

St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 19 Nov 2017 Pentecost 24. Transgender Sunday of Remembrance

Isaiah 56:1-8

⁵⁶ This is what God says: "Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. ² Blessed is the one who does this—the person who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath and their hands from doing any evil." ³ Let no foreigner who is bound to God say, "The God will surely exclude me." And let no eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." ⁴ For this is what God says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—⁵ to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever. ⁶ And foreigners who bind themselves to God to minister to the divine, to love God's name and serve, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all people." ⁸ The Sovereign God declares—the one who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered."

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 A Time for Everything

There is a time for everything, / and a season for every activity under the heavens:

² a time to be born and a time to die, / a time to plant and a time to uproot,

³ a time to kill and a time to heal, / a time to tear down and a time to build,

⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh, / a time to mourn and a time to dance,

⁵ a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, / a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, / ⁶ a time to search and a time to give up, / a time to keep and a time to throw away,

⁷ a time to tear and a time to mend, / a time to be silent and a time to speak,

⁸ a time to love and a time to hate, / a time for war and a time for peace.

Luke 4: 14 – 21 Jesus Rejected at Nazareth

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. ¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸ "The Spirit of God is on me/ because I have been anointed /to proclaim good news to the poor. /God has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners/ and recovery of sight for the blind,/ to set the oppressed free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of God's favour."²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Contemporary reading

To the Transgender Suicides

You will never know/ the peace of acceptance/ once you are finished,/ put to earth.

Life was harsher than the dirt;/ A parent made you feel worthless/ because you wanted to wear a short dress./ Because you felt different/ cut off/ Disowned/ Disavowed; one friend after another disappears/ and no one hears/ the sobs/ no one feels the salty tears/ no one holds your hands/ or offers you a hug
You were damned/ by those who demanded/ you conform, / where there was no warmth./The clock cuts you bitterly/ condemning you to be lonely/ and I cry all the more/ knowing you won't be the only one/not the only daughter wanting to be a son/ not the only male that wants to be a female/ not the only soft face hardened/ or hard face softened till the sorrow overflows/ till everyone you know closes the door/ and you disappear forever more

It is not an easy thing to read the list of names provided for tomorrow's Transgender Day of Remembrance. We have sanitized the experience for you by reading out the names of the countries and the numbers listed as murdered or having taken their own lives. I am not sure we should have done that, but if we are honest, truly honest how many of you or us would want to listen to 230 names along with the cause of death ranging from 'shot in the back' to 'run over by a vehicle' to 'tortured and beaten'. The full list is here should you want to read it and you can access the list on the TDOR website too.

It was a shock to me to realise that I was equally shocked last year when the number of names we could access was only in the eighties, we read them all out then, you might remember, in groups of ten, but still we spared you the causes of death equally horrific. Yet, in the intervening year I had forgotten that sense of shock. It is just as well as remember each year.

As you listen to the countries being read out later, notice that Brazil whose tourism in part depends on mardi gras and samba parades, with their drag queens and transvestites has the highest number of transgender casualties – 151. The US, bastion of freedom and equality, has 24 deaths listed, Mexico 47. I am left to wonder if these are true numbers or whether there are more unreported in other countries which report only 1 or 2 or 5.

Reading the list of actual causes of death leaves me wondering why so brutal a reaction, and why a majority of male-to-female trans victims?

It saddens me as a female to read that transphobia and homophobia have their deep roots in misogyny – in a deep-seated fear of and disrespect of the Feminine. This is why so many trans victims are in male-to-female transition. It is why the hate speech so often used of gay men has feminine overtones. By those who commit these terrible crimes it is seen as an indignity for men to become women or to act like women (at least that is how those phobic members of the population see it).

Crime against transgendered members of society is not an isolated or specific accident, nor is homophobia against both the gay and lesbian communities. It is not specialized only to these three groups, though they get a worse time in many places than women do. It is crime which arises from our society's skewed view of the Feminine, something which unfortunately mainstream Christianity has aided and abetted. Every male and every woman has a feminine side and a masculine side. All people are both feminine and masculine in our characteristics, yet in Western society the male is more valued. So men hide their feminine side (don't be a girl) and women who show too many masculine qualities are put down as 'too bossy'.

This is not a Christian nor a Jewish attitude. In the reading from Isaiah we hear the voice of God being employed to give a valued place to eunuchs and to foreigners/strangers, and at the end of the reading we heard "The Sovereign God declares—the one who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather **still others** to them besides those already gathered."

Along with the chosen people of Israel in this passage the Sovereign God is also allowing in, welcoming in others who are different, including those whose bodies are different from the usual male model. And in the well known Ecclesiastes reading, there is no dualist choice having to be made between two alternatives, seen as the one being 'good' and the other 'bad'. Here there is a time for everything and a rhythm for each activity.

Then centuries later when Jesus turns up at his local synagogue, the passage he is given to read he claims for his own – he is the one to release those in bondage of different kinds and to help those blinded by their own prejudice to see clearly and, as well, to free those who are oppressed.

Even when repressive scriptures are emphasized by those who are frightened and prejudiced, there are these passages proclaiming freedom release and enlightenment in these ancient scriptures.

It is unfortunate, no, more than that, tragic, that the patriarchal society of the ancient scriptures has been assumed by our own times to be the biblical, holy norm – that suppression and repression of the Feminine is a thing to be desired. Not so. Yet, God has been traditionally referred to as always male, even the Holy Spirit which is most often pictured as a bird and whose name in Hebrew is feminine and in Greek is neuter, is referred to as he. Yet, this is not so, there are many feminine terms used in less well known passages for the person called God in the Bible.

If you live in a world where the God of the universe is only thought of as male, that not only gives every male on earth permission to be king of the castle, it also tells each woman on earth that she is second best. No one even has to proclaim this, the metaphors do it silently. Just as when a country has a bully for a President, other citizens of the country feel they can bully others too, a male-only divinity spells out a certain worldview. Yet this is not the biblical position. God is mother and father, crone and king, guiding shepherd and mothering hen.

And what's more, either-or, good-bad, black-white, male-female, straight-gay, cis-trans are not Jewish or Christian dualisms. They are Greek ideas, picked up along the way; employed because they are so useful for the group which thinks itself superior to maintain power and control over the group they see as inferior.

As we saw in the world wars, you can only torture a person if you have decided they are a non-person. You can only beat them to death if they have no value for you. You can hit and kill and maim and gas when the person in front of you is only for you an object on to which you can project all your fear of difference and otherness.

So, let me say this clearly to us all here today.

This is not the truly Christian way.

So many of us and our sisters and brother Christians have been and are mistaken. Every person is equally valuable and loved.

Men *and* women

Straight *and* Gay

Gay *and* Lesbian

Cis *and* trans *and* those who choose not to define themselves by gender at all

Those who are settled *and* those in transition.

As in Ecclesiastes, there is a time and a place for all of us.

Let us make sure we celebrate the Feminine –
the creativity and colour associated with her,
the softness and fertility she carries with her,
the wisdom which Sophia uses as her strength.

Let us celebrate women's power alongside male might;
let us celebrate girls, especially when they become Prime Ministers!

That's what we can do externally.

But more importantly, inside ourselves, let us all, male and female, straight and gay, cis and trans, let us all allow the Feminine to teach us and guide us into all truth; the truth in which we can live and move and have our being without fear;
a truth which is soft and firm, hard and gentle, fertile and freeing,
creative and earthy, growing and celebrating.

Then we will all be free, as Jesus intended us to be,
enjoying the freedom which he died proclaiming and protecting to the end.

And let us commit ourselves to remembering that
real people become real victims when we do not honour the Feminine,
in our own lives, in our churches and in our society.

Let us honour Her so one great day
there will be no more deaths to commemorate but only life to celebrate.
So may it be.

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