

One Body One Faith: Annual Service of Celebration

11th May 2019

Reading

John 8: 1 – 11

Creative God,

All that we have comes from you

And of your own do we give you.

May my words flow from the fire you have placed in my heart,

And may our thoughts together spring from your inspiration.

Amen

‘Go and sin no more’ is an imperative often thrown at us as LGBTQ people, as a condition of our inclusion within the Christian Community. Which is a signal to me that this passage needs a jolly good ‘queering’. I am using queer here as a verb. A verb that means going beneath surface meaning; disrupting accepted meanings, and bringing to bear my experience as one on the underside of power, to see what usually remains unseen, and create meanings that differ from the accepted meanings.

So I offer you this alternative reflection:

Was it something in her eyes that you saw? Some sense that a part of her was hiding; that she was hiding part of herself?

Imagine the excruciating humiliation of the woman caught, we are told, ‘in the very act’ of adultery. How was it to have an intimate and private moment (if that is what it was; if it was indeed consensual, an act of love, and not just an occasion of him helping himself. The him that is invisible in this story). If not, how much worse, as the private humiliation gave way to a public one. Shame declared for the consumption of all, to be stared at, vilified, threatened. Her life

hanging in the balance. They were angry because she had transgressed. She had broken the rules, flouted the law, given in to her desires (if they were her desires). She had done what they would like to have done, and what they would like to have done to her. She excited their imaginations, their jealousies, their anger. Slag. Slut. Whore. She deserved to die and the law of Moses was on their side. Right was on their side, or so they thought.

You could read all this on their faces, hear it in their voices, their baying for so-called 'justice'. And you made them wait. You had the authority to do that, and you used it. You gave them a simple instruction, 'let the one who is without sin cast the first stone', and it turned everything upside down. Her humiliation became their embarrassment. Her fear, their loss of face. Her pain, their shame. They left.

Such was your empathy that you didn't look at her. You looked at the ground. You wrote in the sand. You saved her from one more male gaze. A simple but profound act of solidarity with one who was excluded, ridiculed and broken. How could you know how it felt to be her? And when her accusers had all gone, you offered her restoration. You gave her peace. Her transgression (if it was her transgression) was forgiven. You said, 'Go', and she could indeed go - where she wanted. She was not held then, not restrained. No one could touch her. What did that feel like? What did she do with it?

Perhaps you understood because you, too, transgressed. What was it like for you, Jesus, to be the only human being ever to cross the divide between God and humanity, to disrupt the cosmic order of things and change them forever? This was something you kept concealed, revealing it, subtly and judiciously, to those who could take it in. To those who, at least in some small part, knew what transgression felt like. (1)

So where exactly IS the sin in this story? Not so straightforward now is it? Is it really to be located in the actions of one woman, in the context of a society where women's lives were not their own? And especially when, by definition, this particular 'sin' takes two, and only the woman is held accountable. There is no justice here.

It makes more sense to me if we see the sin as being structural. It resides in the social mores and gender inequalities in that context. Structural evil is ever-

present in human institutions and always will be. Jesus knew this. We know it. Evil structures are usually held in place and maintained by good people. Lovely people, even. That's the irony. Lovely people can become the baying crowd calling for crucifixion, or the leaders that fail to step in to prevent it. Maybe that's why Jesus gave the men the chance to walk away. He gave them the choice not to collude with evil. And for the woman, maybe 'Go and sin no more' is an invitation to make use of this second chance. Affirmed in her humanity, and with her agency restored, she has been transformed, even if the structures have not yet. And maybe, just maybe, those men went away challenged.

As LGBTQ people of faith, this queering of the story allows us to name sin differently too. Within the often hostile and discriminatory structures of church and its theological thought structures, where hypocrisy and lying are expected, we have been told repeatedly that we are sinful in our very being. I suggest we have permission – no, the duty, to problematise that, in the name of justice; to place the responsibility for sin back where it belongs – in the structures that dehumanise and degrade us. We turn the tables so that queer sin becomes what Rev Liz Edman calls, in her book of that title, 'Queer Virtue'. And her subtitle is, arguably, even more important: What LGBTQ People Know about Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity.

I am currently loving the new series of Queer Eye on Netflix. For those who do not indulge, this is NOT just another makeover show. It is not superficial or cheap reality TV. It is, for me, deeply theological. It is about life and love and liberation.

In Queer Eye, the 'Fab Five' (Antoni, Bobby, Jonathan, Tan and Karamo) a diverse group of gay men, work with individuals, each nominated by a loved one, to transform their lives. This means rebuilding self-esteem and affirming their unique identity. With the requisite camp flamboyance, the five bring their expertise and experience to bear on the life of each candidate. There is no, 'if you only lost 2 stone your life would be amazing', or 'run 5 miles a day and you will be awesome'. Rather, the message is, 'you are gorgeous. NOW'. It's gentle, respectful and simple – affirm each unique individual as they are. And in the process of listening to the candidates, the five share aspects of their own lives and experiences: the pain of being cast out by a Christian family on coming

out, or of losing a parent to cancer; the struggle for identity as an adopted son; the experiences of racism growing up; the joys and challenges of parenting. There are always tears. From the five, from the candidate, from their loved ones and, of course, in my case at least, the viewer.

I think one task of Queer Virtue is to make our faith communities more like Queer Eye. Places where we are each cherished for who we are. And as queer people we can lead the way because, at our best, we begin from the assumption that every person's sexuality is God's gift to them, in its uniqueness and in its mysterious and wonderful complexity. When we speak of it we treat it as holy and sacred ground – to be approached with awe and wonder. We notice and share our attractions and desires; reflect on our commitments and the challenges to them that new forms of intimacy may bring. We seek to support one another and reflect together on how to live out our feelings appropriately and express ourselves authentically. This is what we do. This is what the church can learn from us.

I have a prayer for us today, and it is this: that we may

Be Here

Be Queer

And never get used to it.

Be here – in the sense of standing our ground. Wherever our ground is: inside an institutional church context or without it. Standing our ground means understanding ourselves not as supplicants saying 'please', but embracing our agency as prophets and pilgrims, building something new.

Be Queer – in the sense of being our best – scandalous and disruptive - selves. Bringing our gifts of queer virtue – our pride in who we are; our courage in coming out (over and over); our love of beauty; our creativity and resourcefulness; our compassion and skills in community-building; our ability to 'think outside the box'; to create spiritual meaning and relational models that are just and true, because they are born of our experiences of oppression.

And never get used to it. By which I mean two things. Firstly, let us always remember how good and beautiful it is to be who we are. To be gifted with

queerness, and all that that means. To be fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. To be chosen as God's people, and to live out our purpose and vocation. Let's not ever let that shine wear off.

But secondly, let's not become complacent. In 2015 I heard Labi Siffre interviewed on the 30th anniversary of his song 'Something Inside So Strong', which was written in response to Apartheid. He was asked whether he was optimistic about social progress in eradicating racism, and the promotion of LGBT equality. Bear in mind that his male partner of 49 years died in 2013. His reply was cautionary. He said something like, 'never make the mistake of thinking that oppression has gone away. Oppression doesn't go away, it transforms itself and manifest itself in new ways.'

The rise of hate crime in our own context, and of right-wing terrorism globally, is an eruption of a backlash against all the gains we might have thought were secure: it's a poisonous mix of resurgent nationalism based on insecurity, passive-aggressive machismo, deep sexism, and violent reassertions of heteronormativity and strict gender binaries.

Let's return to where we started. One of our queer virtues is to sniff out misuses of power and to expose the misnaming, and deliberate mislocation, of sin. We need to keep these skills honed and keep our analytical wits about us, way into the future. And extend our purview, always, to all marginalised people, and in an era of ecocide, to the planet itself.

So I say again,

Be here, be queer, and never get used to it.

Amen

Alison Webster 10/05/19

(1) This reflection is taken from my book, 'Found Out: Transgressive Faith and Sexuality', DLT, 2017, p. 118