

# Becoming who we really are - Temples of God!

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 03 March 2024

A Reflection by Benjamin Oh

Lent 3B (Mardi Gras)

**Contemporary Reading: from *Christian Mysticism's Queer Flame: Spirituality in the Lives of Contemporary Gay Men* by Michael Bernard Kelly; a Portion of Psalm 19; John 2:13-22**

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

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- A story of An Xin and Kai En – On making a mess and on forgiveness – lessons on becoming who we truly are. “This is your second last warning!” The learning of God’s never ending second chances of grace and mercy, An Xin and Kai En teaches us.
- Beneath the outward joy, the glitter and colours and joy – is the understated lesson of becoming who we really are – to not collude with oppression – of becoming unconditional love – of the telling of God’s grace, mercy and love beyond what the cisheteropatriachal world could imagine.

## **Sydney Mardi Gras as Sacramental – as subversively pro God**

I once wrote “*For so many of us Trans/nonbinary, Bisexual, Intersex, Asexual, Gay, Lesbian, Queer folks and our loved ones – the pride march that is Sydney’s Mardi Gras and Pride Events such as these is such an ‘outward sign of inward grace’ – a sacramental event. It is sacred mystery – something of an experience and understanding that can only be accessed by those who have suffered like LGBTIQ folks.*”

It is such an upside-down manifestation, an upsetting, the turning of tables and lashing of whips of the cisheteropatriarchal temple of worship!

Having been told by many voices, that our truths as LGBTIQA+ are to be sacrificed on the altar of patriarchy - that no joy, no love, no goodness can possibly come out of us ‘*becoming what we truly are*’ for the good of that cisheteropatriarchal system – that’s what a temple is, a system of worship, reflecting that adage ‘we become what we worship’.

LGBTIQA+ folks, queer folks, especially many of us who grew up in the dominantly cisgender-hetero-patriarchal world, many of us have to learn to survive at a very young age what it means to collude, to live in collusion – sometimes against our conscience, to hide, to repress who we are just to survive, to live, to not be harmed.

If you are a racialized person from a minoritised community in a white world, in a racialized society, you also learn and appreciate deeply what grace and mercy looks like. Sometimes what little crumbs of mercies that fall off the table for you and people like you can be life-saving.

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Sunday 03 March, 2024. Lent 3B

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## How we collude?

Having worked and advocated for the past 2 decades in LGBTIQ+ spaces, in a racialized society that Asian Australians have to navigate, the liminal LGBTIQ+ spaces for people of faith and people of colour – you have to learn very quickly alongside other siblings like you who were sometimes born here, sometimes migrants - international students, skilled migrants, refugees that we have much shared experiences. That we have to learn very quickly where you are in the lower parts of the pecking order in our highly racialized society, and how proximity to respectability – to whiteness – to ‘straightness’ - can earn queer people of colour like yourself brownie points.

The LGBTIQ+ sphere is of course not free from being in collusion with oppression – we all need to ask: Who is not at the table?

One can get lost in seeking to preserve one’s life, to become attuned to worshipping the ego – both the communal and that of the individual, to be complicit in the oppression of oneself and another, to let the suppression of justice and liberty take root; the silencing of God’s love, boundless grace and mercy.

## Samples of non-collusion

In 1999, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, Holy Roman and Universal Inquisition), ordered my friend Sister Jeannine Gramick to no longer speak on the subject of homosexuality. Sister Jeannine Gramick who co-founded with Father Robert Nugent the LGBTQ+ affirming New Ways Ministry responded publicly: *“I choose not to collaborate in my own oppression.”*

Michael Kelly whose support and friendship I miss, like Sister Jeannine Gramick, but two year before in 1997 chose to actively not collude with their own oppression and the silencing of LGBTIQ+ Catholic Christians by taking a symbolic action to wear a rainbow sash to Mass. Michael did not take one ounce of pleasure in the vindication of his prophetic action even years later and suffered much from the actions of his oppressors.

A few days ago, Aaron Bushnell a 25-year-old active service personnel of US air force set himself on fire outside the Israeli embassy in Washington DC in the act of Self- immolation whose last words were *“I will no longer be complicit in genocide,”* *“I am about to engage in an extreme act of protest. But compared to what people have been experiencing in Palestine at the hands of their colonizers, it’s not extreme at all. This is what our ruling class has decided will be normal.”* Then he set fire to his own body, uttering the last words - *“Free Palestine.”*

Historically in our Asian culture, this extreme act is meant to utterly call us all to stop and to listen: that we are unbecoming of ourselves, it is the ultimate sound of alarm to the human family, an act of total non-collusion, of non-complicity with the ego.

Some of us are aware of that story of self-immolation of that Buddhist monk in Vietnam - Thích Quảng Đức 釋廣德, who was protesting against the persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government of Ngô Đình Diệm: *“Before closing my eyes and moving towards the vision of the Buddha, I respectfully plead to President Ngô Đình Diệm to take a mind of compassion towards the people of the nation and implement religious equality to maintain the strength of the homeland eternally.”*

Quảng Đức's heart supposedly remained intact and did not burn. The intact heart relic is regarded as a symbol of compassion.

We are of course familiar with the story of Jesus and the cross.

## **Rainbow Pride & Mardi Gras as acts of Non-Collusion**

The redemptive history of our human family is often very disturbing and can be utterly incomprehensible to the imagination of those who are privileged. Just think of those who do not understand that 'pride-filled', 'joy-filled' extravaganza that is the Mardi Gras parade- they ask: What pride are you celebrating? What joy? They don't understand what becoming truly who we are is about. The LGBTIQ+ liberation movement like that of stories of our human redemption is lined with stories of choosing to become who we truly are – for others and for ourselves.

In our earlier reading from Michael, we read *"It is only by truly becoming ourselves that we can become divine."* becoming one's full-self, becoming truly incarnate, becoming undifferentiated from the divine, and being transformed – offer a potent image of what the true spiritual and mystical journey is.

It is about letting go of a system of worship of the status quo, of preserving the false-self, of transformation, of become what we can truly be.

These stories and reflections can really bring a new perspective to the words of Jesus who says: *"Who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love/your compassion, you'll have it forever, real and eternal."*

## **How do we be what we truly are?**

In the Gospel reading today, we have a vivid image of Jesus, the consummate Jew, doing everything that the modern manual for *'Respectability Politics'* instructs a person not to do.

Sometimes in the older interpretation of this Gospel, they theme this passage as the *'cleansing of the temple'*, often heaping blame on the religious community & hierarchy of Jesus' tradition criticising the buying and indeed the selling out of God's mercy as a commodity.

This interpretation can also sometimes 'get us off the hook'. The symbolic actions of Jesus can have a rather profound individual dimension to it. Jesus is charging at our ego, overturning the exchanges we make in our collusion with our own oppression and that of others? In Jesus' importance reference to the Prophet Zechariah who in the last verse of the book writes *"and every cooking pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and use them to boil the flesh of the sacrifice. And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day."*

That we are ourselves, our lives, our homes, our communities be transformed into temples of justice, of worship, of holiness. That we can't collude in the trading of truest selves, that we should not gather our false selves like Den of Thieves.

Jesus did not call the temple business people robbers, he doesn't say that they're doing unethical business, in fact many argue that they're essential services for those visiting the temple- he uses the term *'Den of thieves'* - he names the colluding in turning God's grace and mercy into something that can be somehow traded, perhaps buying and selling what does not belong to them in the first place. Something we and our churches should perhaps take note about limited God's grace and love and mercy through our neoliberal transactional theology. This is what 'conversion therapy' and 'anti-LGBTIQ+ ideologies' are built upon – hypocrisy.

The next point of attack in that Gospel passage is from those who still do not get what Jesus was trying to say and do symbolically – they question him by asking him: *“What credentials can you present to justify this?”* – for LGBTIQ+ people of faith, we are immediately reminded of questions like – how can you be? You can’t be truly a man? You can’t be happy? You cannot love?

Prove to us who worship a cisgender centric heterosexual patriarchy your credentials.

Jesus answered back to them without hesitation, *“Tear down this Temple and in three days I’ll put it back together.”* – perhaps alluding to the Paschal Mystery of Easter- of Good Friday, Holy Saturday and the Resurrection- fact that death to self, to dare be in the darkness of selflessness – only by which we can be the glorious resurrected temples of worship for God. We becoming our truest self as temples of God’s dwelling – that we are to be temples of grace, of justice, of mercy, of love - is perhaps the point of it all, and the queerest of this idea – is that we are all worthy of this transformation.

### **Life and Life to the full is what we called to be for ourselves and others.**

At Michael Kelly’s funeral – the First Reading was chosen from the same Gospel of John 10: 9-10

*“I am the gate. Anyone who enters through me will be safe: they will go freely in and out and be sure of finding pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.”*

Once again, the connection of the Den and Thieves who steals and kills, and destroy who we are becoming.

What, how do we become the truest of ourselves, temples of grace, justice, mercy, love – and undo the collusion with the status quo?

Jesus gives us much clue to loving self - loving neighbour, loving God as an indivisible truth of who we are, might just give us some idea.

The green theme of renewal at Mardi Gras for my *Rainbow Christians Together* family was drawn from St Hildegard of Bingen – here’s what she says about becoming who we truly are:

*“I am the fiery life of the essence of God; I am the flame above the beauty in the fields; I shine in the waters; I burn in the sun, the moon, and the stars. And with the airy wind, I quicken all things vitally by an unseen, all-sustaining life.”*

So, in the paraphrased words of St Hildegard, let me offer this blessing for you my beloved community:

*“May you be the fiery life of the essence of God;*

*May you be the flame above the beauty in the fields;*

*May your becoming shine in the waters;*

*May your becoming burn in the sun, the moon, and the stars.*

*And with the airy wind, may your becoming quicken all things vitally by an unseen, all-sustaining life.”* Amen.

