been murdered in 2021, 96% were transgender women, or trans feminine. Why? It is because transphobia and hate are inextricably bound up with patriarchy and sexism. Notwithstanding a few high profiled women speaking against transgender liberation, transphobia is a weapon to undermine all that the women's movement has gained. For transphobia fights to regain full power over the bodies and souls of those who have traditionally been 'othered' and subjugated. It seeks to put back into our place all who have risen against patriarchal control.

Secondly, the statistics we do have show that, in 2021, the numbers of murdered transgender people doubled in the USA alone, and 53% of those killed were people of colour. Things are simply not getting better; or, at least, where progress is now being made, it is met with violence. Good news, as our Gospel story today reminds us, is always typically met with powerful resistance, with violence, and even death, for those who bear it, especially if they are not people of privilege. Transphobia is thus intimately bound up with racism, and with Black Lives Matter.

Thirdly, analysis of recorded data shows that 43% of transgender people murdered in Europe were migrants. For trans issues are so much about refugees and asylum seekers; about xenophobia, poverty and inhospitality, as well as manifest racism. No wonder right wing politics and media seek to distract people with transphobia, and, in that, concentrate on issues of their choosing and shaping. For if we are to take transphobia and its violence seriously, we have to address the major issues they involve.

Fourthly, what data we do have shows that roughly half of recorded murders of transgender people are of sex workers. This reinforces how transphobia is inextricably linked to male violence and patriarchy, racism, and, not least, poverty and marginalisation. No wonder Western culture has tried to identify some of us as 'perverts', sexualising us as disturbing figures, even as they have denied our visibility, voices and value. No wonder now that religion is becoming the last and greatest bastion of bigotry, with hate and violent consequences. For transphobia is founded on maintenance of cruel difference and othering, and the maintenance of purity codes and stigmatisation. We are therefore made criminal and crucified.

Let me relate this to my own personal journey. Significantly, on the same day that Penny and I formally approached the Uniting Church about the possibility of ministry within it, I heard that a dear friend had ended her own life. Such devastation is not included in the recorded deaths remembered on this day, but it is connected and so very real.

My friend was actually a Christian, from an extraordinary Middle Eastern land of rich culture, but one with a deeply repressive regime. She was younger than me, and beautiful, in appearance and spirit. She had good friends, and, apart from her father, a deeply loving and supportive family in her home country. She had come through the costly struggles of transition, including several demanding surgeries. Yet she ended her own life. Why?

My experience is that we never know what exactly is happening in another person's life and we should not live in continuing anxiety and perplexity, nor certainly in guilt or shame, if someone acts in such a way. We must rather hold all that is good in our hearts and memories. I have also never spoken publicly before about my friend and I will always strive to honour her unique wonder - rather than collude with her being a mere statistic of social, political, or any other concern. So, as with others I have loved who have ended their own lives, I have no answers. Yet I believe that part of their enduring value is to ask us to do whatever we can to listen and to support one another, especially those who are on the margins.

The other day I met a particularly beautiful young transgender woman and I asked her how she was going. She paused for a moment, in evident struggle, and simply replied '*I am still alive*'. That is enough for too many of us transgender people to achieve. These are the realities some of us live with every day, and they must be transformed.

Events like that conversation, and my friend's death, cut me, typically daily, to the heart. I led my friend's funeral and it was one of the hardest things I ever done. The final straw seems to have been an encounter in a well-known clothing store in Brisbane. She had chosen a dress to try on and asked where the female changing room was. The male attendant pointed it out, but smirked and called her 'sir'.

I have had that experience. For my friend it was the turning point: after all she had gone through, and though she was so gorgeous, so feminine, so herself; even though that man was so crass, so offensive, and so part of an old world which if too slowly, is changing; even though she knew, most of the time, that God loved her.

It is not, after all, simply the murders and the violence which bring us down, is it? It is also the little things, the micro-aggressions. That is why some things matter to gender diverse people that do not to others: like the language we use, the pronouns and way we talk to one another, the toilet signs and the awareness needed; as well as the bigger things our politicians continue to dodge, like funding for surgeries and health care, necessary legal changes and removal of gatekeepers, the intentional education, employment and housing policies and resources we require.

Is that being 'woke', or 'snowflakes', or is it about choosing life, flourishing for all? Every little step can make a difference, and remembrance days like today can strengthen our divinely human solidarity as well as honour the pain. Transgender people so do not need anyone's sympathy, never mind pity. We only want life and life for us all.

Solidarity, even in the worst of suffering, and fullness of life: these are two of the great themes we surely see in today's Gospel reading. For this carefully crafted scene of crucifixion is intended to provide us all with hope. We are not told whether the criminals on the crosses were transgender females, black, migrants, or sex workers - who knows? They were almost certainly poor, and victims of the inequalities and violence of the ancient world. We are not told anything about the context of their crimes, or how they were so defined. What we do know is that they represent the outsiders whom conventional society has labelled and seeks to punish. So, with Jesus, they hang on crosses, as literally tortured symbols for others to learn from, on a rubbish heap on the edge of the city, of so-called 'civilised' life.

The crucified one who asks for Jesus' help represents us all: seeking God's grace, always there and open to us, even at our very end. For note Jesus' response. Jesus does not dwell on who that other person is, or what they have done. He simply offers solidarity, and hope. For Jesus and the others crucified are not only condemned by the very same powers. They also share the same pain. Jesus thus affirms our common humanity in responding.

If we cannot find solidarity in our different, yet common, sufferings, what hope is there for us? If we can, as we see in this story, then we are indeed able to be transformed by grace and find fresh hope. For new life, as Jesus shares with us here, is not something to wait for, in some future existence about which we can only speculate. Hope and new life begin here, even in the worst of our sufferings, if we can see the light and let it in.

It would take way too long to talk today about all the spiritual symbolism of dragonflies! Let me conclude however by talking about light-bearing and suffering. For one of the main characteristics of dragonflies is to convey and share light. Like kingfishers, as the poet put it, dragonflies catch fire with the light. Dragonflies draw flame. Dragonflies bring life alive and shine out that light to others with their wondrous wings and movements. No wonder that dragonflies are therefore such expressive symbols of transgender people. As such they encourage us all, like Christ, to see, share, and shine with light.

Butterflies are also beautiful symbols of God's light and creativity. Like dragonflies they too have to transition, bearing the costs of metamorphosis. Dragonflies however have it even tougher. Indeed the dragonfly journey to full life can be quite gruelling. For a start, unlike butterflies, dragonflies go straight from larvae to adulthood, with no pupal stage. In that vulnerable process they also then have to hatch out of water, learning to breathe air and being subject to predators and to rain and other climate changes which can damage and destroy. Time is needed to redistribute their bodily fluids, and push their true bodily features through their skin. They then typically struggle to fly, being further vulnerable to predation. Today the destruction of wetlands threatens their existence. Yet survive they do, and, as the poet says, they then shine!

For these and other reasons, transgender people are truly dragonfly people, and they/we encourage us all to be dragonfly people too. That is at the heart of our Gospel story today. Will our different sufferings simply destroy us, or can we connect through them and allow even our pain to be transfigured by renewing light and grace? Will we allow the powers of death to crush us – whether it be our own personal demons, or those of others phobias, and patriarchy, racism, xenophobia, poverty, stigmatisation? Or will we, with Jesus, and all the dragonfly people, stand up in solidarity and hope, renewed by light and grace?

To take up the words sung by Keala Seattle, for the film *The Greatest Showman*, let none of us ever let others deprive our souls and lives of the greatest truth of all – that we are truly, utterly loved, just as we are.

There is indeed, as Jesus put it, 'a place for us', all of us, 'for we are glorious'.