

EMBRACING HUMAN SEXUALITY 2020

A Collection of Sermon Resources

LGBTQIA+ community and their
RIGHT TO INCLUSION & ACCEPTANCE



ESHA : Towards Greater
Inclusivity In Churches
And In Theological
Education



NATIONAL ECUMENICAL
FORUM FOR GENDER AND
SEXUAL DIVERSITIES

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN INDIA



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PREFACE

Since the reading down of Section 377 IPC by the Delhi High Court, the NCCI has come a long way. Today we present another reading resource. This is a collection of reflections from the Biblical passages that are difficult to understand and/or interpret; as well as those unexplored passages that can lend to the understanding of sex and sexuality differently from what is traditionally handed down by the institutionalised church structures, and the society and its institutions that largely work on sustaining patriarchy driven hegemonic structures.

The present documentation is an outcome of the activities and learning from the ESHA project of the National Council of Churches and its service wing the Christian Service Agency. It is a collection of sermons written by those who have accompanied each other in the process of learning and understanding human sexuality in all its manifestations. They have grown in the faith and belief that sexuality is a gift from God. They have also come to believe that this gift of sexuality is manifested in diverse and various ways, the divine mystery of which is beyond comprehension in its entirety as well as inexplicable in available scripts of human linguistic expressions.

This resource will serve as a guide to pastors and preachers who are struggling to help people who approach them with difficult questions regarding different sexual orientations and gender identities. This documentation will also serve as a biblical-theological resource to the pastors themselves in their theological search relating to diversities in the expression of sexual orientations and affirmation of various gender identities including the elements of fluidity in such expressions and affirmations.

This resource book should serve as a pulpit in its own right reaching out to the people of the pew who are otherwise deprived of authentic exegeses of the Bible to understand the mysteries of God expressed in the libido of different sexual orientations as well as in the varied forms of gender identities.

The National Council of Churches in India is grateful to the staff of ESHA project particularly Fr. Thomas Ninan its Coordinator, Dr. Aruna Gnanadason who was tasked with editing the resource, and all contributors to this landmark documentation, who braved strong winds of being misunderstood and misrepresented in the process of breaking the Word in public spaces.

The members of the National Ecumenical Forum on Gender and Sexual Diversities (NCCI-NEFGSD) of the National Council of Churches in India need to be commended for the determination and consistent perseverance they have shown in helping the churches and ecumenical organisations understand the ever-unfolding mysteries of God. All former staff of the NCCI, and the companions of their times, who had tirelessly laboured for close to two decades now to reach here are gratefully remembered and acknowledged.

Rev. Asir Ebenezer

General Secretary, NCCI

December 2020



INTRODUCTION

Preaching has been one of the most important practices in Church Life and Tradition, since biblical times. Much depends on the Preacher in being able to connect, first with God and then with the world and the audience. All of these aspects form an important part of making a sermon. In doing so, where does one place the Bible? As much as we understand the Bible as being written with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it's also crucial to recognize that in being able to understand God's message for our times, we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We either neglect, or take very lightly, the fact that it is the same Holy Spirit which engages us with the realities of the world and the lives of people; and inspires us to engage with the Scriptures to understand God's message for our times. To close our eyes or be passive to such realities is to deny the voice of the Holy Spirit and hence our scriptural understanding and application become an incomplete process at best.

While engaging with sensitive issues such as gender and sexuality, it is crucial to first acknowledge the widespread ignorance among people, both within the church and the society in general. A lot of misconceptions on these issues have been the root problems behind much of abuse, discrimination and marginalisation of people with diverse identities. Much of the traditional ways of scriptural understanding and historical references to aspects relating to gender and sexuality has happened in the context of such ignorance. It is only obvious that much of the judgemental responses from different churches has happened from such a background.

Thankfully, there has been significant progress in different parts of the world, through the past few decades, in the understanding of gender and sexuality, both scientifically and in the ethical and scriptural understanding of the same. This has paved the way for some of the churches or church related agencies to proactively take steps in making amends for the way they have engaged in this area of commitment. The journey of the National Council of Churches in India, since 2001, with people of diverse genders and sexuality identities have been crucial in bringing about a better understanding of God's creation and the value of life in each other.

This resource book of sermons has come about from the NCCI network of pastors, laity, Christian LGBTQIA+ persons and theologians who have journeyed with NCCI through the past two decades in the area of gender and sexuality. Their reflections I believe have come about with much prayer, conviction, spiritual experience and most importantly through their personal engagement with the lives of those marginalised due to their gender and sexual identities. While it is perceived that the LGBTQIA+ people are outside the church, very little is spoken about their presence inside the church. This resource material is prepared with a sensitivity to the fact that the LGBTQIA+ people are a part of us, within our society, church and family.



It is our sincere hope that these resources, put together in simple language, unlike a bible study, but more in the form of a sermon, will be of help to enable pastors and laity towards an inclusive church life and ministry. We welcome your feedback by writing to me at ninan@ncci1914.com, which would help us know how relevant these resources are and how we can improve further.

With prayers and blessings

Fr Thomas Ninan

General Coordinator, ESHA-NCCI

Coordinator, National Ecumenical Forum for Gender and Sexual Diversities of the NCCI

December 2020



SOME NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

The texts in this Sermon Resources booklet have been written by people who have been, in some way, involved with the lives of the LGBTQIA+ community in India over the past few years. Many of them are working with the NCCI-ESHA's Project on the National Ecumenical Forum on Gender and Sexual Diversities (NEFGSD). We have discovered as we worked in this Forum just how much the Bible has been used to legitimize negative attitudes to, or exclusion of persons of gender and sexual diversities. This in spite of the fact that at the centre of the Gospel message is the saving and liberating love of Jesus Christ who invited all to his table. Our reading of the Bible in the context of the lives of LGBTQIA+ communities often overlooks very obvious contradictions and ambiguities in the Bible and the fact that it is not possible to use the Bible as proof text for some of the understandings and attitudes of Christians today regarding this community and all those in the margins of our societies and yet we do just that!

To demonstrate this point, I draw your attention to the account of the creation in Genesis chapter 2:23-34. After the creation of man (Adamah) the Woman was created “for out of the Man this one was taken.” (v 23 b). Then emerges the confusion - two new humans are suddenly introduced, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh”. (v 24). Biblical scholars have said that this verse was introduced much later into the text! And yet, this verse has become so much a part of the Christian discourse about creation – it is part of marriage service in many traditions; and has been one of the verses at the heart of a binary view of humans as “Men” and “Women” and has led to the patriarchal abuse of women and of persons of diverse genders and sexualities. We will need to reread the creation account with new eyes as appropriate for today’s context and new knowledge.

Thankfully, many theological colleges do ensure that some of this is explained to the students, and the language of the Bible has been interrogated – there are still many more that do not. The NEFGSD, at its annual meeting in February 2020, took the decision to bring out this study guide on sermons on Inclusivity. The writers were given the freedom to choose the Biblical text they will work on. This has meant that some texts are used more than once. Some texts such as the Genesis account of Creation and of destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah have been the most problematic and are more open to be used out of context.

But there is a wealth of texts from the Bible that are also meditated upon in this collection of resources to affirm that sexual relationships are not about the violent abuse of power but is in fact about loving, compassionate and faithful relationships between people! The purpose of this Study Guide is to strengthen the churches, congregations and other Christian groups to become even more understanding and informed about the LGBTQIA+ communities. This required that the language used throughout had to be not just sensitive but accurate.



The texts can be roughly classified as:

1. The affirmation of Love as the core of all relationships among the LGBTQIA+ communities
2. The Bible and what it says to Christians and the Churches today
3. The Church which transforms itself so as to make space for inclusivity.

It is our prayer that this book will be an educational resource, and a blessing to many.

Aruna Gnanadason

This collection uses the following terms:

LGBTQIA+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual or Allies; + refers to other sexualities

Eunuchs in the Bible: It is important to note that eunuchs, as a category of persons is used in many of these texts to refer to a range of gender identities which are not necessarily the same as those we today refer to as trans man or trans woman. In the times of the Bible a eunuch was a man castrated and placed to oversee/guard harems; or was employed as chamberlains in palaces. While trans-persons are born as trans-men and women and decide on gender transition; eunuchs did not have that choice.



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IT IS ALL ABOUT LOVE

Rev. Philip Vinod Peacock¹

I John 4:7-5:12

I think I have a good itch for you today. Have you ever been in love? The kind of love which makes you stay awake at night, the kind of love that makes food taste better, music sound sweeter, the colours seem brighter? The kind of love which either makes your heart skip a beat, or beat that much faster when you see the other person (could be male, female, trans, other). I am sure that many of us here have had that kind of a feeling, and even if you haven't as yet I am sure that you are hoping that you do. For is it not right as the song writers tell us that love is what makes this world go around, that love is reason, that love is the spice in our lives?

And this is what the text from the epistle I John: 4 tells us today, that the commandment we have had from the beginning is to love one another. And love we must. But I am sure that you are thinking wait a minute, this isn't the same thing. The Johanine community is not speaking of a romantic love; they are speaking of agape, an unconditional divine kind of love. A love that loves in spite of and not because of. Moreover, perhaps you are thinking that I am sullyng this idea of divine love from above by equating it with what we would refer to as Eros – or a romantic, embodied, sensual love that we as humans share.

Ever since the publication of C.S. Lewis' book *The Four Loves*, where he speaks about four different Greek words which speak of love in the Bible, in popular imagination there has been segregation, separation, a hierarchy of different kinds of love. At the bottom lies erotic love, above that storge and phileo, or the love between relatives, friends and perhaps even for your pets and country and at the very top of the ladder there is agape. Of course, in modernity there seems to be the need to dichotomize the spiritual and the material, the de-sexualization of the divine becomes an absolute necessity.

I would however argue that this segregation, separation and hierarchization of these four words for love does both our theologies and our lifestyles a disservice. These are not separate ideas of love but rather one flows into the other and influences the other. Therefore, it is not correct for us to privilege agape as being somewhere over and above eros - but we should rather see that eros lies at the very heart of agape, it is the erotic which actually drives agape. Desire lies at the centre of divine love. Without acknowledging this centrality of the erotic, agape is reduced to a cold, imposing, disempowering, claustrophobic and suffocating kind of love. Desire not only makes the divine approachable but also understandable. The early church of course understood this fluidity between the erotic and the agapeic - after all it was very much within the tradition

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He currently serves as the Executive Secretary, Justice and Witness of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.



of the early church to unabashedly read the erotic love story between the couple in Song of Songs as the relationship between Christ and the Church, the bridegroom and the bride. This reading was not a de-sexualization of the text of Song of Songs but was in fact an “en”- sexualization of the relationship between Christ and the Church. Queer scholars remind us today of the vestigial of this kind of tradition which is found in our liturgical attire. Even to the most casual observer, the priest dresses in effeminate if not downright female clothes, and the further up that you go in the hierarchy of the church the more effeminate our dressing gets, the surplice, the chasuble, and of course the Bishops have to cover their hair in church with a mitre. This is cross dressing in church. The liturgical reason for this of course that the celebrant has to represent the church and behave as the bride and the wedding between the bride and the bridegroom is re-enacted in the context of the liturgical celebration. Even in the context of our regular liturgical celebrations the romantic and sexual idea of love is not repudiated in favour of a cold alienating kind of agape, rather desire is the focus around which agape revolves. The spiritual is not privileged at the cost of the material; instead the two are enmeshed, entangled and engaged together inseparably.

The Johanine community possibly have the same idea because immediately after insisting that we love one another the epistle goes on to insist that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. It was a gnostic idea that separated the material from the spiritual, an off shoot which we have today in the segregation of the erotic and the agapaic. Yet the Orthodox Christian position as expounded by Athanasius is that it was the divine who incarnated in the person of Jesus, who was the pre-existent logos. The material and the spiritual are not separate, but in the incarnation, the very embodiment of love itself, we find a perfect union of the two. The incarnation is driven by the desire of God for humanity to be redeemed and that is why the divine takes on flesh itself. To speak of the incarnation is to acknowledge, accept and revere the understanding that desire lies at the heart of agape.

The incarnation seen this way is a dangerous kind of love but love is always dangerous. The reason why right-wing forces in our country want to close down Valentine’s Day, why we are so afraid of love Jihad, it is precisely because love transgresses our social boundaries of caste and patriarchy. Romantic love means that we will marry across caste and community boundaries, it means that we will choose our own partners and question the whole idea of arranged marriage which is locked into the logic of caste and religion. The dominant culture in India lives with the duality of fear and fantasy of the virility of the Muslim male and fertility of the Muslim women. Anything must be done to prevent marriage across caste and communal lines, including acts of violence on couples who transgress; or specifically directed injury to the reproductive organs and genitals of Muslim women during communal riots. Love is dangerous, it is threatening.

Romantic love and its celebration are dangerous because it would allow for women to express their sexuality outside of the confines of heteronormative patriarchy. In fact, in India falling in love outside your community can get you murdered, I mean



look at what happened in Haryana and what the Khap Panchayats there are suggesting². And of course, it is claimed that God forbids same sex love! And yet, it is precisely because of this that love is liberative, it frees us from our oppressive social structures.

Yet that is also why love is controlled, in many theological colleges and seminaries around India the worst thing that you can do is fall in love. In my own B. Th. class four students were threatened to have their marks not sent to the Senate of Serampore because they found love on campus. And not only is love controlled but we are also encouraged to fall in love only within socially acceptable boundaries. Therefore, women are expected to fall in love after marriage, or so they are told - after you marry him, you will fall in love with him. In India it is very common to find people of the same caste and community falling in love with each other. It is as though caste credentials are checked before love happens.

The incarnation is however an unruly kind of love which transgresses boundaries, the divine becomes human and if you think about it, it is actually this act of incarnation - becoming human, taking on flesh - which makes the divine, divine. Without the incarnation God would not be God. And this is our gospel for today, love one another, love in an unruly way which questions social boundaries, love across lines of caste, community and heteronormative patriarchy, fall in love, have sleepless nights, let your heart beat faster, love in unruly ways so that social boundaries may be transgressed. Let no one tell you who to love or how to love them. Or, as that man Yash Chopra said, "Come, fall in love." Amen

² Harayana incident with the Khap Panchayats - Bing



HUMAN SEXUALITY – A GIFT FROM GOD

Rōmal Lāisram¹

Psalm 139: 13-18

“For You formed my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother’s womb.”
v 13 (Berean Study Bible).

In these verses, the psalmist deals with the involvement of God in the origin of human life – it is God who is responsible for the inception of life in the womb and it is God who completes the process of creating a new life. In a wonderful way God skilfully forms the un-born life in the womb. When the poet thinks of the works of creation, nothing but praise comes from the poet’s mouth – it is a moment when the psalmist responds with awe at the realization of God’s involvement in our lives from the moment we are conceived to the completion of our creation! We think of an announcement from a friend or family member that they have conceived and we can look forward to a child – how much joy it gives us! Yes, we often celebrate the announcement with sweets and celebrations! In India, most often, we so not know the gender of the unborn child – we really do not even think of that (most often). Every stage of the development of the child in the womb is followed with rituals and celebrations. The child is formed as God wills – while attempts are made by some, using modern science, to manipulate life...most often it is a natural process. In this creative process, it is not only the gender of the child that is a given, but also all aspects of the new life; including the child’s sexuality is a given! The whole new being of whatever gender or sexuality is a gift from God!

In this context the idea of positive sexuality is a simple exercise: to look at sexual relationships and gender identities as gifts from God; consciously removing the taboos that have been built around the human sexual experience. This has to be said because we live in a context where there **are** taboos and cultural and social interventions that distort the integrity of creation – a child that does not conform to the dominant prototype (male and heterosexual) can place a challenge to us to categorically affirm that sexuality is a gift from God.

Positive sexuality can only exist when one affirms each of the following assertions:

- Sexual expression and sexuality are gifts from God
- Genders, as presented, are gifts from God
- God has created all genders as equals

¹ L Romal M Singh aka Rōmal Lāisram is a well-known LGBTQIA+ activist. He is the founder of QAM(I) – The Queer Arts Movement, India; and Rainbow Kitty – a public funding initiative for the LGBTQIA+ community. He volunteers actively with Solidarity Foundation – an LGBTQIA+ foundation that focuses on marginalized trans-communities; and with CSMR, Bangalore. He is an out-and proud writer; content professional; stylist; diversity and inclusion trainer; activist and journalist — from Bangalore, who also dabbles in theatre, dance and music.



Positive sexuality begins at childhood. To bring up children in an equal world, where male, female or trans – are all considered equal. One gender is not presented as superior to the other one. Girls are not taught to be gentle and submissive; boys are not taught to be dominating and rough.

As children grow up, their natural curiosity about the other gender's body is not met with scorn – instead at home, or school, or even in the church - such curiosity is met with academic and honest answers. The lack of taboo around the open discussion of bodies and differences in biological genders will then lead children to not make the 'other' out to be exotic or as someone to laugh at but as an equal.

With the awakening of sexual desires post-pubescence, young adults ought to be given facts about reproduction and sexual behaviour without a shroud of mystery surrounding the conversation. Young adults must be taught that it is okay to be attracted to someone of the opposite gender or of the same gender. Impetus should be given to not draw attention to the mistakes that can occur if someone shares sexual intimacy without being completely aware of what they are doing. If sexual behaviour is presented without the shame that is usually associated with it and young adults are told simply why waiting for that special someone is worth it – most young adults would choose to wait till they're older for the first sexual experience.

Similarly, with such open conversations around healthy sexual behaviour, the chances of sexual abuse reduce drastically. Children and young adults would be more upfront about people sexually misbehaving with them as they are now unafraid to talk about it – no shame, no guilt must be involved and therefore more open, upfront and heart-to-heart conversations. This kind of openness about what is a 'healthy sexual expression' will also lead abusers to control themselves from abusing children and young adults from fear of being caught or exposed.

This kind of healthy conversation will also lead young adults to realise that sexual intimacy involves respecting the other person's body. Convoluted ideas propagated by pornography and other forms of mass media that choose to show women/transpersons/men as mere objects of sexual desire or as receivers of someone's sexual desires (without their participation or consent) will be challenged head-on.

Ideas like consent are reiterated constantly in a culture that believes in positive sexuality. The focus is drawn towards responsible sexual expression involving two people who choose to be intimate in that way, sharing their bodies for each other's pleasure.

Young adults brought up in a culture that emphasizes consent and healthy sexual expressions are less likely to rape, abuse or outrage anyone else's modesty. Men brought up to believe that women have a right over their own sexuality are less likely to assume they have a right over women's bodies. Gay men brought up in a similar culture will learn to respect their own body and also not participate in abusive behaviour with another man. Lesbian women also learn to respect the bodies of other women.

Adults who have been brought up in this culture learn to respect the choices of their spouses. Issues like marital rape, forced pregnancies, domestic abuse and lack of emotional



support and support for the partner (in bringing up a child, concerning in-laws, etc) are dealt with immediately. Positive sexuality emphasizes the need for adults to understand that they need to be thankful for a partner who has chosen to share their life, body and future with them. Just a realization of that truth can change behaviour in adults and lead to more successful marriages and life arrangements.

Adults realise that decisions are to be made together. That one individual in no way is superior to another individual and choice, consent and opinion always matter.

This is what positive sexuality can do.

The idea behind this is to uncover a full understanding that we are each of us wonderfully made in our mother's wombs. And as we grow up and interact with each other, Christian-centred thought processes teach young people about their bodies (as gifts from God), their sexualities (as gifts from God), their equality (be it Gender, Race/Caste, Sexuality or whatever else); are based on the understanding that we are formed in the Imago Dei (in the image of God). We learn that Christianity envisions a life filled with respect and love for one another. At each stage of life, we are formed and sculpted in Christian values.

Ages 6-12: The focus is on Gender. That all genders exist and are equal. That there is nothing such as gender-specific behaviour and no one gender is superior or inferior to the other. Focus is on Imago Dei. Talking about disabilities and differences - of all beings made in the image of God, can ensure that a child views the world through the lens of equality and love.

Ages 13-18: The focus switches to sexuality and socially-thrust gender roles. Sexuality and what a healthy sexuality means can be spoken about at this stage. Biblical misinterpretations about female versus male or female roles versus male roles can be addressed here. If this is done properly, young Christian boys will not grow up assuming that women's bodies are property or that a wife has to be submissive to her husband. Proper interpretations of roles of genders in the Bible can lead to exceptionally healthy young preadults. This is also the time when we talk about the Imago Dei in the context of sexuality.

Ages 19-24: More a youth group now, the focus shifts to respecting the other person's body and one's own body – accepting oneself and embracing the beauty in which each one has been created. The idea is to ensure that a young Christian adult learns a healthier perspective on sexual intimacy and also develops the ability to love themselves as they are.

Conclusion

I began by reminding us that each one of us is beautifully made in the imago dei with our individual identities; our gender and sexuality, by a God who knits us together in our mothers' wombs! And so, as a community gathered here, let us say together as a closing prayer the poet's words as recorded in verse 17-18 of Psalm 139:

"How precious to me are Your thoughts, O God, How vast is their sum!
If I were to count them.



They would out outnumber the grains of sand;
And when I awake,
I am still with You.”

Amen



DISCERNING TRUE LOVE IN A FAKE WORLD

Fr Thomas Ninan¹

From the time I step out of my house in the morning to the time I come back in the evening, I face abuse, ridicule, I am made fun of.... I don't find anyone talking genuinely to me, giving me any form of respect. It's been years since someone has hugged me and conveyed a few words of love or consolation....

As shared by Mohini, who hails from a Hijra community in Ludhiana

John 8: 1 – 11

Jesus' encounter with the adulterous woman brings out those characteristics of Jesus, that stand out as upholding the dignity and respect of the woman, irrespective of what she did. In a context where the people around her, were up to judge and stone her to death, Jesus gives her new life. The passage brings out those parameters by which, we usually engage in defining and discriminating against people because of their colour, caste, sex, gender, orientation and other tags which consciously or sub-consciously rule our thought process. In fact, we hardly try to understand why a person on the streets, is having to live with a dehumanizing situation or condition for years as Mohini describes. There are today more people living a victimized life, not necessarily because of a judgment passed by a law, but rather more by the actions and in-actions of people from the society. What are those factors that lead our thoughts and actions towards creating such de-humanizing situations in life?

Often, the way the society in a place behaves towards people and other aspects of life is closely related to the culture, tradition and religious practices prevalent. While cultural aspects undergo changes over time, the tradition and religious practices that control human behaviour, particularly in countries like India, do not easily change. They become structural in nature and any attempt to re-visit or re-define them is often looked on as a threat. Adultery, during the time of Jesus, was dealt with much contempt and according to Jewish law, the woman should be stoned to death. While it did speak about how the woman should be treated, very little was said about how the man caught in adultery should be treated. This law is still in practice in many Islamic countries. Jesus found an opportunity to challenge this practice, when he came across the adulterous woman being chased by those who wanted to stone her. This is one instance in the Bible, which deals with issues relating to one's sexuality.

¹ Fr Thomas Ninan is a priest of the Indian Orthodox Church (Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church), presently coordinating the ESHA Project of the NCCI as the General Coordinator since 2016 and also coordinating the activities of the National Ecumenical Forum for Gender and Sexual Diversities of the NCCI. He brings vast ecumenical experience of working in the areas of substance abuse, HIV and in the area of gender and sexuality. He is part of the WCC Reference Group on Gender and Sexuality and the Global Interfaith Network.



While it would have been easy for Jesus to have agreed with the existing practice of stoning, why did Jesus choose the more difficult path to challenge that practice? I believe, Jesus wanted to revisit the way people of his times perceived sin and the implications that had upon the sinner. Here's a woman caught red handed in adultery by the people, the woman, in tears, accepting her sin and running away from the people. There's no mention about what happened to the man who was involved with her. Often, the stories of adultery deal with emotional relationships that involve two people, not one. But the one who suffers in this context is usually the woman. Not much has changed in our society since then. The circumstances that bring two people into an adulterous relationship is often not looked into. In a society which has legalised marriages, one usually doesn't talk about the abuse that happens in married relationships. Besides the verbal and physical abuse that prevails, sexual abuse in the form of rape is quite rampant in our societies. One's body often becomes a slave to a certain structure, bound by the rules of the society or tradition or religious practice of the times.

The LGBTQIA+ communities, often find themselves in such circumstances where they go through struggles with their body, their mind and their social circumstances. Where and how does one in such circumstances, engage with sin, is a deep question that was ignored during the time of Jesus, and so it is during our times too.

Jesus' non-judgemental approach to the woman stands out in this passage, but what is crucial here is to recognize the way he made himself accessible to the woman, who is victimized by the society. Making oneself accessible to someone going through emotional pain, guilt, abuse and all that comes with it, requires a certain set of values, that Jesus here is exemplifying.

We find in Jesus, a non-judgemental attitude, which made many from the margins, those excluded and branded as sinners, untouchables, mis-fits in the society, come running to Him for solace. I would like to believe that these included people with diverse gender and sexual identities, people who suffered abuse because of these realities within their body and were trapped within social structures of the time. So, it was not just those who did something wrong and were branded as sinners, but also those who were looked down upon because of their bodily conditions, either by birth or who may have been affected during the course of their lives. They wouldn't leave His presence once they came in touch with Him. Here was the Son of God, fully human, yet fully God, offering Himself fully, in all that He said, did and thought, for them. They found acceptance, peace, love and more importantly, hope and strength for their difficult journeys ahead. The adulterous woman, in spite of what she did and the way she was branded by the society, finds instant solace with Jesus. Her connection with Jesus, when she saw that He accepted her without any judgement, revived and instilled in her, her true worth as a human being and as a child of God.

This reminds me of a visit I made to Dimapur, when I was invited by an NGO there which runs a drop-in-centre for MSMs in the heart of the town. After the Sunday service, I invited the Vicar Fr Varghese to join me for the visit. We went in our clergy gowns to visit this place, where we were warmly received by my friend Anna who runs the NGO. As we sat around the table to talk, for some time there was just silence as each of us waited for



the other to speak. I broke the silence requesting them to share something about themselves and telling them that we were not there to preach or teach. Slowly one of them started sharing,

“What can we say Fr, we are already condemned and judged. We can’t share about our problems in our homes, neither in our churches.”

I asked, *“What are you looking for?”*

He replied, *“Looking for love, someone to love me.”*

I asked, *“And so have you found love.”*

He replied with a giggle, *“No...that’s not true. There is no such thing as love.”*

I said, *“For a moment imagine that this book called the Bible is not judgemental of you. This is a book of love with a message that accepts you as you are. God does not judge you for your sexual orientation. And you will find love if you believe in God. Love is not about sleeping with different people and experimenting. Trust that God will help you find a partner who will love you as you are. You need to trust God.”*

There was a total surprise on their faces at what I had told them. And then I asked, *“Would you like someone to come and pray for you?”* And he replied, *“Father, we have been longing to have someone come and pray for us, it’s been such a long time...”*

The need for true love, is a genuine need, that comes from the heart. Every-day we will meet people around us, who will genuinely communicate their needs, in small and many ways. Not necessarily through words, but through their actions, smiles, presence and often silence. This is true even with people whom we think of, or have branded, in our bad pages. It becomes all the more difficult when this person from the bad pages directly relates to us, every day in some way or the other. Is our role merely to continue to put them in those branded pages of our minds and treat them continuously with contempt, because we think the Bible says so or perhaps because we find it difficult to forgive them for what they did to us or to someone? Through such responses, we will continue to fail to listen to the voices crying around us for genuine love. We will continue to not recognize or sense the genuine cries for help. If we had responded to the cries in time, it would not have led them into a context off crisis. Our being deaf to the genuine call for accompaniment could lead to suicides or of people leaving home or something else as drastic. In the name of God, what kind of faith are we practising today? Is it life giving to someone, or is it more about what we consider to be “right” at the expense of such lives around us, their struggles often going unnoticed?

Some of the most powerful expressions of genuine non-judgemental love we find today are from children and animals (often pets). Often, it’s not that they don’t know about those times of weakness where we as adults have gone wrong, but in spite of that, the way they communicate with us goes beyond description here. True and genuine love often cannot be expressed in words.

The adulterous woman found such a non-judgemental love in Jesus, where she was



accepted as she was, in spite of all that she was guilty of. It is such love that made her to repent and turn her ways, rather than the judgemental attitude from the people who wanted to stone her for what she did. Today, as we look with contempt on many of those who belong to the LGBTQIA+ communities, are we so different from those who wanted to stone the adulterous woman?

You might want to tell me this: *“The Bible clearly says that homosexuality is a sin.”*

I want to tell you to please do your homework to understand what exactly is homosexuality and then try and understand what the biblical context of those passages are.

You might also want to tell me: *“Oh look at their lifestyles, how can we accept them when we know that their lifestyles of sleeping around cannot be justified?”*

I want to ask you, why do you assume it is a sin? Anyone who has multiple relationships – gay or straight can be called a sinner. Monogamous relationships of love and companionships cannot be called a sin!

And anyway, what should be our attitude to sinners – those who recklessly break the code of monogamy? Rest assured, there will never be repentance in their lives with the sort of attitude that Christians too often project. Rest assured, they will never trouble you or come around you wanting to listen to your damn sermons or your beautiful choirs or church services. Most importantly, you haven’t understood what sin is; and what it means to repent. Seems like you have different lenses to measure sin when it comes to the LGBTQIA+ community. Sin is something very personal between the person (the “sinner”) and God, not with anybody else. Let’s leave it at that. The journey towards repentance is very personal as well unless you are an example towards that, don’t expect others to learn it.

Most importantly, it requires acceptance of the person for the journey ahead. And if you are not sure about promising the person that, you might as well go and do your homework on yourself first before looking at the sins of others.

You might also want to tell me, *“Oh it’s against the tradition of the Church, even the Church Fathers stood against such people.”*

Let us not spread wrong information. Sometimes, neither you, nor your Church have tried to understand what the Church Fathers have been trying to teach. If you had done so, you would not be discriminating against people today and keeping them away from God’s love or in creating a loving community. People from the LGBTQIA+ communities have suffered because they have not been accepted for who they are, in their own homes, communities and churches. The various traditions of the churches, including the way we interpret the Bible, needs revisiting and analysing to see whether they have been there to promote God’s love or promote discrimination based on gender and sexual identities.

God is love, and those who worship God must worship God in spirit and truth. Every human being, regardless of their physical, sexual, gender, racial, cultural, religious identity, has been created in God’s image. And God’s image is free of such humanly constructed categories. It’s time we communicate true Christian values as we engage in various ways



with our faith practices and church life. Let's not get stuck with those practices which judge or discriminate or promote hatred among human beings, rather, let's be sensitive to the dangers of our actions and in-actions, which has the potential to destroy a life even without our knowledge. Let's consciously and intentionally, make a start with ourselves, to make a loving and a better world around us, not faking it, but in reality, experiencing it within ourselves and with others around us.



Rev. Priscilla Rawade¹

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. Leviticus 18:22

A five-judge Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court, on September 6, 2018 decriminalized Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) by partially striking down some of its provisions. The bench comprising Chief Justice Dipak Misra; Justices R F Nariman, A M Khanwilkar, D Y Chandrachud and Indu Malhotra ruled that Section 377, to the extent it criminalizes sexual acts between consenting adults, whether homosexual or heterosexual, is unconstitutional. After that day there has been a lot of debate around whether it was a right or wrong decision that was taken by the court. The Church too was part of this discussion. Many churches in India were against the decision of the Supreme Court giving the reason that it was something that was against the Bible and hence it cannot be accepted.

Two prominent Scripture passages that are used to condemn Homosexuality are from the Old Testament: Leviticus 18: 22 and 20:13. The dangerous problem of picking up select verses is like that of picking up a piece in the puzzle and establishing the idea that it is the complete picture. There are a few things we need to understand while we study scripture. The Bible was written centuries back, it had its own audience and the author and the redactor had a certain context in mind while writing it. Without taking into consideration the context, the background and by interpreting the text as is, we overlook what Jesus said about, “Putting the new wine in the old wine skin.” By doing this, Jesus implied, the wine is only going to get spoilt and will not be of use to anyone.

Holiness Code

The book of Leviticus is one of the books of the Pentateuch and hence has much importance. Some scholars argue that the book of Leviticus was for the Levite class while others opine that it applied to the whole Israelite nation. The verse 22 from Leviticus chapter 18 is part of the bigger periscope which begins in chapter 17 and ends with chapter 27. The chapter from Leviticus 17 to 27 is called as the Holiness Code. This Holiness Code is assumed to come from the P (Priestly) source which was mostly written in the exilic and post exilic period. This was the time when the Israelites were scattered.

¹ Rev. Priscilla Rawade is from Kolhapur, Maharashtra. She is an ordained minister from CNI. She did her BD from Bishop's College, Kolkata and her M.Th. in Old Testament from UTC Bangalore. She currently works in Bishop's College, Kolkata. Rev. Priscilla Rawade shows how the Bible has been used to shame and harm the Queer community for ages, so, it is high time that we start looking deeply into the text and try to understand the context of it. As Jesus says, "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins." Similarly, we need to look at these difficult texts and see what are the liberative and life affirming elements they offer.



Their faith was crushed and they were lamenting. This was the time during which they began to contemplate and meditate on their fate. This was also a time when they were struggling to keep their identity intact as the People of God.

The Holiness Code forms an important part of the book of Leviticus. The aim of the Holiness Code was to inform people how they can be Holy and how they should stay Holy. The simple reason being that Yahweh their God was Holy. This Holiness was not an abstract idea. It was imbibed in their daily life. The way they eat, dress, do business, have sexual relationships, worship and so on everything was included in this Holiness Code. Israel believed that Yahweh was the source of Holiness and so to be Holy they had to follow certain commandments and rituals.

Jacob Milgrom writes that the book of Leviticus is about values. Some say that the book consists only of rituals such as sacrifices and impurities. He conceded that this is true, but underlying the rituals we can find an intricate web of values that model how we should relate to God and to one another. Milgrom says that when a society wishes to express and preserve its basic values, it turns them into rituals. It is visual and participatory. They get embedded in memory at a young age, and get reinforced with each enactment. Ritual is the poetry of religion that leads us to the moment of transcendence.²

When a ritual fails because it either lacks content or is misleading it loses its efficacy and its purpose. A ritual must signify something beyond itself, whose attainment enhances the meaning and value of life. Having these things in mind lets us analyse how we can look at the Holiness Code from the perspective of Homosexuality. This can be useful for the church to enable it to embrace homosexuality as a normal way of life.

1. Holiness as Upholding One's Identity

The Holiness Code was written in a context of the exilic period of Israel. In exile, the people were struggling to maintain their uniqueness, their distinctiveness and their identity. The laws were thus written down so that they could maintain their identity. It was a struggle for them. It is so for the homosexual community today. In a society with a majority of heterosexuals it is like the LGBTQIA+ are in exile, struggling to uphold their sexual identity and integrity.³

2. Holiness as Enriching Relationships

The laws were written for the tribal community which was closely knit. Thus, it became very important to see that lines were drawn to see that each relationship in the community was kept intact and that the relationships were enriched. In the community of believers, we have people with different sexual orientations.

² Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus A Book of Ritual and Ethics A Continental Commentary* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004

³ Victor Paul Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Context," in *Homosexuality in the Church Both Sides of the Debate*, edited by Jeffrey S. Siker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 31-32.



Holiness here then means that we need to break the rules that divide us and to set new paths that would enrich our relationships.

3. Holiness as Life Affirming

One of the important reasons for prohibiting homosexuality at that time was because it was believed that the semen, the seed, was wasted. This had life which was valued very much by the Israelites. The Israelites believed that Yahweh was the source of life. When Israelites greet each other with Shalom they meant it in all realms of life. Jesus said, "I have come to give life, life abundantly." (John 10:10). The LGBTQIA+ community have to hide their identity so as to be accepted as normal persons in a society. This experience for them is suffocating. They cannot truly be themselves with the fear that they would be abandoned and looked down upon by the people they love. This then becomes like death for them. They breathe physically but because they are not able to be themselves, something inside them dies. Hence if any ritual is life threatening to someone it needs to be changed. We have to come up with alternatives that allow people to be true to themselves and live life wholly and abundantly.

4. Holiness as being Liberative

To be unique is a pleasure but it also involves a lot of struggle and suffering. One of the reasons that we see that homosexuality and other sexualities were prohibited was because it was practiced by people of other nations who believed that the gods of fertility will be pleased and there will be abundance in everything. The Israelites did not follow this as they believed that Yahweh is the only Creator. By following the rituals that did not fall into the dominant group, the Israelites believed that they were being liberated as those in the margins.

5. Holiness as to Love

Lev.18 begins with Yahweh telling the people that Yahweh is their Lord and God. This sounds more like authority but underlying it is also a loving God who is claiming that this people are Yahweh's. Yahweh's love for people can also be seen as Yahweh does not want the people to suffer as the earlier inhabitants. Yahweh giving details on how they should live, how their lives should be in each and every aspect, only shows Yahweh's concern for the people. Yahweh tells the people "you should be Holy, for I am Holy." We see that love plays a very crucial and important part. There can be no Holiness without love. Hence if our Holiness is without love and concern for the people and all of creation, our Holiness is shallow and incomplete.

Reading the Word

On May 16, 2020, the news broke that Anjana Hareesh, also known as Chinnu Sulfikar, had committed suicide and died. A 21-year-old student from Kerala, Anjana was bisexual – she committed suicide. She had shortly before, appeared on Facebook Live and had spoken about how her family allegedly tortured her because of her sexual orientation.



In the months prior to her death, Anjana said she was beaten and locked up in her natal household, taken to ‘de-addiction centres’ without her consent, and put on heavy medications in order to ‘cure’ her – all of which wreaked havoc on her mind and body.

Eventually, Anjana managed to escape with her friends, and got in touch with Sahayatrika, a human rights organization that supports LGBTQIA+ persons who have been assigned the female gender at birth. As Sahayatrika tried to find enough support to secure Anjana’s life away from her family, they had to deal with many hostile and unsupportive institutions in the process. A few days later, Anjana committed suicide and died.

This is not a new story. Many people from the LGBTQIA+ community have committed suicide due to the cruelty of the society. We as church need to hear the cries of these lives. The word of God should be proclaimed in a life affirming way. We need to find new ways and methods of reading the Bible. Read through the lens of not the powerful but through the lens of the marginalized. As Jesus said in the Gospel of John 10:10, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” We as a church should not be an obstacle for someone to live their life in abundance but a source that nurtures and nourishes life.



AT LAST...YOUR TRUTH

Rev. Junia June Joplin¹

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Matthew 13:1-3, 44-46

“And at last,” wrote the poet Audre Lorde, “you’ll know with surpassing certainty that only one thing is more frightening than speaking your truth. And that is not speaking.”²

Tell the truth.

When I took a course in seminary called *The Life and Work of the Pastor*, our professor offered us those three simple words as one of the most important rules to guide us as we prepared to enter our sacred vocations.

Tell the truth.

What we learned, as we continued to sit under that professor’s wisdom, was that, when he admonished us to tell the truth, he was *not* letting us in on the secret to smooth sailing through life and ministry. Not at all.

You see, back in the 1960’s, when he told the truth to his all white southern Baptist church – when he told them he thought it was wrong that their bylaws made it so black people could not become church members...and when he told them he was going to work to change those bylaws...he got himself into a fight that consumed ten years of his ministerial career.

Ask the prophets what happens when you tell the truth. Jeremiah will tell you about it from down in that well they tossed him into. Ask women what happens when they tell the truth about harassment and assault, often to find they’ve only become the targets of more harassment and assault. I guess telling the truth is easier said than done. Maybe truth-telling isn’t valued as highly as we like to think. Maybe my teacher understood that. Maybe that’s why he was so determined to imprint those words upon us.

Tell. The. Truth.

When you live much of your life in the pulpit, you are constantly dealing with temptation to sidestep or gloss over or make compromises with the truth. You’ve seen and heard about how it can go wrong, so you develop a preference for truthiness instead of truth.

1 Rev. “June” Joplin began serving in church ministry over twenty years ago, at nineteen years old. She has served congregations in North Carolina and Virginia, and most recently worked as Lead Pastor of Lorne Park Baptist Church in Mississauga, Ontario. She holds degrees from Appalachian State University and the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. A long-time advocate for greater LGBTQIA+Q+ acceptance in faith communities, June has been acclaimed as a stirring preacher and graceful leader. Her sermons and other content can be found on her website, pastorjune.com. Sermon preached on Sunday July 26, 2020

2 From an Audre Lorde speech, recorded in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 1984. Sermon preached on 14 June 2020, the Sunday she came out.



That's a word Stephen Colbert coined about fifteen years ago. Truthiness – that which seems true without having to actually be true. That which reflects what we, in our biases, *want* to be true. Sometimes, it's easier to be *truthy* in the pulpit than it is to be *truthful*.

The justifications for this are many:

You've got to pick your battles.

I just don't think my people are ready for that.

Change comes slowly.

If you say it that way, you're going to lose people.

Nobody's going to listen to that.

Nobody wants to hear that stuff.

That's too controversial; it's too political.

People come to church to feel good.

It's not worth the trouble. It's too risky.

The Brazilian priest and liberation theologian Dom Hélder Câmara once said “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask *why* they are poor, they call me a communist.”³ That's the kind of thing you say when you've learned how costly speaking the truth can be. I'm afraid that a great many of us preachers – and a great many of us believers – would rather hand out food than confront challenging truths about hunger and poverty. Or, as we're discovering in this tumultuous season, to take comfort in our insistence that all lives matter rather than confront the hard truths being told when people proclaim that Black Lives Matter.

Tell the truth.

Recognize, however, that it comes with a cost. Speaking of cost, Jesus, in his wisdom, once said that the Kingdom of Heaven, like the truth, is costly. God's great dream for the world, Jesus said, is like a treasure hidden in a field. Or, it's like a pearl so valuable, it can put a spark in the eye of even the most seasoned pearl collector. It's out there to be found; it's beautiful; but it'll cost you.

Jesus loved to tell those kinds of stories. They were his trademark. I read from Matthew chapter thirteen this morning, and that chapter goes on and on, listing one story after another, with a few verses of interpretation tossed into the mix. But more often it's the case that these stories – these *parables* – don't include any kind of explanation. Instead, they invite us along our *own* journeys of interpretation. They are like sacred set-ups, and Jesus is often counting on his hearers to start making their own connections and thinking about their own punch lines.

With that in mind, sometimes I wonder about the two treasure-seekers in the parables I read today. Something in their decision making seems rash...foolish, even. After all, these are two stories about people liquidating *all* their assets, selling all they owned. How did that even work? How long did it take? And how could it

3 Quoted in *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, by Claibourne, Wilson-Hartgrove, and Okoro, p. 450



have possibly happened quickly enough that they didn't stop to think, "wait...am I sure about this?"

This is a rare and precious treasure, for sure. But is it precious enough to justify selling everything else? A field with a treasure in it is lovely, I guess. But what am I going to eat? Where am I going to sleep? Or... This is an exquisite pearl, no question about it. But is it really worth selling all my stuff and emptying my bank account? At least the other guy got a field. You can't build a house or grow food in the middle of a pearl. These people seem like they're making such crazy decisions. And yet...

For some reason, Jesus wants us to know that this seemingly indefensible risk is actually a fitting example of what God dreams about when God imagines what creation could be. That's what the Kingdom, the family, the beloved community of God, is like. Because sometimes, God calls us in the direction of something that is so beautiful and so precious...something that enkindles such abundant and undeniable joy, well, you've just got to point yourself in that direction and go.

It's my belief that we are all treasure seekers in some way or another. Seeking something that is precious, something that is beautiful and true. But I'm not so sure our stories look like the ones we've heard from Matthew chapter thirteen today. I don't think there are many of us who would grasp at treasure with such wanton abandon – no matter how much joy it might promise us.

My suspicion is, if we were living out either of those parables, our conditioning would kick in and we'd manage to talk ourselves out of it. We'd remember how much safer it is to settle for truthiness instead of truth...how often we've seen the world make an example out of the risk takers. The dreamers. The prophets. The poets. The rebels. The pastors, too – and probably a number of other people you know.

So, my suspicion is, we'd let that treasure go. We'd let that treasure go, and maybe we'd give it a passing thought, now and then. Perhaps we'd lament our missed chance a moment or two before the cynicism within us spoke up and said "*it wasn't really worth it,*" or "*it would have never worked, you know.*" We'd believe that voice. And we might even convince ourselves to put those thoughts out of our mind entirely. To busy ourselves with other pursuits...lesser pursuits. It's sad, isn't it, to think about those missed chances. About all the treasures left buried in unpurchased fields. All the precious pearls left unsold. And it would be very sad, indeed, if that's how the stories ended.

But God is love, friends. Our scriptures tell us so. And our scriptures tell us also that love never ends. And there's our good news – because our Source of Endless Love will never be content with stories ending that way. With treasures undiscovered. With precious pearls unsold. Jesus reminds us, in some of his other stories, that God is relentless about such pursuits.

So, maybe that pearl has to sit in the case in the jewellery store for a while. Maybe the dream has to go undreamed, the truth ends up not being spoken for a while.

Just know that God, the wildest dreamer and most persistent treasure seeker of them all, isn't One to give up. God is the One who makes a way where there is no way. God



is the One who knows you more fully than you know yourself...the One who knit you together in your inmost being...the one who made you...fearfully, wonderfully. That God has a way of guiding you, by the same fear and wonder, to the place where you'll find your treasure. To the shop where your pearl just happens to be for sale. To the moment when you can't do anything else but speak your big, risky truth, no matter how much trouble it gets you into.

I stepped up into the pulpit for the first time when I was eleven years old. I had been listening to what I was certain was the voice of God. I heard that voice calling me to be a pastor. And that's what I did. I've been following that calling – and finding my way into one pulpit or another – for thirty years. I *thought* that was my treasure. And it was. Sort of. But there was more. Maybe I didn't realize it at the time, but there was more. God had more to say to me back then than “*you're supposed to be a pastor.*”

The fullness of my treasure, the wholeness of my truth, wasn't entirely clear in those days. So, in much the same way we settle for truthiness instead of truth, I settled for half a treasure. A pearl that was nice enough, but not the kind of precious that sets God dreaming.

Ultimately, graciously, we are led by the Divine Treasure Seeker to that place where, “*at last [we] know with surpassing certainty that only one thing is more frightening than speaking [our] truth. And that is not speaking.*”

Even if the cost seems too high. Even if the consequences seem too great. Even if the landing seems too hard and the leap of faith God wants you to make feels like madness. God isn't going to stop calling us. God isn't going to let up until you've arrived at the point where you accept that it's time to cash out your accounts and say, “Alright. Let's buy that pearl.”

I've been thinking about that point for a very long time. It is a point I suspected I had let pass me by. But God is gracious, and God makes a way.

And friends, with the divine joy of one finally getting her hands on a most precious pearl, I want you to hear me when I tell you I'm not just supposed to be a pastor, *I'm supposed to be a woman.*

Hi friends. Hi family.

My name is Junia.

You can call me June.

I am a transgender woman, and my pronouns are she and her.

That's the treasure, folks. That's the truth I can't help but speak. Until now, I didn't know *how* or *when* or *whether* to speak. I thought it was impossible. I thought it was sinful. I thought it was too costly. But I have learned; and I have grown; and I have discovered that the only thing that costs more than buying the treasure God creates us to find is not buying it. In sharing this truth with you today, I'm saying that I want to be the person God created me to be, that I want to experience the health and wholeness and the abundance of life Christ has been calling me to experience since



the time when I first believed and followed.

I realize, of course, that I may be taking an enormous risk here; that possessing this pearl may truly cost me everything. It's scary, but I read someplace that love casts out fear.

So, if you're listening to this message and you are part of the Lorne Park Baptist family, another truth I want you to hear me say is, *I love you and I still love being your pastor*. And I hope that we can find ways as family of faith to walk together in that love. I hope we can model grace and compassion in a way that very few churches have ever done. I hope that we can demonstrate courage and vulnerability, and listen together as God calls us to imagine what a vibrant, life-affirming ministry can look like here at the beginning of our second hundred years.

I had hoped to share this truth with you in person. The onset of Covid-19 closed that door, but perhaps another door has opened. We are living in a world where we're asking important questions about what really matters; we're also making broader connections than we ever have before. So maybe you're receiving this message and you're someplace else.

Geographically. Religiously. Theologically. Socially. Maybe you can give some thought to what you're seeing and what you're hearing. Maybe your part of another faith community, and you're wondering what this might look like at your church. Regardless of how you're connected to me, I hope that, by answering God's call and speaking my truth, you'll be inspired to do the same.

Finally, to my LGBTQIA+ siblings in my family of faith and beyond...and to the millions of you who are or where people of faith: I see you. You are not alone. As an ordained minister of the Gospel, as someone upon whom the church has laid hands and said "*you can speak for us*," I want you to hear me say that you are fearfully and wonderfully made. Beautifully made in God's image. A perfect reflection of God's matchless creativity. No matter your orientation or gender. And I want you to hear me say that God delights in you and feels pure joy for you for having discovered your treasured identity.

I am sorry for the times you have been lied to about who you are in the eyes of God. I am sorry for the times that you have been told that who you are is sinful or broken, whether it's some raving fundamentalist in a suit and tie or his kinder, gentler counterpart in jeans and sneakers at the hip church in the movie theatre. It's not true. Those words are deceitful and evil and we have already lost too many siblings to that deadly theology.

In particular, I want to proclaim to my transgender siblings that I believe in a God who knows your name, even if that name hasn't been chosen one yet. I believe in a God who calls you a beloved daughter even if your parents insist, you'll always be their son. A God who blesses you and gives you a home even if you're not welcome in the place you used to call home. A God's whose relentless creativity invites you to become who you were created to be, even if you have to risk everything to do it.

That's the call that comes to every one of us. Regardless of our gender or orientation or age or ethnicity or status.



You are loved. Loved with an everlasting love.

That Love frees you to find your pearl...to become the person you were meant to be.

And I don't know what that ministry is going to look like, exactly. But by the goodness and grace of Jesus, I am going to speak that truth...I'm going to share this abundant treasure...and I am going to proclaim that good news for as long as I have breath.

Hallelujah.

Praise and thanks be to the Lord, the Holy One, the Creator, the risker of risks and the seeker of precious treasures.

Amen.



DEATH DEFYING LOVE IN THE BODY OF GOD

Rev. Dr. Rohan Gideon¹

Song of Solomon 8: 6-7

Vs 6 Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. (Alternative Translation: Strong as death is love, inexorable as Sheol is ardent passion.) Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

Vs 7 Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned.

I do not wish to keep my explanation of love vague and glorified—and therefore safe—as they do in wedding sermons, but will try to meditate upon the above verses in the context of LGBTQIA+QIA issues we face in our own lives and in our immediate contexts.

This text revisits our traditional understanding of love and sees love as a death defying act in the context of sexual diversity. Many times, we restrict the notion of the love of God to just those expressions of love we are familiar with or culturally and doctrinally subscribe to. The plurality of passion and the desire to love constitute the core of God, and is Covenantal.

We all explore our sexuality passionately and are ready to sacrifice our deepest thought-processes—which are culturally conditioned—to safeguard what we believe is right. Many of us have been struggling about our own sexuality yet have held on to our desires while some have succumbed to societal pressure and violent circumstances. We come from churches, various religious backgrounds and ideological communities that take different, and at times conflicting, positions on issues of sexuality. Contrary to some conservative observations that our churches do not need to speak of LGBTQIA+ issues, personally we are aware that we have teens and young adults in our families, churches and among our friends, who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, most who suffer in silence and are at risk of being isolated, ignored or victimized. We are also aware that we take different ideological positions on these issues, especially on the notions of love,

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This reading is about love and about the desire to safeguard love as a death-defying act. The passage primarily talks about a couple that deeply desire to be united, but feel inhibited to express their love in all its fullness due to cultural constraints.



desire and relationships. These religious and ideological positions come from the perspective with which we read our scriptures and religious practices.

Many times, we equate the love of God just to those expressions of love we are familiar with and subscribe to. And we also tend to claim our own expression of love as superior to any other expressions of love. It is in such entitled circumstances that our familiarity with our own limited notions of sexuality breeds contempt on any other unfamiliar forms of sexuality. These unfamiliar forms of sexuality could be expressing the same divine love that we may be expressing but our cultural notions blind us to these more than just rainbow² expressions of love.

Love and desire in this passage should be seen as a seal or a sign of the Covenant, a clearly visible reminder that the Covenant of God is all inclusive and expansive. The reminder of the expansiveness of the Covenant is a joyful relief to those who bring diversity to the table with their varied manifestation of sexuality. The expansiveness is also a reminder to those who claim to be in solidarity with the community should move their solidarity beyond our restricted notions of the Covenant. How we understand the Covenant depends on how we understand God, who is the author of the Covenant.

A very powerful Hebrew word in vs. 6 is *shalhebet'yah* is a version of the divine name Yah, as in Yahweh, suggesting that desire and love as manifested in the Covenant is “a flame of Yah[weh]”. The fierce flame/passion constitutes the core of God, a constant battle between love and death, where life prevails even when the Covenantal relationship is violated. The thoughts of death and grave here are strong indications of the fierce and delicately poised nature of love. In the constant battle between life and death, life comes out as a hopeful sign. The flame here is the most vehement flame—literally, a flame of Yah. We understand that it is the only place where a sacred name occurs in the book, and when the name appears, it is to express something superlatively great and strong about love, desire and passion. It is this flame of supernatural power that is kindled and cherished by God. The constant struggle for the desire of the love alerts us to the shallow glorifying of love and at the same times calls us to boldly identify the complex nature of love especially in the context of sexual diversity; and of love involved in such relationships.

Love, as expressed in this passage, is safeguarded to the extent of embracing death. This does not glorify death and killing, it depicts the unseen depths and also the gravity of love to the extent of defying death. To understand this love further, what Rowan Williams says about Grace can be said of Love and passion too. Williams explains:

It is this discovery which most clearly shows why we might want to talk about grace here. Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted.

² The colours of the rainbow are seen as a sign of diversity when it comes to sexuality. The rainbow flag has become a symbol of the LGBTQIA+Q rights movement. It is believed that the flag dates back to the year 1978, when the artist Gilbert Baker, a drag queen and a gay man designed it.



He further says,

The whole story of creation, incarnation and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created so that we may be caught up in this; so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God.¹

In our own immediate and wider contexts, there is also the idea of love that demands discernment of complexity of relationships, which is as overwhelming as death and the grave. Bear in mind the complexity of love depicted here and the complexity of responses to Love. The overwhelming expressions of love should put to death the notion that only heteronormative relationships are ultimate and divinely ordained.

While on the one hand there has been a glad increase in the number of those who are openly gay and lesbian, on the other, death and death-like situations project themselves in various forms: cultural notions of heteronormativity, patriarchal notions, and so on. Honour killings and ostracization of sexual minorities continue to be perpetuated. Our first attempt to punish and obliterate the object of desires of those who do not behave like we do, is by unleashing the forces of death and defilement that follow the community everywhere thereafter. Culturally, we are appalled and terrified by multiple possibilities of the expressions of Love. It is in this context that God invites us for a fresh understanding of covenantal love driven by fierce passion and desire to practice love in one's own right as exhibited in the heart of God.

¹ Rowan Williams on Desire and Wholehearted Love - Dan J. Brennan



“BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY”: QUALITY OR QUANTITY?

Rev. Dr. Anupama Hial¹

Gen 1: 27 – 31 & Gen 2: 1 – 3

Introduction

Freedom to choose may be understood in different ways in India as different kinds of bondage and enslavement are prevalent in our country in the name of culture, traditions, religions and customs. Though there are no detailed statistics available, that a sizable number of people are of diverse sexual orientations. India’s Supreme Court struck down section 377 of the Indian Penal Code - a draconian law that outlawed same sex relationships. But the fight for equal rights for LGBTQIA+QI had not yet been fully won in our society. The LGBTQIA+QI community are still living within the bondage of harassment, discrimination on the grounds of their different sexual orientations and gender identities. Freedom is needed where there is bondage. The clutches of bondage are to be broken by the Spirit of God, without which there is no authentic human freedom. Unfortunately, the literal readings of text/scripture by the church deprives the LGBTQIA+QI community of the right to freely profess, express and experience their sexuality.

The text over the years has been dominated by the context. Paul was a master at superimposing context into the text and thereby producing what can be called an ‘interpretative canon’. The Christian church (community) was established first before the New Testament (Greek Bible) was composed and circulated. This gap provided Paul the possibility to produce a volume of theological interpretations as recorded in his works, particularly in the epistles. Historians have also proved that Paul was heavily influenced by his Greek philosophical leanings, and that served as his background to interpret the Gospel. The Gospels were written by Jesus’ disciples who had recorded the oral historical events without any addition. They were witnesses to the acts of the Gospel and oral data about Jesus’ life and ministry were included later into their writings. But Paul outsmarted the disciples and circulated contextual interpretation as early as 40 AD whereas the Gospels were circulated as late as 70 AD.

Today the canonical text has the Greco-Roman socio-cultural milieu which in a way allows the readers to understand the pure canon within the interpreted canonical texts. Thus, Paul’s theology was found in the communities of Jesus in written form

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well before the Gospels reached Jesus' communities. It is for readers to judge whether the events of history were misrepresented due to the emergence of theology, vis a vis Paul's writings, for theology is only an interpretation of texts.

One of the features that received close attention in Paul's writings was patriarchy and human sexuality. The resources for his influence, without any doubt, were the Greco-Roman socio-cultural political landscape that Paul was exposed to prior to his conversion. His background was in Jewish religious life, Greek philosophy and the Roman authoritarian political setting - all of which produced in him a strong patriarchal bias and a proposition on sexuality. They were his individual opinions guided by local socio-cultural factors.

The existence of diverse sexualities is God's design for creation. The command 'be fruitful and multiply' is given to all creatures and humans are only representative. Humans are endowed with knowledge to act responsibly, and not to dominate the earth. Unfortunately, humans have dominated through the multiplication of their species and subjugation of other species on earth and sea. Because humans have taken literally the command of being 'fruitful and multiply', human sexuality was developed into a well-articulated human way including the restricting of God's gift of sex to reproduction.

The first two chapters of Genesis are very important, they cover millions of years of the creation and after creation period. It is very difficult to deconstruct the entire mystery of God's creation, no one can fathom the length and breadth of God' plan for creation, and in particular of humans in the creation. This leads us to believe the literal description of the Word, the acts of God, cannot be reduced to two chapters or narratives, to seven days, or a few years.

Therefore because of the distance and limitations of human knowledge one assumes that God would have been in a pensive mood when humans were created and asked to be 'fruitful, multiply, fill and subdue.' I am sure God would have repented and possibly had changed God's mind realizing how humans have abused God's commands and promises and destroyed the creation. To me it is rather a commitment to the cause and the nature of creation, and the spirit behind being effective stewards, rather than mindlessly 'filling and dominating' the earth as the way to fulfil God's commandment. This is where sexual diversity comes into play. Sexual diversity is more about a commitment to preserve the earth, creating a balance in sustaining the earth and providing resources equitably to all the creation. All this so that God's creation will bear witness to justice, equality and dignity of **all creatures** as well as the preservation and sustenance for all species and the environment. I will speak briefly of four dichotomies in understanding of the above text in the context of human sexuality:

Dichotomy of Male and Female

The complexities rising from the question of diverse human sexualities have been reduced to our focus on the male-female dichotomy and not on the diversity implied. Creation and the blessing upon the creation to be productive and fruitful are more about the quality of life rather than the quantification of growth. The text and context, and inter-contextuality have evoked complexities; raising questions on the evolution of the word;



theological interpretations; and the religious/cultural understanding of church leaders.

Sexuality is a gift of God, for it builds relationship, intimacy and partnership. To be fruitful and multiply is also quality of life in relationship, affection and partnership. God has not exclusively prescribed the sexual act for being productive and becoming fruitful through the arithmetic of multiplication.

The biblical imageries of erotic relationships are founded between two persons and not necessarily between two opposite genders such as male and female. Sex is designed by nature of its plan and purpose and is confined to same species alone. Creation stories of the description of male and female is more a question of compatibility than of making them absolute categories.

The world suffers with discrimination and exploitation due of our absolutisation through strict categories. The schema of creation is diverse and manifest in its multiplicity. In other words, relationships are based on partnership and complementarity, rather than by sharp divisions as male and female. Does it mean that two males or two females are denied partnership and complementarity in their relations? Partnership and complementarity cannot be limited to human sexuality alone. It is much wider and more complex. Therefore, it is essential to bring out the message of the text and understand the purpose of God which in being authentic to any gender and sexual identity.

Dichotomy of Body and Spirit

The early church developed theology based on dualism. Such dualism was pitted against each other - Body and Spirit. Body is bad and spirit is good. Anything that is thought to be bodily is to be rejected.

There is need for a fresh understanding of human sexuality and interpreted in the present scenario. And in our context, we keep in mind that Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code was declared unconstitutional since it was draconian for people of different sexual orientations.

We must read the Bible taking into consideration its historical, social, cultural and economic context. A literal reading of the Bible does not portray balanced images of sexuality. Sexuality in the Bible should be studied from the following context: Greco-Roman world, sexuality in the Gospel tradition, sexuality in Paul and beyond Paul, Divorce, Same-sex intercourse, men and women in community and leadership and celibacy. Otherwise this becomes the Word superimposed by today's socio-cultural norms and caste theology as the finished product belonging to this particular cultural context. The Canon is defeated when the socio-cultural aspects of today's context is rigidly applied to another context and time.

God has made humans fearfully and wonderfully (Psalm 139:14). Fearfully because God knew that humans alone are a risk to God's creation and wonderfully because



God knows humans are endowed with knowledge which makes them co-creator alongside God. This has to be celebrated in a greater way. At the deepest level of human creation, the spirit gives meaning and purpose of life and spirit enables us to love one another, to love the other, and to love oneself and God.

Dichotomy of Morality and Complexities of Multiplicity

Emphasis on 'over moralizing' sex and 'over sexualizing' morality is counterproductive. Often, they are the by-product of a context. In God's design sex is reserved for a committed relationship, because it brings intimacy, partnership, and complementarity. Of course, humans have created the institution of marriage to legitimise intimacy, partnership, and complementarity. But all these categories of committed relationships are not to be reduced by contextual moralising of sex and sexuality. They are extracanonical and extrajudicial aspects in the reading of the Bible.

The Freudian analysis of repression and guilt that governed our thinking have to be replaced with postmodern understandings of freedom and openness. Moralising sex and sexuality have to be critically understood in the context of diverse human sexualities. Morality cannot be treated as a deterrent, but rather as a guidance that promotes committed relationships rather than just the sexual act.

Dichotomy of Complexities and Commitment

God's design for sex is not limited to heterosexuality alone; but God is prescriptive of total commitment between the sexual partners. The expectations for being in relationship is not devoid of commitment and if commitment does not exist, it would only make the gift of sex abusive, leading to broken relationships. Therefore, the emphasis on freedom and openness does not call for either partner compromising on their commitment to the other. It is the commitment to the partner that entails moral conviction. It is not sexual orientation per se.

Culture has taken this one step further to say that the act of sex is also within the boundary of morality. The act of sex is a libido instinct that drives the partners to indulge in postures of fantasy. What constitutes within the act of morality is commitment and the attitude to sex, in which the commitment and faithfulness of the partner matters most. Sex can be both a bane and a blessing depending on how it is used.

The African theologian Emmanuel Katongole calls the abuse of sexual relationships "condomization". He means that on the one hand African churches promote safe sex to overcome the curse of HIV/AIDS, but on the other the church sees sex as a sin. The church tries to insulate itself from the social upheaval and crises that present themselves in the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and at the same time religious morality rejects the victims of such as they are seen as sinners, as if the schema of salvation cannot be offered by God to them or received by the victims. Commitment in relationships which builds love, trust and care for each other. The Church is called to embrace people who are living with HIV/AIDS and in the context of this text, those of different sexual identities, to assure



them the peace of God - not looking at their morality but at their commitment to their partners and to God.

Conclusion

In I Cor. 12, Paul talks about the body of Christ as one body, in which there are many members or organs. The body of Christ can even be understood as a group of many members put together in the one body. The composition of the body of Christ is further explained that in one Spirit, all the members of the body are baptized. There is no distinction on any front, be it ethnicity, caste status or sexual identity, all the members of the body are baptized into the one body of Christ through the one spirit, for all of them are made to eat and drink from that one body. God's word is liberative and empowering and not enslaving and dehumanizing to all people and this includes the whole spectrum of the LGBTQIA+ community. Those who are part of the body of Christ must be liberated.

On the contrary as theologians and Christian leaders we need to challenge the evil culture and culture bound interpretations which ignore the experience of people like the LGBTQIA+ community and which legitimize their low status in the Church and society. There is a need to liberate hermeneutics from the clutches of sex-discrimination, or any other form of discrepancy so as to preserve the unity of the church while acknowledging the differences.

In this context it is important for us to rediscover and reinterpret new images of God. That image of God must be inclusive and non-judgemental. We should translate and interpret the Bible in a way which will be applicable to both men and women and people of other sexual orientations without losing the authentic message of the Biblical text. The LGBTQIA+ community needs to be liberated from bondage, that of patriarchal hermeneutics of the Bible and that of the scriptures of other faiths. The call is to be fruitful and multiply not in quantity but through affirming the quality of life in relationship.

As we find throughout the Bible human beings crying for freedom and God promises liberation by saying "I will open your graves" (Ezekiel 37: 13-14) - the graves that bind us in slavery, the graves that curtail all our freedom, the graves that make us slaves and the discriminated against. The promise of God our creator of freedom needs to be actualized in the LGBTQIA+ community by welcoming them into a life of freedom and togetherness in Christ.

For this we need to identify the Spirit of God that dwells within us and among us. Shall we commit ourselves now to the guiding Spirit of God to liberate all from all bondages to experience freedom, freedom to live in relationship, freedom to be respected, and freedom to celebrate life in all its fullness.



HERE I STAND!

Fr. Philip Kuruvilla¹

Gal: 3:28: *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male not female: for they are all one in Christ”.*

Introduction:

The theme of my sermon is from St Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians, Chapter 3 v28: *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male not female: for they are all one in Christ”*. I am going to speak about Gender Identity and Human Sexuality. I will in this meditation discuss the issues faced by some communities who are present all around us. Many of us do not accept or acknowledge them, some of us are afraid of them. I am speaking of people who are called: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex-known in today’s parlance as the LGBTQIA+ communities. I am sure some of you are shocked and you may ask -why discuss sexuality from the holy pulpit in a holy church? If you allow that we are your spiritual guides, then it is our duty to bring to your notice things that we feel are important to your holistic wellbeing, and that of humanity as a whole. If we do less- out of fear that you may not like what we say- then we have lost the prophetic role that is given to us, an important part of being a faith-leader.

We must look at the times. Never before have the sexual ethics of our culture been faced with such a confusing array of material. Divorce is increasing; live-in-relationships, instead of a marriage, is fast becoming the norm in

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Indian metros; new technologies have made pornography immediately accessible to young adolescents through their cell phones and the internet; living together is very common in cities. The once inconceivable notion of same-sex “marriage” is now recognized by law in a growing number of countries. What should be our response to the issues of human sexuality? The need for a clear voice from Christian leadership or the Church is critical, both for the health of our own faith communities and for our faithful witness to the world. This voice must not be homophobic or transphobic, but rather must use Jesus’ responses to the excluded of his day as its touchstone.

Remembering that we Christians constitute only 3% of India, it would be good to look at



the majority Hindu faith and its response. Traditionally, Indian [Hindu] culture is not openly against people of such orientations. Sexuality issues go back to ancient Hindu scriptural writings. As in many other societies, homosexuality has always been part of the traditional Indian sexual practice - and this is evident in the carvings of some ancient temples. In ancient India, homosexual activity was either ignored or stigmatized or laughed at, but never condemned as 'sinful' nor called 'criminal'. Homosexual practices were accepted - a person who was gay was allowed a space in the family and the community, and homosexual practices were tolerated as long as men and women fulfilled their responsibilities to normal marriage, family and procreation. Similarly, trans persons had a part in Indian community life. In some cultures, in India, even today, *hijra's* are considered to be the harbingers of good luck. There was no 'us' and 'them'. So, when did this change come about? It was the Victorian-era British, who came to India to 'civilize the heathens' as well as to trade, who took upon themselves the task of moral policing, and who soon imposed a Sodomy Law -Section 377- in 1863, in all the south Asian countries they colonized. Homosexuality was considered 'unnatural' and made illegal. In 1967 this law was repealed in Britain, but we in India continue to carry the colonial baggage in our new found morality, 75 years later.

We have forgotten that there is no 'us' and 'them': *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male not female: for they are all one in Christ"*

You may wonder if the views I put forth are mine alone. Let me tell you about an all-India Christian organisation called the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI). It is a 106-year institution which is the ecumenical expression of 30 Orthodox and Protestant Churches in India. Your church is probably a member. Any program or workshop the NCCI conducts, or any document that it passes, has to have the approval of every member church. NCCI has been working in the field of Gender Diversity and Human Sexuality since 2001, but the average Christian is not aware of this. You may remember that the Supreme Court and the Delhi High Court had taken differing stands on Section 377 of the Constitution, regarding homosexuality, more than a decade ago. In 2009, the NCCI organized a meeting in Kolkata, and the Statement they brought out said they consider the Delhi High Court verdict to decriminalize consensual sexual acts between adults in private as a positive step. It also said: "We appeal to the Christian communities to sojourn with sexual minorities and their families without prejudice and discrimination". In 2011, NCCI brought out *"An Ecumenical Document on Human Sexuality"* for the churches. NCCI also brought out, at that time, a booklet of *"Bible Studies on Human Sexuality"*. In 2017 two more very relevant books have been brought out by NCCI which I will refer to shortly.

Now, as Christians, let us turn to the Holy Bible for answers to our life questions, and this includes the issues of the LGBTQIA+ communities. *"For many are invited but a few are chosen"* [Mt.22:14]. Jesus parable of the wedding feast - mentioned in Mathew and Luke - highlights inclusivism. The poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame – all found a place. However, in Mathew 22:11, the writer talks of the



king who ordered a man who was at his feast but who was not appropriately dressed in wedding clothes, to be thrown out. It seems everyone can come to the feast, even if poor or marginalized, but the host will still look at your clothes. Since we know the invitees were from the streets, from among the poor and marginalized, we need to understand what Jesus meant when he threw someone out for not wearing appropriate attire. What is it that they really lacked? And then ask ourselves why do we feel it is “us” who will decide that “they” will not enter the kingdom of heaven? Those with diverse sexual orientations are human beings who also need this ‘sacred space’, and ‘pastoral understanding’ - there is no ‘us’ or ‘them’. *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female: for they are all one in Christ”.*

Biblically, the first question that comes to mind is, *“Doesn't Genesis 19: 1-29 tell us Sodom was destroyed because of homosexuality?”*. And at the first reading of the scriptures it would seem so. For most of us, the sin of Sodom is homosexuality. This is the text that has been used consistently to justify the condemnation of same-sex relationships. The general idea is that the study of the bible is objective and scientific, bringing out the original meaning of the original author. But it isn't so simple. The books of the Bible were written at different times, each in a particular cultural, historical, religious and social context - which are different from that of the person or group reading the stories today. Those reading the Bible and how they apply their minds, including their commitments and beliefs, determine the real impact. Hence a deeper and non-judgmental reading of the Bible does not agree with a distorted position on Sodom. Lesser known tracts by the Prophet Ezekiel [16:49] says it was the un-willingness of the people of Sodom to share their abundance with the poor, was the reason for its destruction. For Amos, [4:1,11], Sodom's destruction came because of their oppressing of the needy and their crushing of the poor. Even Isaiah [1:10-17], with reference to Sodom and Gomorrah says, seek justice, reprove the oppressor, be just to the orphan, contend for the widow. But most people use this Genesis story for bashing those with different sexual orientations. It is unfortunately true that such readings of the holy Bible have played a significant role in the building up of stigma and discrimination we Christians have indulged in towards these peoples, and used as a basis for the violence that has been inflicted upon sexual minorities over the last few centuries. Today, the Bible is being reinterpreted with less bias and more acceptance. I suggest *“A theological reader on Human Sexuality and Gender Diversities”* (NCCI Publication) for your further reading and education, which has been prescribed as standard reading by several theological colleges in India.

Our Pastors and spiritual guides also need to relook at and rethink their attitude towards the LGBTQIA+ communities. Very few of you have heard of the *Senate of Serampore College* near Kolkata. It was founded by three missionaries Carey, Marshman and Ward and granted the status of University in 1829. It is from here that the majority of Indian pastors and clergy get their Bachelor of Divinity Degrees before ordination to priesthood. In its attempt to keep abreast with modern issues and challenges, it has had to constantly revamp its syllabus. By 2014 it has included an optional paper on Human Sexuality. This is what is called *“Queer Hermeneutics”*, which seeks to bring an alternative point of view from the perspective of sexual minorities, based on the precepts of Christian Theology.



So then, how do the Indian Churches in India respond to issues of human sexuality and gender identity? It may be seen through a study, that Indian Churches do not have a united voice or unified response, instead a variety of views are represented. Even within any one denomination, individuals and groups hold different points of view. The NCCI has documented the response of several Indian churches towards the issues of the LGBTQIA+ communities. The book: *“Christian Responses to Issues of Human Sexuality and Gender Diversity”* published in 2017, has become a ready reckoner for all sections of the Church in India, who want to understand these issues. The problem is not in India alone, it is there for the worldwide Evangelical, Pentecostal, Catholic and Orthodox Churches as well. The Roman Catholic Church officially does not approve of homosexuality, but it has softened its stance in recent years. In 2014 the Vatican Synod of Bishops approved a document which gives greater acceptance to gays, saying they must be accepted with respect and delicacy. A quote by the present Pope, Francis, in July 2014, has become very famous: he said: *“If someone is gay and seeks the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?”*

Fear on our side has much to do with lack of information and communication. Most of us have seen trans-folk at red lights or in trains. Their aggression and demand for money nauseate and scare us. However, they claim that it is a result of permanent knocks and abuse they are getting every waking moment of the day, all the days of their adult lives. They too would prefer to have regular jobs – prejudice ensures that employment is scarce for them. So, who is correct? Homophobia is the irrational fear of people of homosexual orientation. Transphobia is the irrational fear of people who are transsexuals. There are many among us who respond to our fear of the LGBTQIA+ communities with violence and unjust, un-Christian behaviour. Let me be clear - even liberal sections of the Indian Christian Community seem obsessed with legitimizing ‘dominant’ hetero-sexuality as normal and natural, and isolating and ostracizing those who do not come under this ‘normality’. Homo- and trans-phobia also works in reverse. The opposition to homosexuality and transsexuality brings out many negative responses – and violence is only one. The terrible backlash from society towards those with different sexual orientations, brings about such pain that they are now sharing publicly, and they are finding their voices. People are speaking out and others are listening- can you hear their cries? *“From the moment we open the door of our room in the morning and come out, we face rejection, ridicule, vocal and physical intimidation. The pressure is unbearable”*. These statements coming from LGBTQIA+ friends who have experienced not only exclusion, rejection and condemnation, but also violent attacks, including from members of the Church that claims to follow the footsteps of the gentle Jesus.

If you will stay and listen to their stories, you might have a different view point. Because of persecution and intimidation, they have left school early. No one wants to give them jobs. To eat and to live they have only two means- begging and sex work. And the cycle continues. Almost one-third of them admitted that at some time in their life they had contemplated committing suicide as a result of ill-treatment and pressure from their faith leaders, families and friends. If I said that it is you and I who are responsible, by our silence, by our closing our eyes, for the death of these



who are also children of God, very few would agree. But it would be nearer the truth. We should be ashamed - it is we who are responsible for their plight. Let us not make excuses.

We know loving parents who have taken their gay children to religious leaders, or tried to change them through prayers and psychiatric counselling. In the course of my working all over India, I found the dark side of humanity's response towards those who were different, and more so if they were of different sexual orientations. I know of families that actually killed their child if he/she was not born with 'normal' genitals. Or people like Mallika whose parents pumped her with hormones during her adolescent years – in order to make her more of a man. By age 32 she could not walk properly. Have you heard of 'corrective rape?' Parents who allowed their daughter to be raped by a relative in order to ensure she 'enjoyed' sex with a male and changed her outlook - because she told them she was attracted to other women. Parents who gave their child electric-shock therapy to stop their gay behaviour. All these responses arise from a lack of knowledge, and phobias. Instead, can we offer them tolerance and acceptance? Can we give these people 'space' to be part of God's community - without judgment, without stigma, without discrimination? Do they not need God just as you and I do? Especially if they are members of our family, or our church community? What if they march in life to the beat of a different drummer? Who are we to judge?

I bring you before some experts for medical, psychological and legal responses. The medical and psycho-social questions are those which we have to look at after the theological questions are taken up. We can ask- Is their condition something which can be changed? Is homosexuality the consequence of social and external influences? Were they born like this or did circumstances bring them to this point? If so, can we change those factors and ensure that homosexual persons were not produced? Is it an expression of innate biological factors? Unfortunately, the answer to these questions is not a simple yes or no: "Nature or Nurture" is still open for debate, there is no agreement among the world's medical and psychiatric fraternity - both sides lack proof for their arguments. However, more and more experts are of the opinion that it is a condition you are born with, and if something is in your DNA, you cannot change it without destroying the person. To give strength to this argument, the American Psychiatric Association, in 1973, and WHO, the World Health Organisation, in 1992, both officially accepted homosexuality as a normal variant of human sexuality.

Before concluding, there is one more good reason why we as faith leaders need you to understand the issues. In a nutshell, stigma and discrimination against transgender people is illegal. The pillars of the Government of India – the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary, have been working hard to support and emancipate the transgender community. By the NALSA judgment of 2014 the Supreme Court of India accepted that beyond male and female, there was a "third gender" which had legal rights ensured by law. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 is an act of the Parliament of India with the objective to provide for protection of rights of transgender persons, their welfare, and other related matters. The last word on gays from Section 377 has not been heard. If any of us as individuals, as community or business leaders, or those who head Churches and Christian Institutions, discriminate against the trans community in any



way, we can face prosecution and penal action. *'I didn't know'* will not suffice as an answer. Hence it is our duty to keep abreast with the latest rules concerning these who are our fellow citizens, or else we will come up hard against the law of the land, not only against the tenets of Christ.

Conclusion:

The goal of this sermon is not to ask for the acceptance of the lifestyle of these people. What would be ideal as it is a mental transformation in us which can lead to a social transformation and to new boundaries in religious thinking and traditions in the light of Christian values. We are so quick to judge and to condemn others, do we have the right? The mission of the Church and her children is not to protect or defend our liturgy, doctrines, ecclesiastical offices or even the Bible. That is God's domain. Rather, we are called to enable others to experience their faith by exposing ourselves to the challenges that comes from the margins. We must evolve from being only defenders of ancient dogmas, and instead project the churches as sacred spaces where love destroys fear and exclusion.

If it is my belief that we are committing a greater sin by excluding any group of people, in this case, those who live with a different sexual preference or orientation. I do not expect that through this sermon you will change your views, but I offer you a different perspective, and ask the Holy Spirit *'to guide you to the truth'*. At the same time, we need to ask how we can be a church which ostracizes, shames and excludes a group from a fuller communion in the Church, the Body of Christ? This issue is not a 'western' or 'foreign' import; or it one that will go away if we ignore it, but one very deeply embedded within the Indian ethos. A church which resembles a fort keeping out others who share the *imago dei* the Image of God, marked by the sign of the Cross, may not be considered the Bride of Christ, because it would not pass the test of inclusivity. Christians and Churches have to focus on the issues of these marginalised communities - church leaders need to speak out in terms of acceptance. The need of the hour is for a genuine understanding of the issues- and a loving response. Christ would expect no less from us. Amen.



Rev. Dr. Allan Samuel Pallanna¹

Amos. 9:1-12; Rom. 2:17-29

The deep-seated perception that persons of vulnerable communities, labelled and socially mutilated as being uniformly dangerous and immoral is a harmful myth that has resulted in the mistreatment of the most despised persons and communities throughout history which has been reinforced by hurtful stereotypes. It provides the powerful with convenient justifications to exercise control over persons and communities. Usually we see that when power is involved, whether be it social, economic or sexual, human beings slip into the side of discrimination and further still, exclusion. This is an interesting example of human perversity and the predictability of human behaviour. In this context, how does one make sense of it all and would scripture posit a perspective? The scriptures constantly prod us to understand the depth of human failings, the depth of human trust and the depth of human hope.

Plurality of Faiths and Orientations

A thought that beckons our imagination is “the only way to be religious is to be interreligious.” This portrays the multi-religious context of many of our societies. However, on the other hand, religion is seen as the principle cause of most of the discriminations in the world. Faith as often associated with inclusion is now associated with violence and exclusion. Discrimination between faiths and within faiths are widespread. People are often driven to take violent means in order to achieve what they perceive to be just and ‘inclusive’. We may cite many instances from within our churches where local conflicts have fuelled irrational behaviour ending with violence. People often justify such violence as the will of God. Also, many groups claim that their religiosity or faith is the only true one and all others are false.

Within one’s own faith, people are often confronted with the question: *If I begin to respect other faiths, ethnic and sexual orientations, does that mean that I am denying God and my faith?* or the more popular question that is often asked by youngsters during confirmation class: *will I be compromising my faith if I have friends from other religious faiths or ethnic or sexual orientations?* This often gives rise to guilt and a sense of ‘faithlessness’. A prayer

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Collect that is prayed in many churches is perhaps the best starting point towards inclusion: “Create in us a new heart that accepts people of all faith and of sexual orientations and genders, as sisters and brothers and strive together to discern your light and truth.” There are two significant pointers in this prayer with two different emphases: 1) acceptance; and 2) discernment

The prayer beautifully articulates our relationship with people of other faiths and orientations. We pray in the Collect that God would create in us a new heart of acceptance so that we may discern God’s light and truth together. The prayer makes a fundamental affirmation that we need each other as friends, sisters and brothers to realise and understand who God truly is. Acceptance does not mean compromise or hierarchy. Discernment does not mean rejection. In acceptance, there is a call to discern the working of God amongst the people of God. The Bible is a witness of God’s presence and God’s working amongst various people.

Amos. 9:1-12 – In God, there is no partiality at all

The prophet Amos confronts the false notion of the people of Israel that they were the only ones who were liberated and led by God. Amos brings God’s judgement on the people for assuming that religiosity would assure them safety. The language of escapism is used such as ‘they dig’, ‘they climb’, ‘they hide’, ‘they go’ (vv 2-3) as people try to take shelter in supposedly holy places where God is thought to dwell. The safe places in popular understanding such as ‘heaven’ and ‘Carmel’ are not so, as God brings God’s judgement even in those places. These religious ‘escape routes’ do not assure ready protection to the people who claim faithfulness whilst nurturing hatred for people ‘outside the fold’.

Amos 9:7 is a pivotal verse as it affirms,

*“Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord.
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,
and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?”*

There is a strong sense of God’s immense concern for all people of the world and God’s liberative act even in the histories of other people that Israel considered ‘enemies’, ‘outsiders’ and ‘un-believers’. God’s word, saying, “Are you not like...” suggests that Israel is placed alongside the others as one of the many nations being constantly nurtured by God. There cannot be a privileged claim that Israel can make over against other people, as God affirms that God shows no partiality. It is in the very nature of God to be concerned about all people. In the epistle to the Romans 2:17- 29, Paul corrects the misunderstanding that religious practices lead people to faith. He directly addresses a section of the community that strongly held the false notion of separating people on the basis of following or not following certain customs and practices. Paul clarifies that hypocrisy is unacceptable in matters of faith (vv 21-24). Paul extends the understanding of the law not only to incorporate other expressions of the law amongst other people, but sees them as examples of honest faith (vv 26,27) Romans 2: 29 says, “Rather, a person is a Jew who is one



inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.”

It is also an affirmation that God ‘looks at the heart’ rather than outward appearance, perception or sexual orientation. Though we may see distinctions and divisions based on faith affirmations or sexualities, the Gospel exemplifies the view of the entire humanity according to God’s perspective. The recovery of memory of both our failure and the invitation of God to start afresh is always present. We are forever opened to God’s power of transformation and grace, where all are invited to be filled with the living power of God’s immense love.

In the days of Amos, the prophet, whilst religious leaders of the day were busy churning out sugar-coated messages of wellbeing and hatred towards the neighbour of a different perspective, Amos confronts the corrupted discriminatory exclusionary practices of the societal life of Israel. *Amos speaks a theology of inclusiveness over against a theology of hatred.* Amos forges an explicit and unbreakable link between justice toward the neighbour and righteousness before God, a link that goes back to the covenant at Sinai. Amos’ ministry provides an eternal witness of God’s opposition to economic, political, social and sexual injustice and hatred of the neighbour.

Good religious practices may not be everything unless and until it makes one a better human being. This is evident in reading from the epistle to the Romans that even though St. Paul studied under Gamaliel (one of the prominent educators of his day), he still persecuted the Church. It is not enough to refrain from murder, we are called to live without hatred. What we do on the outside is supposed to match what we are on the inside.

The Gospel reading calls to open new territories within the heart and outside. Those are territories, both of risk and promise. It is to open the door into the house of vision and beginning. It is a vocation where we feel at home in our heart and life and work. Many centuries ago, the Jewish sages asked, who is a hero of heroes? They answered, not one who defeats the enemy but one who turns an enemy into a friend. That is what happens when enmities and discriminatory practices are set aside. Jesus by calling his disciples, his friends, brings forth a new vision of relationship, not of hierarchy and exclusion, but of love and trust.



LOVE YOUR (GAY) NEIGHBOR

Rev. Deva Jyothi Kumar¹

The churches and Christians could not escape the reality and had to break their silence about the growing openness in society to the culture of same sex relationships. I know that some Christian families are directly impacted by the discussion because they have friends or family members who are gay. There are probably a few among us who struggle with gay tendencies in the pews today. So, I understand that I address a difficult but pressing issue. If we believe in the truth of God's word, then this should not be an issue and we should not shy away from it. We are going to reflect on how we should respond to our gay neighbour across the street.

The way Jesus worked to bring change in the understanding of the Jewish people about the non-Jewish community around them, whom they had thought of as people outside the grace of God, is illustrative of any mission that aims for a change in our understanding about others in a community.

Heterosexual people who label themselves as belonging to the designed order of God's creation fiercely condemn non-heterosexual persons as cursed or as self-inflicted sinners. The Church has predominantly shielded heterosexual people's designs and deliberates on its ethical policies and behavioural norms strictly against the non-heterosexual lives from a heterosexual framework. They condemn non-heterosexual persons as sinners who corrupt God's order of sexual life. They look very similar to the way the Jewish dehumanized the non-Jewish and expected them to repent. Increasing attendance of sexual minorities in the churches and the society necessitates the church to break its protracted stand of denunciation and condemnation. If the church wants to bring a change in its policies regarding the behavioural patterns of non-heterosexual persons, I have a few ideas from the way how the historical Jesus tried to change self-righteous people of his community.

Interpreting the scriptures for inclusion

Scriptures in any religion are a powerful base that controls social and religious behaviour of their respective followers. People tend to look to the scriptures as a proof text for all their attitudes and behaviour. They miserably lack in understanding of the way of how and where the content of the scriptures was formed. They pay no heed to the fact that scriptures comprise of human minds especially of those who wrote the texts. They have a myopic view that the scriptures are inspired or

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directly revealed by God for God's people. How that is practically possible they cannot explain but just say 'God can do anything'. They are also in a panic about questioning the authority of the scriptures as God himself authored it - questioning it will lead to misfortune in life. But the increase in rationality and Biblical scholarship as well the increase of scientific and technological knowledge about life questions the stand of the scriptures on certain forms of human behaviour.

As for as the Bible goes, they would assert that non-hetero sexuality is condemned as sin by the Bible. Some Christians would quote Paul who said homosexuality is sin. Some people who are trying to understand the growing concerns of gay men and women are still hesitant to accept them because Bible condemns them as sinner. It has become a very difficult task for theologians to make people understand that those words are to be understood in the context of its occurrences and composition. How do we understand the scriptures? Can we question scriptures? Or ignore them? Investigating how Jesus responded to the scriptures in his time might help us to approach the present struggle from a strong Biblical position?

Bible doesn't say anything about Jesus' direct inference to homosexuality however, his intervention for the sake of the poor and the sick people, who were considered sinners by the Jewish elites, was often condemned by Jesus because of his faithfulness to the Jewish scriptures. For example, Jesus neither appreciated nor gave immediate approval to the elite Jews who demanded that Jesus' stand on stoning a commercial sex worker was wrong; although they quoted the appropriate scriptures that supported their action.

What Jesus did was to make the Jewish elite re-consider that their stand towards the woman, despite strong scriptural support. Jesus' interpretation of the scriptural demand of the Jewish elites was to admonish them to see the victimization of the woman beyond scriptural insistence that she had sinned. He neither criticized nor appreciated the scriptures but wanted the followers to give space for a newer interpretation from a newer perspective. The church in the present situation needs to understand that the victimization, negligence and denunciation of the homosexual persons goes beyond what many Christians claim the scriptures say. A newer look is needed that gives space for the point of view of the neglected LGBTQIA+ community and the struggles of homosexual men/women/community.

Interpreting the tradition for transformation

Jesus was criticized for healing people on the Sabbath more than for his act of healing the sick. He was intentionally healed on the Sabbath even with opposition. Perhaps this boldness of Jesus must have mounted Jewish antagonism against him. Sabbath was a tradition, that calls the Jewish to be in absolute tranquillity and submission to God's action of delivering them from Egypt. They were expected to deter from any work on the seventh day of a week. Every Jew was expected to strictly adhere to the Sabbath law. In the course of time this became a merely habitual and an obligatory practice rather than of following the law with definitive conviction. They designed and redesigned new rules to punish the disobedient, nevertheless elite Jewish interest was always safe guarded. For



example, circumcision was permitted on the Sabbath (Jn:7:14), perhaps to generate money for the temple, but then again, the sick could not be healed. Jesus asserted, when obstructed from eating grains on the Sabbath that, ‘things that are swallowed will not pollute a person but that which comes out of one’s mouth can’. In another context he said ‘healing a sick person on the Sabbath is as important as rescuing a goat from a pit on the Sabbath regardless of the importance of the day’. Jesus is pointing out that some traditions are practiced out of habit rather than having a scriptural basis.

When I ask my friends why they do not accept people of the homosexual community they ironically say ‘it is not generally practiced’. We traditionally follow the heterosexual practice and claim it to be the norm. Homo sexual orientation is not talked about easily in our society even by those of homosexual orientation, from the time of our ancestors and even till today! We live in a world where the poor and marginalized are not recognized. Emotions of the poor and minorities are imagined to be evil and sinful. They are always denounced and dehumanized. The world that we live in approves only of the actions of the majority (as in the case of heterosexual practice), or beliefs, practices and behaviour of the affluent.

During this time of the Covid-19 pandemic one painful reality acutely upsets me. Itinerate preachers and even popular evangelical preachers hotly condemn gay people as the reason for the catastrophe happening across this world. And they say that nations that legalized gay life styles are punished by God. Preachers on live channels kneel down and pray for hours asking God to forgive the nations. They even promote the idea of repentance by those in same sex relationships which, according to them, will reduce the pandemic. Such preaching furthers the humiliation of the people who have only recently begun to celebrate their sexual identities. This reminds me of how innocent Christians were viciously treated by the Roman rulers who blamed these Christians for the natural calamity happening in the region. What we must not forget is that Covid-19 as an airborne disease kills people irrespective of their sexual orientation. Pandemics come at different moments of world history due to environmental and lifestyle disturbances we as humans have caused. How can we blame God for that? Or how can we say that the God “who loves the world” would use such a death dealing force on the world?

A true follower of Jesus would definitely do what Jesus did in his time. We are not doing what Jesus asked us to do; but we are doing what was said about Jesus by his disciples and especially by Paul the apostle. Jesus the magnified (as God) is constantly preached in our churches and not the Jesus who identified with the marginalized (the historical Jesus). Let us break any tradition that dehumanizes those who long to live with integrity and decency around us. This is the real challenge for the church today.

Interpreting religious attitudes to be human

Social distancing was followed in a cruel way by the dominant Jewish people when dealing with the non-Jewish. In India it is known as untouchability where one



group of people by their birth (Dalits) are not to be touched or seen. In answer to the question “who is my neighbour?” Jesus tells the parable of how a Jewish religious leader, (like a priest of today) and a Levite had treated a half dead man on the street. They were very conscious of their holiness and did not want to be polluted by touching a wounded stranger. But a Samaritan, a man who was considered to be polluted, took care of the wounded man. With this simple story Jesus reminded the Jews there that any person in need of your attention is your neighbour.

In India, as an answer to the question “who is my neighbour?” for too long our society has been built upon this myth: that there are two and only two ways of being human, male and female; that these identities are determined by our bodies at birth, and cannot be changed. But trans people know that this is not true. We know that there are more than two ways of being created in God’s image. We know that these false boundaries and boxes can be and must be moved, or redrawn, or broken down. There is a profound cultural revolution happening today. Trans people are coming out to tell our stories, and these stories often uproot long-held assumptions. Not only is it possible to change genders, it is possible to be bi-gendered, or multi-gendered, or to identify with no gender at all. The world that God has laid before us is much greater, more nuanced, and more wonderful than anything we can categorize or define.

When we try to limit God’s creative power into two little boxes, all human beings are harmed and limited. Anyone of any other identity – trans, gay, queer or straight – who does not conform to society’s gender expectations is vulnerable to abuse. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight people are also hurt by our society’s narrow mindedness, and prevented from becoming and expressing their full and authentic selves. Butch lesbians² who aren’t hired, effeminate straight men who can’t find housing, boys whose dolls are taken away, girls kept off the sports team – we are ALL suffering from a system that does not reflect the true diversity of human beings as created by God.

The Church should change its behaviour. Discriminating against people of different sexual orientations is a sin. Jesus’ ministry was all times with and among people who were condemned as sinners and he always insisted on including them as equals. Church should be an agency of advocacy for people with different sexual orientations to live with their due rights and be given that they need for their empowerment.

² Butch and femme are terms used in the lesbian subculture to ascribe or acknowledge a masculine (butch) or feminine (femme) identity with its associated traits, behaviour, lifestyles, self-perception, and so on.



ALL ARE INVITED IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST

Dr Lalnghakthuami¹

I Cor. 6: 9-10; Lk 14: 16 – 24.

Let me start our meditation with a story narrated by Joanne Leung with Pearl Wong:

I was born male but became a woman after a sex reassignment surgery. I am a male-to-female transgender lesbian Christian, 52 years old. I wanted to be a girl from the time I was six-years old. I prayed to God to change my mind, to help me to behave like 'a real man' and to erase my desire to be a woman. Nevertheless, I could not escape from my burning desire to be a girl. It took me forty years to make my final decision. I prayed and asked God whether I could take hormones to look more like a girl. God gave me an interesting answer. God said that if this was my desire then I had to bear all responsibility for that decision. However, the promise from God was that wherever I go and whatever decision I make, God will be with me! Eventually, I decided to have the surgery. I told my church that I am a trans person. Many people in the church asked the pastor why he allowed me into the church. My pastor said he would not ask me to leave but if I changed my sex, they would not be able to accept me anymore, as God created me as a man and changing my sex was against natural law.

But I finally had my surgery in May 2009 and that took eight hours! A year after my surgery, I realized that the surgery had granted me a new identity and I did not have to struggle with my body. In short, I love myself. I tell God that I will glorify God forever because God is so amazing in giving me a new identity.

I have suffered various forms of oppression because of my gender identity. Previously, I suppressed my own gender identity and sexuality because I believed that God did not want me to change my sex. However, if I had not gone through these struggles, I would still be reading the Bible literally and condemning my gender identity and sexuality instead of wrestling with the Bible in ways that have deepened my faith. I still question God very often. I have a direct communication with God, as God reveals to me through my prayers and dreams. I still have lots of questions. I want to understand God's will for me, and to help other transgender people to come out of their shame.

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In this sermon she highlights of the value of the reign of God where everyone is included, no matter who we are. Even though, our socio-heterosexual norms and standard rule out people of diverse orientations in our community – this is against the liberative message of Jesus. This is a time for us to celebrate our diverse sexual orientations as all of us are created in the image of God.



The above testimony has a lot to tell us about the struggles of people with diverse sexual orientations in our Christian community. We not only question their identity but we also stigmatize them as if God has given us authority to do so. The affirmation of heterosexual as normative seems to be the only acceptable criteria in our heterosexist society that discriminates against people of diverse gender identities. We cannot include in our community those who are not inside the parameters of heterosexual norms and gender dichotomy, therefore, people of diverse sexual orientations have to struggle in their daily lives. It is very common for them to experience bullying in schools or other peer groups, mocking, and discrimination inside and outside their homes. Many questions may arise in our minds – Who are ‘we’ and ‘them’? Is heterosexuality the norm in the sight of God? Who decides ‘who would be included/excluded’ in the community? What would be the original design of God for human community? Why are some excluded - is it because of the traditional interpretation of the Bible that promotes a stereotypical ideology? Or is it because of the ‘clobber passages’² in the Bible with which we promote the idea of exclusion?

While keeping in mind those questions let us turn to the Scriptural passages I Cor. 6:9 -10 and Lk. 14: 16 – 24 for our meditation.

Our church traditions have accepted the Bible as “infallible rules of faith and practice” for believers. We refer to the Bible for answers to our deep-seated questions about life by saying “what does the Bible say about it?”.

Questioning the authority of the Bible seems to be unusual in our church life. Many a times, we use and misuse the Bible to legitimate exclusion, violence and oppression as in the case of women, the Black community, people of diverse gender and sexual orientations, etc. A literal reading of certain biblical passages excludes many in our churches. If that is so, we need to reconsider certain texts that have been used to exclude certain sections of people in our Christian community.

I Cor. 6:9-10: This is one of the difficult texts which needs to be interrogated for the exclusion of same sex-relationships and people. It is usually quoted (or misquoted) by the Church to exclude people of diverse sexual orientations in our community. In fact, this text is ambiguous as it refers to the ‘passive’ and ‘active’ partners in pederast relationships (relationships of unequal power) or to homosexual and heterosexual male prostitutes. It is unclear whether the issue is homosexuality alone or ‘sex-for-hire’. Some New Testament scholars argue that Paul never used the Greek word ‘homosexual’ rather he used ‘*malakoi*’ and ‘*arsenokoitai*’. The NIV translates *malakoi* is ‘male prostitute’, who takes a passive role in sexual relations with other men. *Arsenokoitai* comes from two Greek words that mean ‘man’ and ‘bed’. Paul made up this word but never defined its meaning. The NIV chooses to translate this word as ‘homosexual offenders’. According to the New Testament scholar L. Jayachitra, *arsenokoitai* may refer to male prostitution or any kind of promiscuity or pederasty (a male having sex with a minor boy). The problem

² Clobber passages refers to Bible texts used to put down the opinion of another which we do not agree with. Here it is texts used to silence the voices that call for the inclusion of sexual others.



is that Paul did not define accurately the term *arsenokoitai*. Here we come across the problem of translation of the Bible.

In the ancient Roman world, the heterosexual men kept a boy in their house to use for their own sexual gratification. These boys were sex slaves. The men who owned these slaves were the *arsenokoitai*, who took the active role in the sexual encounter. There were also other boys who were male prostitutes and offered their services at Roman temple cults. They were the *malakoi*, who took the passive role in the sexual encounter.

New Testament scholars come to the conclusion that Paul was not referring to homosexuality when he used the terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. He was referring to male prostitution and to heterosexual males who sexually abused younger males. His main agenda was to stop the abuse or sexual slavery and sexual abuse by heterosexuals because it was sinful. This is the context in which Paul came up with this message and it has nothing to do with two men living in a committed, loving, same gender relationship. Paul urged the believers to stop abusive behaviour if they were so involved. He wanted the church to be a place where people started caring for one another.

We come to realize that this particular text cannot be used to exclude people of diverse gender identities or push them into the periphery in our community. Let us not attack lesbians and gays by using this text so that we will not promote homophobia and violence against them.

There is another important message from the parable of the Great Banquet where we see a commitment to inclusion of all kinds of people in the reign of God. This parable as an open feast guides the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, in his ecclesiology and ecclesial practice. He notes that this feast is both imminent and already present through the ministry and presence of Jesus Christ. Jesus' message about the reign of God and his forgiveness of sins are incomprehensible without this fellowship of the table which is anticipated with tax-collectors and sinners. That is why, Jesus' feasts are joyful wedding feasts in the dawn of the divine rule as demonstrations of God's unreserved, prevenient and astounding grace (cf. Lk 15:22 ff; 19:1-10). Let us draw some important messages through this parable of the great banquet:

- (i) The meal with the disciples is not an exclusive meal enjoyed by the righteous, it is the meal of Jesus' friends, who participate in his mission 'to seek that which was lost'.
- (ii) Jesus' fellowship of the common meal demonstrates the gospel he preaches, and offers an entry point for the inbreaking of eschatological reign of God.
- (iii) The table ministry of Jesus entrusts his disciples and his Church to proclaim the good news of God's invitation to the outcast, the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.
- (iv) The divine invitation to celebrate the fellowship meal is being ushered through the work of the Spirit of Christ.



- (v) The Church has to find its identity in the image of the open feast and make sure that all the people irrespective of caste, gender and sex would be invited in the fellowship of the God's reign.

We draw resources for the exclusion and inclusion of certain sections of the people in our community from the same Bible! Sometimes the literal reading of the Bible done by conservative Christians makes them blind to the liberative message of the Bible. However, we realize that a proper exegetical study of the Bible helps us to rectify our preconceived ideology that excludes 'others'.

'Inclusion' in one's community based on the love of God is the core message of Jesus. The parable of the great banquet sets an example. 'Love your neighbour as yourself' is basic to the ministry of Jesus where an invitation is given to all the under privileged people. This is mandatory in our mission today. The domination of the patriarchal heterosexual norms and ideology needs to be dismantled in the light of the values of the reign of God. In so doing everyone will be at the centre and no one will be at the periphery. We need to liberate ourselves from a narrow heterosexual mindset and offer new approaches for relationality so that we may realize that – 'acceptance of each one's identity, rights and dignity is mandatory in our mission today'. Moreover, the distortion of assumed heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy which is constantly present in our churches needs to be rectified because they go opposite to the liberative message of Jesus. Let us discard our worldview of normal-abnormal, natural-unnatural, superior-inferior, clean-unclean and envision a humanity of wholeness where everyone would be accepted for who they are. Let us listen to the cries of the marginalized people in and around us and extend our love and compassion. Let us also move with Jesus who set an exemplary life for the Christian community. Let us remember that "God created human being in God's Image", all of us irrespective of our different gender orientations, are all made in God's Image. Amen.



LEARNING FROM THE 'OTHER' JESUS MET JUSTA

Rebecca Sangeetha Daniel¹

Matthew 15: 21-28

Introducing Justa – The 'Other' Woman:

One more story of an unnamed woman. This was my first thought on hearing the story of a woman simply described as a Canaanite by Matthew. However, though the bible itself does not give a name for her, some later sources, from the third and fourth century known as the Pseudo Clementine homilies identify the Canaanite woman as Justa.

Today I invite you to journey with me through the story of Justa. It is a story of the 'other'; the one who is in many ways on the margins of the social, cultural, religious and gendered structures of the context of the text. As a 'gentile' Canaanite woman, she is outside the borders of purity. She is 'unclean' by birth, a foreigner and a female, and 'an untouchable' because of her daughter who is possessed by an unclean spirit'.² She is understood as one who is doubly oppressed, a 'single mother' with a little child.³ From an Indian perspective Aruna Gnanadason identifies the woman as a Dalit woman on the basis of impurity being ascribed to her.³ It is from this point of her 'otherness' that we need to understand the implications of the effects of her words and actions on Jesus.

A Story of Two Boundary Crossers:

If you see Justa's encounter with Jesus, we see it as a story of two boundary crossers. Though they are from different geographical and social backgrounds, Jesus and Justa, cross different boundaries. Jesus crosses from the Jewish territory into the gentile territory of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon are more than place names, they are considered to be dangerous and threatening enemies of the Israelites. In Matthew's

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² Hisako Kinukawa, *Woman and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 53.

³ Aruna Gnanadason, 'Jesus and the Asian Woman: A Post-colonial look at the Syrophenician Woman/ Canaanite Woman from an Indian Perspective', in *Studies in World Christianity*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2001, (pp. 162-177), 167-169.



gospel, we see that it is the only time when Jesus moves beyond the boundaries of Israel.

At the same time, we see Justa also crossing several boundaries. She crosses the boundary of speech, space, acceptable female behaviour and cultural limitations by directly addressing a foreign male with a loud voice and that too in public.

Pressing for Inclusion:

What strikes me about this story of Justa is that she has to shout to get help and attention for her daughter. She is considered by the apostles to be an inconvenience, but nevertheless she persists. What is most important is that her persistence is recognised as faith by Jesus. Matthew even puts on Justa's lips, the liturgical phrase used by the early Christian community, 'Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David'. This communicates the idea that her cries for help were in themselves acts of prayer. Jesus' affirmation of this action, as faith, functions as an affirmation of female power which was able to overcome extraordinary obstacles'.⁴ In many ways, I see Justa as a representative of the many around us today who have to shout in the midst of their desperation to receive any attention or respect – the LGBTQIA+ communities come to mind.

We see many Justas of today who use many creative forms of resistance to gain the attention of those who are in a position of power to respond to their struggles for justice and dignity. These include those in the Black Lives Matter Movement, the Gender Justice movement, Movements of sexual and gender minorities, Dalit and Adivasi movements and many other movements who have to take up protest in order to be heard. Within the church we see it in the cries of the several who have been denied participation in ministry and leadership on the basis of who they are, including all the communities mentioned above.

An example of modern-day Justas comes from Liberia – The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace campaign. During the civil war in Liberia both Christian and Muslim women led a movement for peace and pressurized Liberian men to pursue peace or with the threat that if they do not act, they would lose the right to physical intimacy with their wives. Also known as “the women in white”, they perfected the art of corridor lobbying that involved pressurizing negotiators to come up with concrete resolutions during peace talks. These women would block all entry and exit points, including windows in order to prevent negotiators from leaving the talks without a resolution.

Challenging stories of today's Justas challenge us to think - how is the church responding to their shouts and cries for justice and inclusion?

Moved for Transforma(c)tion:

Today the challenge is for all of us in the church to respond to the cries of the several Justas around us. For this the church needs to learn to become a bit more like Jesus.

This scriptural passage is a challenging one to understand and justify the behaviour of

⁴ Elaine Mary Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel According to Matthew*, (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), p. 243.



Jesus. Initially Jesus seems non-responsive to the woman. However, later his reaction is rude and shocking especially when he refers to the woman and her daughter as dogs. People over the centuries have struggled to interpret the answer of Jesus. Some say he was trying to test the woman's faith and others say that the term for dogs was an affectionate term and used widely.

For me what comes across strongly in the text is Jesus's willingness to change his position after hearing the words of Justa. Jesus who begins the scene with the assumption that 'the Kingdom is for the Jews now and only later for the Gentiles ...ends the scene with a willingness for the gentiles to benefit significantly from the kingdom even now'.⁵

We also see Jesus as someone, who is willing to listen and learn from the 'other' – a gentile woman. Some biblical scholars have spoken of Justa's ministry to Jesus alongside Jesus' ministry to her. They identify Justa as one who 'led Jesus to become a "boundary breaker"'.⁶ Sharon H. Ringe, says that the Syrophoenician woman 'seems to have enabled Jesus to act in a way apparently blocked to him before. Her wit, her sharp retort, was indeed her gift to Jesus - a gift that enabled his gift of healing in turn. It was a ministry to Jesus which ultimately opened up the possibility of Jesus' own ministry to others.'⁷

It is this response of Jesus – listening to a foreign woman and acting on her words, that is the challenge that Jesus holds out to the church today. In a world of many cries for justice, the church should learn to listen to the voices at the margins of our societies and of our churches. The theologian Paul Tillich says that the first duty of love is to listen.

For the church to become a space of healing and hope it is important that the church becomes a listening community. A community that overcomes its own prejudices by opening itself to the voices of the least and last. It is through such listening and opening up that we can grow into our true and fuller selves. Today I ask us to open ourselves to give a listening ear to those who are treated as the sexual and gender "others".

Dear sisters and brothers, when we speak of the theme of inclusion in Matthew's gospel it has become usual for us to start with the Matthean genealogy. Matthew's gospel is a gospel which has a special place for gentile women. When introducing the story of Jesus, Matthew in his genealogy of Jesus includes four gentile women who were the ancestors of Jesus, namely Tamar, Ruth, Rahab and Bathsheba. This introduction to Jesus is seen in many ways as throwing light on the work and witness of Jesus as understood by Matthew.

⁵ David Rhoads, 'Jesus and the Syrophoenician Woman: A Narrative Critical Study', in *JAAR*, Vol. 62, No.2, 1994 (pp. 343-375), 360.

⁶ Kinukawa, *Woman and Jesus in Mark*, 139.

⁷ Sharon H. Ringe, 'A Gentile Woman's Story', in Letty M. Russel (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), (pp. 65-72), 71-72.



Even as we reflect on these four gentile women and remember them, I think Justa, the Canaanite woman, deserves a place alongside these four women. If these women contributed to Jesus' **coming** into the world, Justus contributed to Jesus **becoming**. She did it at the cost of risking her dignity and reputation. But in the end, her 'words' became the means through which Jesus the eternal 'Word' was 'freed' to become the word of liberation beyond boundaries. The church in its understanding of discipleship as following Jesus – needs to be open to the freeing words and actions of the other, letting itself be transformed by the 'other'. That is the challenge for us today in our quest to understand inclusion as a faith affirmation.

May the examples of the **shouting Justa** and **listening Jesus** inspire us as we continue to live our life as children of God seeking justice, peace and healing for all in our world today.



WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TELL THE CHURCH ABOUT THE TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY?

Paul Ragland¹

Acts 8:26-40

It is not very often that we hear a sermon in our churches on Transgender men and women, their stories, their lives and about their community. The reason is not that the Church is unaware of their existence but we intentionally miss them out of our Bible studies, sermons or even conversations. Because of this our remembrance of them is minimal or nil. The Church has become a space where Transgender persons are unwelcome. Today, questions regarding the lives of sexual minorities have started to grow in the minds of our congregations. Are they created in the image of God? Can their lifestyle be accepted? Can they too receive baptism and communion? Will their presence in the Church be a bad influence in our youth/children? And finally, we arrive at the crucial question, “what does the Bible tell us about Trans men and women?” The Bible has always been a reference point for Christians while discussing, debating and learning about any difficult issue. Therefore, let’s first understand what the Bible has to tell us.

It is well established that the word ‘Transgender’ does not appear in the Bible. “Transgender” is a word that is derived from the Latin word *Transgenre*, which is an umbrella term applied to a variety of individuals, their behaviour and groups they belong to, who transcend what are “conventional” gender roles. The first usage of the term “Transgender” has been generally attributed to Virginia Prince, an advocate from Southern California in the US, when arguing for freedom of gender expression. The term became popular in the 1980’s when it was used as an umbrella term that included all those whose gender identity did not conform to their gender assigned at birth. In 1992 the term became popular when it appeared in a small but influential pamphlet by Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come*. And so, we see how the term is a recent development which was not in use during Biblical times. Rather the term “Eunuch” was the term in usage during those times. The word comes from the Greek word *eunouchous* which is a mix of two words: ‘bed’ and ‘to guard.’ A eunuch was a castrated male. They were employed by kings as guards and caretakers of the many wives the ruler had in those days. Because they served close to the rulers they rose to positions of advisers, ministers and generals. Men chose to be castrated for several reasons such as coercion by parents who hoped their child would have a prosperous life in the palace, some due to poverty, some due to punishment while some had their say in it. The Bible

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mentions “eunuchs” in passages like Isaiah 56:4, Mat 19:12 and Acts 8:26-40 which we would reflect upon. Therefore, unlike today, eunuchs during Biblical times and during the medieval era and across empires, held a privileged and high status in the society. Even in religious circles they were revered and respected.

What does the Church and Society say about Transgender persons today?

In contemporary Indian society the status of the Transgender community has drastically changed as compared to the dignity and privileges that they enjoyed before the rule of the British. Today, transgender men and women are abused, criminalized and detained due to the laws that are present under the Indian Penal Code. In pre-independence era, the British first introduced the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, which mentioned that any eunuch seen in public spaces would be arrested without a warrant. However, this Act was repealed in 1952. But today transpersons are criminalized under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Both these laws were introduced by the British because transpersons were considered to be a threat to a heteronormative society. By heteronormativity we mean the belief that there can only be two genders, masculine and feminine. And because we are brought up in this belief system from our childhood, we feel a sense of disturbance and are unable to accept a man acting or behaving like a woman or vice versa.

These laws introduced by the British were generated largely with the advice of the Christian missionary movement of those times based on an understanding that God created only two genders - man and woman; and sanctified their ‘sexual’ relationship. Anything outside this order of creation was considered to be against the will of God and had to be ‘cured.’ George Zachariah, the theologian and ethicist, points out that these laws were introduced to civilize the heathens and ‘purify’ them of their lifestyle. Therefore, transphobia in our Church and society was generated and propagated very much due to a Christian mindset then and continues till today. We believe that trans persons are not created by God because we do not read about them in the creation narrative. If we come across individuals who are struggling with their gender identity, we dismiss their feelings suggesting to them to see a psychiatrist since we believe that what the person feels is just in their head. We make derogatory remarks like ‘*chakka*’ or use the number ‘9’ while referring to them. Even the things we see about them in commercial serials, in movies or on television, show them in a bad light as if they are always involved in some sort of crimes. All these factors have shaped our narrow and uninformed images of their lives.

What does Acts 8:26-40 teach us?

The book of Acts records the missionary endeavours of the disciples of Jesus and the missionary journeys undertaken by Paul. It gives us important insights as to how first century Christianity grew and the struggles the disciples faced both among themselves and from the outside world. It records how beautifully the Spirit of God leads them to new communities, families and members of the society whom they never thought would encounter with the gospel. This brings us to the encounter that the Apostle Philip



had with the Ethiopian eunuch. Verse 27 and 28 describes the position that the Ethiopian eunuch held in the society. As an important official, close to the royal family, he had access to places of worship and had a considerable amount of wealth and education. However, when we read this passage we do not acknowledge or speak out loud regarding the gender identity of the eunuch. The New International Version describes the eunuch just as “a man” rather than a “castrated man.” In the Tamil Bible it does not mention that the Ethiopian was a eunuch. In Malayalam the Ethiopian is described as *shandan* meaning eunuch. But we often focus on the eunuch’s national identity rather than his gender identity. Therefore, the first step as teachers and preachers of the Scripture is to acknowledge the presence of the eunuch, to speak out clearly and loudly about the gender identity of the eunuch. The eunuch, in this passage, is not shown in a bad light in any sense of the word but show that the Holy Spirit and God do not discriminate against anyone based on their gender identity – but rather, the Spirit leads Philip to the eunuch.

Secondly, two important verses speak of inclusiveness in a radical way; v. 29, “Go to the chariot and stay near it;” and v.31 “So he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.” Inclusiveness is not about inviting someone to our own space where we do not feel vulnerable, powerless, fragile or discriminated against; but rather it is about entering into spaces of the lives and communities where we leave our privileges behind and feel the experiences of those at the margins. Inclusiveness starts when we recognize how as a Church we have been on the oppressive side of the system. The time is now to recognize and confess how intolerant, unloving and unfriendly we have been towards trans persons. And, to recognize that as a Church we need to seek forgiveness for our actions and inactions in the context of suffering and pain in which they live. Arvind Theodore, theologian and ethicist, points out that, “Far from being an inclusive Church, the Church must instead be willing to be part of (included in) queer fellowships/communities.” The Ethiopian eunuch *invited* Philip. Will the trans communities *invite* the Church? Can the Church accept such an invitation to become vulnerable with them?

And finally, in v.36 we read, “As they travelled along the road.” The journey that both the eunuch and Philip shared culminates in a beautiful incident of the eunuch being baptized. The question by the eunuch, “Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” does not come with a doubt or a sense of fear of rejection, rather it is a bold statement affirming the eunuch’s gender identity and presence in the first century ‘heteronormative’ Church. The Church is called to journey with communities striving for justice and peace. Such a journey must enlighten us, help us introspect and must help the Church to be faithful to the gospel; and be willing to be pushed by the Spirit to go out of its comfort zone.

The encounter of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch certainly calls on us to reflect upon how Churches have responded to communities of sexual minorities. The image of God abides in all of God’s creation. Transgender persons are created in God’s image. Due to fear of violence, social and familial ostracization, and the notion of honour and shame that is evident in the Indian society, trans people choose to hide



their gender identity. But the mandate of the gospel is that Christ came “that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10b). And the Church is called to share in this life of abundance that Christ gives to all communities; irrespective of their gender/sexual identity, caste, race or religion.



EUNUCHS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Fr Dr Reji Mathew²

“Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given.

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can”. - Matthew 19:11-12 (NRSV)

At the outset may I seek your permission for using the word “eunuch” in this sermon even though it is not welcomed by many today in a discussion about inclusive community and gender minorities. I am compelled to use the word just to be loyal to the biblical text I have selected, which uses the Greek word *eunachos* and its derivatives five times. Moreover, the word and the text quoted above are significant and relevant for our discussion about an inclusive People of God. In spite of patriarchal and exclusive interpretations of the gospel for centuries the theme of inclusiveness, with gender minorities at the centre, is more evident in our text than in any other portion of the New Testament. This is a great warning to those who consider themselves having sure entries in the Kingdom of Heaven. They are like the Israelites who lived during the time of Jesus. Even though the Jews are criticized in the interpretation of the Gospel most often people maintain the same exclusive approach to the Kingdom of Heaven when it comes to their own society.

A careful reading of the word of Jesus concerning the “eunuchs” (Mt 19:12) is needed to bring out the real message of the text.

Jesus as the Hope for the Underprivileged

The first message we get from the word of Jesus is the inclusive nature of the faith community called the Church and the family in its miniature form. On an occasion in which Jesus talks about family, children and youth in Mt 19 we see the eunuchs as part and parcel of it. The full context of this passage today is the answer of Jesus to three questions raised about marriage and divorce by “some Pharisees” among

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Here Fr. Reji Mathew points out that ESHA/NCCI deals with an issue, which is very relevant for today's Church as well as society. Responding to the issues of gender minorities is legitimate for Biblical and theological reasons. Serious studies of this sort will help us create an ambience in which our fellow citizens feel dignified and our pastors to come out of their conventional shells.



“the crowd” who followed Jesus when he “departed from Galilee and went to the region of Judea across the Jordan” (Mt 19:1-12). There is a lead question, a follow-up question, and then an implied question: First, there is the question about divorce (v. 3) and Jesus answers that originally God the Creator did not include the dissolution of marriage (vv. 4-6; cf. Mk 10:6-9; 1 Cor. 7:10-11). Second, there is the follow-up question about Moses’ permission for divorce (v. 7) and Jesus answers that divorce was permitted only for the sin of sexual immorality (vv. 8-9). Third, there is the disciples’ cynical observation that it would be better not to marry (v. 10): “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry”. This is a typical outlook of the patriarchal system in which males stand in a relationship of dominance and power over, and use against women. Unexpectedly, Jesus introduces the life of eunuchs in this discussion. It is quite a surprise for us that Jesus talks about people who are outside the parameters of family, because a normal discussion on family includes men and women only. Jesus uses the word “eunuch” here because in those days all who were neither male nor female were labelled as “eunuchs”; the specification of each gender orientation under the LGBTQIA+ group of today is modern. Therefore, the teaching of Jesus was a challenge to the people of the time of Jesus and is still a challenge to the 21st century Church. When Jesus says in v. 11 “all men cannot receive this saying” he expresses his disagreement with the androcentric patriarchal interpreters.

Thus, Jesus reminds us in Mt 19:1-12 that he is the saviour of all people and will abolish the social binaries like Jews-Gentiles, Men-Women, Rich-Poor, Privileged-Underprivileged, and Righteous-Sinners. Not only does Jesus uphold the dignity of a woman in her relationship with her husband but he also does warn us about avoiding people who are neither male nor female. Right from his genealogy up to the commissioning of his disciples Jesus opens up the Kingdom of Heaven to all human beings irrespective of their gender, social background and life situation. This is why the public ministry of Jesus was inaugurated with a fulfilment quotation from prophet Isaiah: “the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned” (Mt 4:16; Is 9:1-2). In the parable of the wedding feast, which is a metaphor for the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus finds the arrogant and exclusive Jews as an “undeserving” people and he extends an invitation for the feast to “those who were in the street corners” (Mt 22:8-9). All those who are “thrown into the street corners” have the right to sit along with the dignified children of God. For Jesus and his kingdom nobody is more important than those who follow the divine principles. John the Baptist makes this clear in his announcement about the arrival of Jesus the Messiah: “the axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into fire” (Mt 3:10).

1. Kingdom of Heaven as Fulfilment of a Divine Promise

Secondly, Mt 19:11-12 challenges the existing theology about the Kingdom of Heaven and the writer of the Gospel sees it as the fulfilment of the promise given by God to gender minorities. It is noteworthy that Jesus brings forth this pretty radical concept in a discussion about family life. Family was used as a metaphor for the Kingdom of Heaven both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jews of his time considered marriage



and the bearing of children as the purpose of the creation of human beings and they could not imagine people who lived outside the conservative parameters of family life and sure they were ignorant about the dignity and rights of people who were neither male nor female. There lies the sharpness of the word of Jesus. Our Lord here talks about three sorts of persons in this category: First, there were “eunuchs” by “birth out of the wombs of their mothers”, by natural constitution and without their choice. Second, there were “eunuchs” who were made against their will and by the force of others. Castration was either a sign for people of certain occupations in royal courts or a mark of violence by the powerful. The Hebrew word *saris*, which appears 45 times in the Old Testament, refers to the title of a court officer (Gen 37:36; 2Kings 18:17; Jer 39:3,13). The Greek Septuagint translates the word as *eunouchos* 31 times. In the Book of Esther (Esth. 1:10, 12; 2:3, 14-15; 4:4-5; 7:9) eunuchs are high ranking officials in royal courts. The same we see in the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8:26-19 too. The third category of eunuchs in Jesus’ talk comprises people who steadily withstand their natural inclinations for family life and they may glorify God in a celibate life. Unfortunately, in the history of interpretations of this text most of the discussions revolved around the second and third kinds of “eunuchs” mentioned in the logion of Jesus; castration of men (voluntary as well as involuntary) and celibacy. Interpreters have ignored the first part of the saying, i.e. “the eunuchs who have been born out of the wombs of their mothers”. This is actually the most important category today for our discussion about an inclusive community.

What is noteworthy in the word of Jesus is the fact that he neither distinguishes between the eunuchs by nature, eunuchs by force and eunuchs by choice nor does he grade them by rank; he does not place the celibates or the eunuchs having high ranking official roles above the first category of eunuchs. Rather, for Jesus the eunuchs “who are born as such” are “created by God in that manner” just as men and women are created. Jesus expresses his love and care for people “who are born with a difference” in the eyes of the dominant powers of the society. In the miracle story of the “man born blind” his disciples ask Jesus; “Lord, why was this man born blind? Was it because of his sins or due to the sins of his parents?” Jesus said a big NO to them (Jn 9:2-3). Here Jesus does not share the judgmental attitude of his contemporaries towards the vulnerable. Moreover, he stresses that “eunuchs who are born as such from the womb of their mothers” are people who are loved and respected by God. Thus, on the one side Jesus rejects here the Deuteronomistic view about the “eunuch” (Dtn 23:1-2), which is purely an exclusive term for kicking some people out of the community called the People of God, theologically as well as socially. On the other side, Jesus upholds the message of Isaiah 56 by which a eunuch should neither be ashamed of his nature nor should undermine his rights as the “Image of God”. For we read in Isaiah 56:3-5: “*Let no eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree.’ For this is what the Lord says: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant – 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.*” Therefore, what Jesus does in Mt 19:11-12 is an eschatological enactment of the promise of God.



2. Identification of Jesus with Gender Minorities

What captures our minds in Mt 19:11-12 is the fact that Jesus makes a response to a supposed taunt or jeer by “others” commenting on the nonmarried status of Jesus and his disciples. These others (whether specifically mentioned as Pharisees, or simply vaguely described as his “contemporaries”) referred to their non-marital state by reference to a derisive figure, the eunuch. This is part of a series of *ad hominem* attacks on Jesus and his disciples (Mark 2:18 - not fasting; Mark 2:23 - violating Sabbath; Mark 7:5 - violating purity rituals with respect to meals; Mat 11:19 – being a “glutton and drunkard”; John 8:48 – as Samaritan and demon possessed). The taunt of “eunuch” was meant to accuse him and his disciples of not conforming to the social expectation, indeed the social *demand* to be married and produce children. After hearing a strong and restrictive word against divorce and remarriage, the disciples give a cynical reply that “it is better not to marry”. Jesus always gives such uncompromising maxims to the disciples like those we read in the six antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:17-48). However, the reply of Jesus to the comment of the disciples attracts our attention: “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given...the one who can accept this should accept it’.”

It is all the more striking that here Jesus identifies himself as a “eunuch by choice” for the “sake of the Kingdom of God”. Even though the figure of the eunuch was a scandalous one in the context of the Jewish milieu of the saying, Jesus does not find any uneasiness in calling himself as well as those who have abstained from marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of God as eunuchs. We should be aware of the fact that *honour* and *shame* were pivotal values of the first-century Mediterranean world: Honour was the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society. It was the estimation of one’s own worth, his *claim* to pride, but it was also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his *right* for pride. *Shame* can be defined as the reverse of honour, as the loss of respect, regard, worth and value in the eyes of others. Labels such as “sinner”, “unclean”, “demon-possessed”, and “tax-collectors” indicated beings “out of place” and Jesus found no problem in calling himself a friend of such people.

Thus, the radicalism of Jesus’ saying comes to the fore in Mt 19:11-12. In the inimical gender-identity context of the present day the radicalism of Jesus to the “eunuchs who are born out of the wombs of their mother as such” is to be acknowledged and appreciated. If we grant the conservative reading of the Bible in favour of the clear delineation of male and female identities, sanctified at the time of creation, reinforced through Mosaic legislation, and promulgated by his Jewish contemporaries we will be advocating a theology unacceptable to Jesus. No matter how you view it, the figure of the “eunuch” as both a physical body and a social identity radically undermines the foundational assumptions used to reinforce the conservative reading of the Bible, precisely because *this* body and *this* social identity threatens the sacred boundaries made by the male and female. Jesus’ perspective of the Kingdom of Heaven can’t be limited by our criteria designed by a male dominated world which has no other genders other than the male and female. As Jesus said to the Pharisaic critics; “*Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given*”.



DIGGING INTO THE ROOTS

S. Esther Ao¹

Judges 19:22-25

Prayer for illumination:

Dear God, source of all light, as the Psalmist prayed Your word is light to our path. We pray help us to understand Your word that it would bring forth life to and for all. Amen.

Introduction

In India, it is a known experience, for most of us that during the summers, usually after the rain, the plants, bushes and trees sprout and grow overnight. I remember a summer incident some years back. After the rain, the front of our house was filled with weeds that had grown overnight. So, early mornings and evenings just before sunset, my dad would work ardently with his hands to get the weeds out. I joined him sometimes in his expeditions. Initially, in my eagerness and haste, I would pull the weeds by their heads, leaving half of the weed with its root still stuck firmly in the ground. Then my dad's gentle voice would remind me often that to get the weed out, one needs to always pull them out by the roots otherwise it would grow back again, and the effort to clean becomes meaningless. I learnt a lesson that day for life, in some of life's issues as well, we need to get down to its roots.

When we read the book of Judges chapter 19, we are often horrified by the tragic story and events that it narrates. In some of our churches and theological discussions, this scripture passage is invoked to illustrate ancient Israel's disgust about sex between men against the present-day acceptance of same sex relationships. In light of this debate, this passage, challenges and beckons us to look into the root of the events that took place and thus introspect on what is rooted in us and our churches.

The Weed: "The wicked men of Gibeah" (Judges 19:22)

Weeds in our garden could be aggressive and even harmful to the plants. In Judges 19:22, we read about one such weed from the ancient Israelite society during the time of Judges. These were certain men of Gibeah. A Levite and his concubine who were travelling were invited by an Ephramite to stay as guests at his house. However,

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on that fateful night, certain men of Gibeah surrounded the house and threatened to rape the Levite. The Hebrew word *belial* (Judges 19:22) is used to describe the men of Gibeah. Most versions of the English Bible translate it as "...perverted" "perverse lot". Unfortunately, most of us Christians when reading the text attach this word immediately to the homosexual act. However, the Hebrew word *belial* used here is closer to the meaning of "worthless, good-for-nothing, base fellow" "wicked". The men of Gibeah were the wicked, worthless and base men. Hence, to focus on the sexual intent of the men and condemning homosexuality based on it, is to limit the significance of the text and deny the wickedness of the men of Gibeah.

These men of Gibeah were wicked and worthless people. These men of Gibeah violate the protocol by threatening to rape the Levite who was staying as a guest at the Ephraimite's house. The protocol of hospitality of ancient Israelite obliges both the individual and the village to take responsibility to offer hospitality and protection to strangers. This act of the men indicates the disintegration of their integrity and values, and erosion of interpersonal values of God's chosen people that were supposed to affirm life to people especially those who were vulnerable and at their mercy. We should understand, therefore, that these men were wicked for taking advantage of those who were at their mercy and violating their rights and dignity, ultimately claiming death over life.

Getting to the root: "but to this man do not do such a vile thing" (Judges 19:24)

The weeds, no doubt, were the wicked men of Gibeah who threatened to rape the Levite and inflicted violence on the Levite's concubine. However, the root which gave rise to this violence was buried deep into the ancient Israelite society. Just as the root nurtures and gives life to the weeds, we can say that the root that lay in the Israelite society nurtured and perpetuated their wickedness.

The men of Gibeah demanded and threatened to rape the Levite who was staying as a guest at the Ephraimite's house. The host tried to stop this by making a bargain - by offering his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine to the men, instead of the Levite (Judges 19:24). The men could not be pacified. The Levite "took his concubine and brought her out to them" (v.25) and they raped her.

The threatened rape of the Levite and rape of the concubine occurred not because of the heightened sexual drives of the men who wanted to rape a man or because the concubine was an acceptable second-rate sex object that can be used to satisfy the men's heightened sexual drives. The threatened rape of the Levite was an attack upon the Levite's ability to resist and maintain his honour and status. The rape of the concubine occurred because she was considered as an extension of the Levite's honour. The mob found her an acceptable substitute as abusing her - in a way thus dishonouring the Levite. This also explains why the Levite's concubine was thrown out to the mob and not the virgin daughter of the host. The virgin daughter of the host had no connection with the honour of the Levite.



The root of the wickedness of the men of Gibeah was not their “homosexual” drive, as popularly understood. The root lay on the distorted understanding of honour of a man which was to be protected at all cost. Just as when the Levite’s masculinity and honour was threatened with the strong intent to dishonour him, the concubine is thrown out to be brutally raped as we see in the story.

The Weed and Getting to its roots: implications for the Indian Churches

The reading from the passage of Judges 19:22-25 propels us to examine our Indian churches especially in regard to our attitude towards sexual diversities.

1. The Weed

We the churches in India are often like the weed, the wicked men of Gibeah, towards people from diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. We issue threats, warrants and judgments, verbally and non-verbally. Some are so subtle, hardly identifiable yet the psychological damage it does is like an avalanche. Our prejudices make us deaf to their stories and plight. I share an event that happened in one of the churches in India. A consultation programme was planned to be held inside the church building. However, the members suddenly decided to have it outside the church because one of the panellists was a trans woman and they did not want her to sit in the stage of the church. This is just one example of the discriminatory incidents that happen in our churches. We stigmatize a part of our community – people of diverse sexualities. Have we been Christian towards people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations? Or have we forgotten the values and essence of what Christ has taught us and behave just like the men of Gibeah whose values and integrity had disintegrated?

2. Digging into a Root

Digging into the root of the passage we are meditating on helps us to see the intended and the actual violence in a different light. We now denounce the understanding of this passage, and the way it is quoted often as a text that speaks against homosexuality. It in fact sheds light on the wickedness of the men of Gibeah and the root of the distorted understanding of honour. “*Izzat ka saval hai*” meaning that it is a question about one’s honour - a popular phrase in India. This phrase has sadly infested the church and we the Christians as well. In the name of saving one’s honour (and of course this refers specifically to male honour), the family’s honour, clan’s honour, tribe’s honour, Jat’s honour, and so forth - and for this many lives have been sacrificed. Just to protect the “honour” of the family, tribe, clan, often people deny or hide the existence of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Instead, they would force a daughter (or son occasionally) of another orientation to have a traditional marriage saying that once they are married, they would be “rectified” of their “perverted”, “distorted” behaviour. Some people even



go the extent of cajoling them into counselling or medical therapies often leading to disastrous consequences. The exaggerated concern attached to “*izzat*” or honour has often permitted and encouraged violence against women and sexually diverse groups of people. It is time for our churches and society to affirm life and the liberation of all lives.

Conclusion

The root of wickedness, in the context of the story of Judges 19, was not rooted out. And so, we see the chain of violence being meted out in the latter part of the story. The price of which was paid by the innocent “virgins of Jabesh and Gibeah”. This root “*izzat*” which was the underlying thought process of the men of Gibeah was perverse and not the sexual in nature. If we as churches and society do nothing to uproot this, we would continue to justify and perpetuate violence done against vulnerable groups of sexual diversities and women. To stop the chain of violence, we need to dig into the root and weed it out, or else vulnerable and innocent people will continue to be the victims.

May we as the church be prudent in reading God’s word. May we be steadfast in reading it and getting to its roots. May we as the church also strive to offer inclusive, life affirming actions instead of perpetuating stigmatization.



LET GOD DECIDE WHO IS INCLUDED: A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

B. Silpa Rani¹

Genesis 19

“I am a pastor and people love me but I am not confident enough to come out as gay because people in the church won’t regard me with respect because my sexual orientation differs from theirs. Though I am an ordained minister, I am afraid to disclose my orientation as people might not accept a gay person as their pastor. I am suffocated working in the church as I am not able to face my own congregation because the church in India still condemns homosexuality as a sin. It is burdensome to live my life this way, where people judge you based on your sexual orientation. I am committed to my ministry as a pastor nevertheless, I feel the need to find a place other than the church where I am accepted and I am without any condemnation.”²

This is the cry of an ordained priest of one of the mainline churches in India, who happens to be a friend of mine.

This is a pertinent issue to be brought to the forefront. But the question is, how does the church comprehend issues regarding sex and sexuality? To be specific, in the Indian church, the interpretation of scriptures is intertwined with cultural norms, beliefs and practices. The teachings of the church and the interpretation of the Bible in the Christian tradition is still wholly dependent on colonial interpretations of the scripture – this verdict is derived from the traditional literal interpretation of the Bible as is normal in India; without digging deep into the context of the original text formed out of another social, cultural, religious, political and ethnic milieu. And that is where the menace lies.

Therefore, it is imperative for the church to be open to adopt new hermeneutical tools to understand the depth of scriptures which would broaden not only the textual context but also the present context so that the bible makes sense to the readers of the present time. Thus, to reflect on the theme “Inclusion as a Theological and

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This text explores how the interpretation of Genesis 19, traditionally, has stimulated a homophobic attitude within the church and society and thus, the faith community must understand this controversial passage from its in-depth context so that the text would not be misused/misinterpreted. This reflection is an attempt to explore the context of the text and how it could pave the way for “inclusion” for the people of diverse gender and sexual identities.

2 My personal conversation with a gay friend.



Ecclesiological Mandate” I would like to explore the passage of Genesis 19 to understand it’s context and how it could pave the way for “inclusion” of the people living with diverse gender and sexual identities.

Context and Text of Genesis 19

While listing out the biblical passages against homosexuality, Genesis 19 normally takes first place. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is often used as a reference point by *conservatives* to justify the condemnation of homosexuality. Traditionally, the interpretation of this passage has stimulated a homophobic attitude within the church and society. Thus, it becomes important for the faith community to understand this controversial passage making an in-depth study of the context of the text so that the text would not be misused/misinterpreted.

In chapter 19, Lot invited to his home two angels (men) who were sitting in the gateway of Sodom. He strongly urged them to come into his house instead of spending the night in the town square. Lot brings them, and make them a feast which depicts the hospitable nature of Lot. Later that night, his house was surrounded by the men of Sodom demanding that Lot brings out his guests so that they “may know them” (19:5b).

The Hebrew word “יָדָעוּ” literally, “that we may know them” with the root word “יָדָע” means “to know,” “to have knowledge,” “to find out,” “to discern,” “be acquainted with,” “know a person carnally,” “to have sexual intercourse,” and so on.³ These connotations for “יָדָע” might be applied to this context of Genesis 19:5, however, church traditions interpret this verse with reference to same-sex intercourse without emphasizing several other meanings of the same word which could also be possible in this context. The Hebrew lexicon is clear about it that to *know* would not have the connotation for sexual intercourse alone but also the other above-mentioned connotations. Thus, it is clear that the meaning of this connotation is to have “knowledge” of, or “acquaintance,” and is not necessarily an act of homosexuality.

The translation of the word “יָדָע” also includes “sexual intercourse” but emphasizing only this, has led people to associate the sin of Sodom with homosexuality. The mob wanted to abuse the guests. The people of that city who when they see the men enter the house were apprehensive because they are considered a threat to the city. A similar instance can be seen in Judges 19 where the crowd wanted to abuse the concubine. Here in Genesis 19, the mob was not looking for sexual gratification from the guests, rather, they wanted to humiliate them. Thus, it is clear that the sin that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah was not about the act of homosexuality or about a male having sex with another male. So, let us explore what then led to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah?

To understand Genesis 19, we need to take a close look at Genesis 18. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah begins from Genesis 18 verse 16 onwards with the conversation of Yahweh and Abraham. Here it is important to note what is written in verse 20 to understand the context of Genesis 19. “Then the Lord said, *How great is the outcry*

3 BDBG: *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979),394.



against Sodom and Gomorrah and how **very grave their sin!**⁴ It is worth recognising that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was already noticed by Yahweh before the actual scene happened in chapter 19. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah had been held as a “very grave sin” by Yahweh. So, what were the sins?

The text of Genesis 19 illustrates the situation in Sodom referring specifically to the abusive violence and savage inhospitality. The text does not talk about homosexual activity or orientation generally, or of nonviolent sexual relationships. Other biblical references to Sodom lift up a wide range of behaviour, from neglect of the poor and needy to lies, greed, luxury, heterosexual abuse, and inhospitality to strangers (Isaiah 1:9-10, 3:9, Jeremiah 23:14, Lamentation 4:6, Ezekiel 16: 48-55 and Zephaniah 2:9). Even Jesus remains true to the text in condemning the town to a fate like Sodom’s because of its refusal to receive strangers (inhospitality) who bear the word of God (Matthew 10:14-15, 11:23-24, Luke 10:12, 17:29, 2 Peter 2:8).⁵ All these references would give a clear picture about the sin of Sodom which does not include homosexuality. Paul never referred in his letters to Sodom even when he talked about homosexuality, the context of Sodom was not quoted by him. In the story of Sodom, it is all about wickedness, greed, corruption of a self-centred people who refuse to aid the poor and care for the strangers at their gates. Thus, God had decided to wipe out Sodom long before the city’s men showed up at Lot’s house as it is mentioned in Genesis 18:16. God was angry because people behaved badly with the juxtaposition of injustice, corruption, and inhospitality in the society and not because they were gay.

Another important fact is the way the interpretation of this text had emerged as the “sin of homosexuality” without focussing on the other social evils and injustice. According to history, its origin lies in the works of the ancient Alexandrian Jewish Philosopher Philo in the third century CE which became the dominant reading which several centuries later interpreted this text as focussing on homosexuality. In the eleventh century Peter Damian invented the word *sodomia/sodomy* which came to denote a state and expression of same sex desire. This understanding was not prevalent in the Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew text of Genesis 19. Thus, from the pen of philosophers and patriarchs this interpretation has crept into the church’s interpretation of this text until the twenty first century.⁶ Hence, the church has a greater role to play in interpreting the text correctly and taking a stand for the people of gender and sexual diversities.



4 Genesis 18:20, NRSV Bible.

5 “Introduction to the Pentateuch - Genesis,” *The New Interpreters’ Bible Commentary*, Vol.1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 142.

6 Michael Carden “Genesis” in *Queer Bible Commentary* edited by Deryn Guest, Robert E Goss, Mona West and Thomas Bohache, (London: SCM Press, 2006), 37.

Indian Ecclesial Intervention for Inclusion and Justice

The Church is a powerful platform to advocate for justice and inclusion. This passage is one of the many misquoted and misinterpreted parts of scripture to exclude people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations from being a part of communities of faith. At this juncture the church needs to understand this passage with a knowledge of the context, and with the help of other biblical verses, to clearly hold this position, that Sodom and Gomorrah's sin was not about same-sex relationships but many other sins associated with the people. Most of the times, homo-eroticism or same-sex relations are named as misnamed as "sodomy." The church should take a stand to condemn such usage of the term as it undermines the city of Sodom as this incident was not about same-sex relationships. Use of the term "Sodomy" demonizes the text which has a completely different context without any direct reference to homo-eroticism. The teaching of the church needs to be revived from the clutches of homophobia and heteronormativity. We need to accept people without bias or without being judgemental about their sexual orientation. We need to change our notion from what has been normalized by moving towards becoming an inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community, who do not come out openly because of the phobia that surrounds them by being termed "sodomizers". So many of them live with insecurities by being excluded and abandoned by the family and society, and even the church!

The Church is guided by the 'Great Commission' to preach the 'gospel' to the ends of the earth. The gospel here is the gospel of inclusion and justice that needs to be preached in all corners of the world. The church is made up of all people, especially those who have been, for centuries, marginalised for their sexual orientation and gender diversities at various levels. God is love. This love does not discriminate or exclude anyone. For such a time as this, the church is called to practice the scripture with utmost care, to give leadership by being inclusive and just to the LGBTQIA+ community.

As the Church, are we ready as the community of Christ to regard and accept the way Jesus did during his time, without being judgemental about people? Let us respect and accept differences as with these differences that we see are different manifestations of God's creation among us. Let us understand the pain and pathos of the discriminated community. May the Holy Spirit guide us to intervene and to strive towards inclusion and justice in our church and society!



ECCLESIA: A SPACE FOR ANYONE AND EVERYONE

Ms Shoba M.¹

Isaiah 56:3-5

Sitting in an auto, I was waiting at a traffic signal. A woman, who looked quite different walked up to me, and tried to say something but before she could utter some words, I stopped her and said, 'no money'. She, with a smile on her face said, I came to ask, if you are alright, I saw you looked sick. Her words made me pause for a while, and I replied slowly, "I am alright". This was the first time I had talked with a transgender person and it was because she initiated the conversation with a question of concern. I have seen transgender women many times but was scared to talk to them or even to go near them.

Why is there fear to talk to our fellow humans? From where have we got this fear? Why are they not seen in religious places like the Church? Is the Church a place of a few? These questions are to be asked by everyone. The importance of seeing the Church as a space for and of all is a continuous struggle for Transgender persons. Church as a welcoming, embracing and life-giving space has become a gendered and sexed space, a closed space for transgender persons in our society. We have presented a Jesus, who cannot embrace the transgender community as in our eyes they are different from the binary genders - the so called male and female. The binary genders have become the dictators to tell all how to live and have life. In the process gender and sexual minorities have been deprived of their right to live a dignified life. Isaiah 56:1-8 is a text that questions the Ecclesia for not being able to let everyone find themselves in God. In reading Isaiah 56: 3-5, there are two thoughts that I would like to ponder upon.

1. Ecclesia: In God Anyone and Everyone are Welcomed

Isaiah 56-66, commonly identified with Trito-Isaiah invites people to take part in YHWH's covenant conceived as a continuation of Davidic covenant. Isaiah 56:1-8 describes the qualifications for admission to the temple. The first two verses of Isaiah 56 (56:1-2), explains that to be part of God's salvific act, one should observe justice and righteousness and should observe Sabbath and refrain from doing evil. Verse 3 then presents prophetic instructions concerning the inclusion of foreigners and eunuchs - the conditions are set out in the form of rhetorical statements.

The concept of a "eunuch" (a castrated person) is described in the Bible primarily

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by two words: *saris* (Hebrew, Old Testament) and *eunouchos* (Greek, New Testament). However, both words can also mean “official” or “commander”, while castration is sometimes indirectly referred to without using these terms. The word Eunuch cannot be confined to males alone but includes females too. Why is there a special invitation to eunuchs? According to Duet 23:1, “No one whose testicles have been crushed or whose penis has been cut off, may be admitted to the community of the Lord”. Eunuchs during those ancient times, high officials at the royal courts, who had to be eunuchs so that they could be trusted with the royal harem. Some people castrated themselves in the worship of pagan gods. All these people were directly excluded from worshipping Yahweh. They were considered a “withered tree”, the withered tree of course serves as a metaphor for a person who cannot produce seed and therefore cannot produce offspring. This understanding limits one’s sexuality to procreation alone. According to the ‘people of God’ the people who worship Yahweh and are part of the temple are the so called “perfect bodies” and who follow gender norms set by the society and sanctioned by the religious faith. They were also people who had undergone circumcision, which was mandatory to be part of the worshipping community. The exclusion of certain groups of people who do not meet the societal expectations was interpreted as divinely sanctioned exclusion.

But these patriarchal norms, interpreted as divinely sanctioned, are questioned in Isaiah 56. God commands the people to let the eunuchs inside the temple. For God, to be part of God’s sanctuary, one did not need to be ‘a Jew’, ‘the circumcised’, “the perfect body” or ‘those who procreate’ - **but** they just have to follow the Sabbath and do what pleases God: that is doing justice and paying fidelity to the covenant; this requires being God’s faithful people. Accordingly, one need not be of a particular gender or sexual orientation and not even circumcision was a required qualification. This clearly shows that ecclesial agencies are God-sanctioned - patriarchal norms have no right to stop anyone from coming into the sanctuary of God. Everyone has the right to find themselves in God’s presence as it is God who welcomes and gives rights to anyone and everyone. In the life of Jesus too, the most excluded, the marginalized and stigmatized were welcome to experience the Kingdom of God. Ecclesia should be a place of welcome of all those who are not welcomed in other places.

2. Ecclesia: God as the Author of Histories and Existence of Anyone and Everyone

From childhood churchgoers have witnessed that only “women” and “men” are present in the church. Without any questions or doubts, people believed that the Church is a place for heterosexuals alone. Human-made boundaries have kept people of other genders and sexualities out, and they are made to believe that the Church is a place only of a few. But against such assumptions when God invites eunuchs to be part of worshipping community, God not only gives them the right to be part of the community but also assures them an “everlasting name”. God assures to the eunuchs that they will have a place in YHWH’s house within its walls – it is YHWH’s temple! This comes in the form of a promise, in Hebrew, *yad*, literally means, ‘hand’ that is better than the terms ‘sons and daughters’ and is an eternal name. The term, *yad*, metaphorically explains the



sacred pillar that sometimes existed in Israelite temples, monuments or grave sites (1 Sam15:12; 2 Sam 18:18.). It can also be used as a metaphor for the phallus-the organ of reproduction that is missing in eunuchs (Isa 57:8).

The history of a people is always remembered through the descendants who they procreate, and also through the great monuments that they leave behind. In the case of the eunuchs, though they worked in the royal courts, their work was never recognized or praised or even rewarded and above that their existence itself was erased in the history as they could not procreate. Their identity was crushed in the hands of a patriarchal society. Therefore, for this community, YHWH's command to invite them into the worshipping community and assuring their existence an 'everlasting name', challenges the patriarchal society for doing injustice throughout history. It questions whether, people of God were truly following the God of justice and righteousness - a God who does not discriminate. When God assures a name better than that of 'sons and daughters', God is deconstructing their understanding of 'perfect bodies' and their understanding of 'God as male'. God transcends God's identity beyond gender norms, a trans-God as called by some. God identifies Godself with the lives of eunuchs, whose histories continue to get erased and whose gender and sexual identity is ridiculed, mocked and made invisible till today. When God identifies Godself with eunuchs, God also redefines the concept of procreation which is understood in terms of bearing children. God rewrites these stubborn, rigid and immoral norms and defines 'procreation' in terms of their existence itself as their existence is not a bed of roses. God, here becomes the author of the erased histories and existence of the transgender community. By rewriting the history and existence of transgender persons, God is clearly saying that the so called "perfect bodies" and "procreating bodies" are not the requirements in the temple of God and in the justice of God.

In the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, one sees him identifying himself with the eunuchs in Mathew 19:12. In the kingdom of heaven that Jesus proclaimed, he rewrote the forgotten histories and existence of the excluded ones. Jesus proclaimed his kingdom to these vulnerable people. This mission continues when an Ethiopian eunuch is baptized by Philip in Acts 8. Though the powerful always tried to make the marginalized invisible, we witness a God who takes the side of the oppressed and marginalized.

I conclude...

The lives of transgender persons have been made horrible by all of us, we push them to a life of begging, suffering from a lack of love, care and support. It is just because they are not able to live like elite heterosexuals. We brought these norms even into the life of the Church and discriminated against them and erased their histories and existence and called it 'divinely sanctioned exclusion'. But God clearly exposes the injustices done to the transgender community. By inviting them into the worshipping community, God condemns the historical injustice and discrimination against transgender persons. God welcomes all to the temple to live and experience joy and freedom.



CALL TO RADICAL HOSPITALITY, RADICAL LOVE, INCLUSION AND WELCOME

Jessica Prakash-Richard¹

Genesis 19:1-11; Matt 11;12-24

In the Bible there are many ‘unnamed’ characters – some of them - the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), the woman caught in adultery (John 8), the woman with a flow of blood (Mt 9; Mk 5; Lk 8), the little girl Jesus raised from the dead (Mk 5), Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11), the eunuch Philip baptised (Acts 8), the Syrophenician (Mk 7:26)/Canaanite woman (Mt 15:22) who bargained with Jesus to heal her daughter, the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet (Lk 7), the many women who followed Jesus, Lot’s daughters, Lot’s wife, and the Levite’s Concubine (Judges 19).

A similarity that struck me in all these characters was that they are mostly women, or those whose presence in the text is somehow related to something sexual, or those considered ‘the other’. This correlation is both fascinating and problematic. It also exposes three biases/ assumptions:

1. A bias held by the writers of biblical narratives that women or those of ‘another gender’ except the male gender were not important.
2. An assumption that those whose identities were linked to their gender or sexuality were less than acceptable and therefore ‘should’ remain in the background.
3. Those considered ‘the other’ were not considered worthy to be named or given a voice.

Jesus, during his journey on earth, being brought up as a Jew, also held these biases. He too was a product of his times. But Jesus allowed himself to open up to be empowered by some of those considered ‘the other’. He was empowered to break these prejudices that excluded, silenced, and disposed of some as not worthy of ‘being in the frame’.

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This text focuses on the narrative about Sodom and Gomorrah and exposes the exclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community that we practice as a Church. Aggression against the poor, the orphan and widow, inhospitality, violence on strangers, oppressing the vulnerable and the least, were the sins of Sodom. This text is about the abuse of power and that God indicted Sodom for its exclusion and for not welcoming the stranger and ‘the other’. The sermon calls for introspection on the Church’s prejudices, exclusion, and inhospitality. in the light of the radical love, inclusion, and welcome that Jesus calls us to practice.



It is important that we try to wrestle with texts that are puzzling; to discern the silencing; to understand the nuances in the narrative. In times when many forces try to portray certain groups of peoples as ‘the other’ in order to exclude and silence them, we need to understand biblical interpretations that are sometimes misused to exclude and silence certain groups of people.

Let us look at one such puzzling and misunderstood text to discern God’s concern for radical hospitality, Jesus’ radical love, inclusion and welcome. I am grateful to and have adapted insights on some of these texts I talk about today, from David R. Weiss’s *Hearts Unbound*² series that dramatise these texts through a method called ‘Readers’ Theatre’.

First, God’s radical hospitality – In the Genesis 19 story of Lot and the travellers he provided shelter to, Lot insisted that the travellers or strangers deserved to be protected at all costs – even at the cost of his daughters’ virginity.

The attitude of the mob outside Lot’s door that night was that of a mob wanting to terrorise strangers in their midst. They even taunt Lot calling him ‘an alien’ who had come into their midst.

The depravity of Sodom was the way the city treated the most vulnerable and ‘the least’ in their midst – the poor, the widows, the strangers, and orphans. Sodom practised inhospitality to the stranger and aggression against the vulnerable. Terrorising those who would spend nights in the square while travelling, or those who had no one to protect them (widows, orphans) had become the target.

The outcry of ‘the least’ against such wicked inhospitality of Sodom had reached the ears of the Lord (Gen 18:20-21), who had come with the two angels to meet Abraham. While the Lord continued a discussion in which Abraham interceded for Sodom, the Lord sent the two angels/messengers ahead to Sodom to see if there was any truth in the outcry that had reached the ears of the Lord (Gen 18:22; 19:1). These were the two strangers Lot had given shelter to.

We find further proof of Sodom’s depravity in the books of Isaiah and Ezekiel. Isaiah, speaking in the voice of God accuses Israel of acting like Sodom, says:

“You are the perpetrators who destroy my vineyard! What you’ve plundered from the poor is still in your house! Why do you crush my people and grind the faces of the poor into the ground?” (Isaiah 3:14-15).

Isaiah says, in order to no longer be like Sodom and Gomorrah, Israel must:

“Learn to do good! Search for justice and help the oppressed! Protect those who are orphaned and plead the case of those who are widowed!” (Isaiah 1:17)

Apparently, these characteristics – ‘doing good and justice; protecting widows and

² David R. Weiss *Hearts Unbound: Engaging Biblical texts of God’s Radical Love through Reader’s Theatre* – Reconciling Ministries Network (rmnetwork.org)



orphans' – were absent from Sodom's radar. Ezekiel calls Israel Sodom's "sister," and explains this metaphor saying Sodom,

"had abundant food and not a care in the world, but she refused to help the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16:49).

Aggression against the poor, the orphan and widow, crushing the poor, inhospitality, violence on strangers, oppressing the vulnerable and the least, were the sins of Sodom. We have been told that homosexuality was the wickedness of Sodom. The text points otherwise. Inhospitality to strangers is the focus.

Outside Lot's door the townsmen demanded the travellers Lot sheltered, to gang rape them. In a world where only men counted, this was a way to humiliate and 'reduce' them to women. Gang rape of travellers was to brutally emphasise that they were not welcome in these parts. This was not about sex, homosexual or heterosexual; it was raw show of power to oppress, dominate, and find a target to show that power over.

From time immemorial sexuality has been abused this way – for one community to show hate on another. Sexual violence is used to terrorise the vulnerable. Lot's daughters and the travellers – were both on offer that night to the mob wanting to show power. The Judges 19 story of the Levite's Concubine shows that this night could have ended differently for Lot's daughters than it had for the Levite's Concubine who was gang raped by the mob the whole night, and left for dead on the threshold. The story of Sodom in Genesis 19 is about abuse of power. It is not a story about what is appropriate or inappropriate love between two people or about sexual orientation. This story is **not** about God's judgement on homosexuality. The two strangers/angels were there to investigate the outcry against Sodom – the way they treated the vulnerable in their midst.

The reputation of Sodom for centuries until Jesus' times was that it was the worst example of *indifference* to the marginalised; and of *inhospitality* to strangers. When Jesus refers to the reputation of Sodom, he compares it to the indifference of the town of Capernaum to the miracles witnessed and yet refused to understand the message of Jesus (Matthew 11:24). Jesus compared towns failing to welcome the disciples who went there making themselves intentionally vulnerable i.e., without money or sandals – as being worse than Sodom. He directly links Sodom to inhospitality (Luke 10:10,12).

Sodom symbolised exclusion of the economically poor, the foreigner or aliens and those who had no one to protect them. The towns around Capernaum refused Jesus' message because they thought he dined with sinners and tax collectors (Matthew 11:19) whom they saw as 'excluded' from the kingdom of God. Just as Sodom treated with indifference those considered marginalised, these towns, in Jesus' time too, excluded those they considered sinners. And Jesus considered such exclusion more sinful than the inhospitality of Sodom. Jesus' ministry tried to overcome anything that excluded anyone from the community to which God calls them.

Sodom, in this sense, refers to the practices of exclusion and inhospitality that we as a church practise rather than to homosexuality as a sin. Have we ever thought about Gen 19 in this way? God indicts Sodom for its exclusion, inhospitality, and not welcoming the



stranger and ‘the other’. As a Church today who are we not welcoming? Who are we actively inhospitable to? Who are we actively excluding?

We exclude those we see as ‘the other’ because of sex, gender and sexual orientation – the transgender persons, the lesbian, gay, intersex, bisexual and queer community. We see them as ‘Other’ because they are different from what we have been taught is the ‘norm’. We exclude them as unworthy of the body of Christ. We see them as ‘sinners’. When we do so, we would do well to remember that Jesus dined with and walked with those considered ‘sinners’.

Secondly, radical love and a radical inclusion. This is what Jesus practised. The kind of ‘inclusion’ Jesus showed was not merely including ‘those who were othered’ into the ‘mainstream’. Instead *he entered the world of those who were considered ‘the other’ ‘the excluded’* – walked with them, conversed with them, broke bread with them, let them challenge the internalised notion of who was ‘chosen’. Jesus conversed with those considered ‘the other’ by the Jews– the Samaritan woman, the Syrophenician woman, the leper, the woman with a flow of blood. Jesus showcased ‘the other’ – the Samaritan - as the only character with love and compassion for the neighbour.

This is the kind of radical love and radical inclusion that Jesus calls us to practise, as a body of Christ and as an *ekklesia* of equals to practise: to dare to enter the world of those excluded like the LGBTQIA+ community, converse with them, break bread with them, allow ourselves to be challenged by them on our internalised notions of life, love, sin and redemption.

Thirdly, Jesus practised a radical welcome. Jesus exposed publicly the woman with a flow of blood who touched the hem of his robe to be healed, so that the crowd around him will understand that bodily functions related to sexuality do not ‘pollute’ and should not be cause to exclude women as ‘impure’.

When the woman caught in adultery is brought to him, Jesus smashes the double standards regarding sexual behaviour that the so-called sexual sin of adultery was ‘more sinful’ than other sins, when he says, ‘the one without sin throw the first stone’. In that crowd not everyone may have been guilty of adultery themselves, but all of them, without a doubt, would have been guilty of greed, anger, and lack of love for the neighbour or alien in their midst. Jesus was emphasising that all sins are on the same continuum. And that it is wrong to consider anything related to the body or of sexual nature as ‘more’ sinful than greed, anger or the other sins that victimise and cause suffering to others.

Jesus’ radical welcome means the **breaking of prejudices publicly**. It means the public embracing of the touch of ‘the polluting’. It means the public declaration that acts of sexual nature are not a reason to exclude or label people as sinners when ‘all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of god’. This is the kind of radical welcome that Jesus is challenging us to exhibit as a body of Christ to welcome the LGBTQIA+ community by publicly standing with them and claiming that they are a part of this



same body of Christ; It means standing with them when they are harassed, violated and discriminated as 'the other' because they choose to love differently or live differently.

May we not be found indulging in the sodomy of inhospitality, crushing the vulnerable and the stranger in our midst.

May we be empowered by Jesus' example to practise a radical love and inclusion.

May we have the courage to exhibit the radical welcome of Jesus by publicly breaking prejudices against the LGBTQIA+ community and those who are marginalised.



Khrotsolo-u Teno¹

Matthew 19:12

Introduction

In these verses, the evangelist Matthew records Jesus' teaching on marriage without preference of divorce or the possibility of people living together outside marriage, for the sake of the kingdom of God. The hearers were the inhabitants of Judea beyond the Jordan. As Jesus was healing the people, some Pharisees came with the intention to test him and stated, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" In the context then Jesus is responding to the Pharisees' question by reminding the crowds about the life of "eunuchs." Though the passage deals on the issues of marriage and divorce, I will limit myself to the portrayal of "eunuchs" in verse 12 in the context of its literal and metaphorical image.

The Portrayal of a Eunuch in verse 12

Matthew highlights three groups of eunuchs in verse 12. The first classification consists of the "natural eunuchs" who are born that way – highlighting that they too are made in the image of God. The second classification is the "forced eunuchs" who are made to be so by others. Here, the text does not deal with the "change of sex" but encompasses the subjects forced to do so. Perhaps, one must have undergone trauma due to the physical change made to their bodies against their wish by those in control. Throughout human history, it is a known fact that the subjects were and continue to be used for the benefit of the oppressor who controlled its society.

The "voluntary eunuchs" are the third classification - those who choose to live a celibate life for the sake of the kingdom of God. The "voluntary eunuchs" represent those who renounced marriage and chose singleness.

Contextual Reading of verse 12

Verse 12, specifies whether a person is natural eunuch, a forced eunuch, or a voluntary eunuch – encompassing all these categories as made in the image of God. Contextually, the natural eunuchs also need to embrace the promise "of being made in the image of God". In such a healthy society, one ought not to force or entice others for the benefit of oneself. Therefore, in a global Christian community, if

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anyone wants to live as a voluntary eunuch, one must give the space to choose who they want to be. Our society really needs devoted people to advocate and work for the welfare of the Church as well as the community to build an inclusive world that embraces every individual as God's children.

Singleness is also a gift from God (cf. 1 Cor 7:7). It is a gift because a celibate life can further enhance the work for the kingdom of God. It is unthinkable to stop working for the kingdom, once a person realizes that she/he/it is made in the image of God. However, everyone cannot become a voluntary eunuch as it is a matter of choice. Feminist theologians have rightly pointed out that God is beyond gender. God is beyond our human categories of gender. It's actually already in the Prophet Isaiah in the 11 Chapter. God says, "I am God," and not human or a man. God is beyond that, and we need help to remind us of that, because we tend to think of God in very human categories and as of the male gender. The world will be incomplete if exclusivism is still around us and certainly, our beautiful world will be complete when everyone is included into one's heart - the abode of love.

Towards Inclusivity

Positive family nurturing can play a great role in creating a holistic environment. It is the parent's responsibility to accept, support and continuously foster the well-being of those born as eunuchs in the family. We live in a world of reason where every choice is considered normal. Perhaps, there is no say in the family when socializing becomes an integral part of daily life. Nevertheless, the writer urges every parent as well as every Church leader to discourage the notion for "Change of Sex" by undergoing various tedious artificial/commercialized procedures as we stand on the belief that everyone is made in the image of God.

The writer has reservations on the notion of "Change of Sex" as it negates the theology of everyone being made in the image of God, irrespective of being created as a male, female, or Natural eunuch. Acceptance and embracing of oneself is the key factor here. Moreover, "Change of Sex" is against God's *fantasm* a (phantom). It is the Church's responsibility to count everyone as a child of God. Wholistic wellbeing of every member of the Church should be the primary goal in caregiving ministry of the Church. Likewise, our society must also give privilege to all the Eunuchs and advocate for them as rightful citizens having full access as laid down in the Constitution of India.

Conclusion

As followers of Jesus Christ, let us love one another - the Natural eunuchs, Forced eunuchs, and Voluntary eunuchs alike. Let us respect their individuality and give space for growth and inclusivity. When one ignores Eunuchs, one misses the mark of one's duty as an imitator of Jesus Christ, as Jesus Christ himself during his earthly ministry always stood by people who were neglected, discriminated against and subjected to exclusion by the society. Let us continue to affirm that Eunuchs are made in the image God and are fully capable of working and serving the Lord Almighty God. Therefore, let us all work together for the kingdom of God. Shalom!



“GOD’S INCLUSIVE SALVATION”: THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE OF ISAIAH

Dr. Atula Ao¹

Isaiah 56:1-7

Stereotyping, gender discrimination and oppression in all forms still exist in our society. Race, caste and ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality is at the heart of division and hatred among different communities of faith. The question of the alien, the stranger, the foreigner, the sojourner, the others like the LGBTQIA+, is a quest by a group of people seeking to maintain their identity. The church in its proclamation of salvation was addressed only those are considered the ‘unblemished’ and ‘holy’. Redemption or Salvation in the Old Testament was almost always a worldly and concrete vision of salvation from enemies, from oppression, from slavery, and from injustice, by a God of love and mercy.

The task of Biblical interpreters has been a challenging one in the context of interpreting and appropriating the message of the Bible. The process of mutual interpretation of the past is almost never without pain and without critical interventions. Nor is it today when the church is confronted with serious questions when it comes to proclaiming the good news of salvation to the LGBTQIA+ community. However, a churchly conversation about this issue will have to be shaped by the call to love one’s neighbour and protect the common good in the formation of a just and sustainable society.

The welcome to the foreigners and eunuchs in Isaiah 56, invites us to understand clearly the message of salvation and redemption by apparently overturning both tradition and the Torah. By addressing the eunuch’s lament, Trito-Isaiah² elevates their status, demonstrating not only to the eunuchs but also to fellow Jews that Yahweh has a deep concern for the eunuchs and their plight. Isaiah 56 presents the possibility of a new and welcoming voice, by upending the older tradition that had been concerned with separation what was deemed pure.

Context:

Isaiah 56 is set in Jerusalem following the exile where rival groups were attempting to restore Israel. The third Isaiah provides a broad and universalistic outlook,

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² Trito-Isaiah (Third Isaiah) is an **artificial name** that was introduced into scholarly research in 1892 by B. Duhm in order to designate the textual corpus Isa 56–66 and the anonymous prophetic figure to whom it has traditionally been ascribed.



“welcoming all faithful people to the temple, which will become a ‘house of prayer for all peoples’ (56:7).” The priestly establishment contends that the Babylonian captivity resulted from contamination by foreign ways and influences that had led Israel to become like any other nation and to forfeit the title of being the holy people of God. The Priestly reconstruction insisted on maintaining the laws of purity and holiness, and the laws that excluded those who were “blemished”.

According to Leviticus no one with “crushed testicles” shall “come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish” (Lev. 21:16-23). Deuteronomy’s prohibition is even more severe, denying such “blemished” persons not only the priesthood but any participation in the worshiping community (Deut. 23:1). Against the backdrop of such prohibitions, Isaiah 56, speaks a different word.

The eschatological vision of the community of Trito-Isaiah looked for Yahweh’s salvation to be extended to all peoples because of Yahweh’s own righteousness (56:1). In Isaiah, Zion becomes universalized where the previously excluded others are finally welcomed into the assembly of God. Overturning the Levitical prohibition, eunuchs will be included in the coming Messianic Kingdom.

The eunuchs are either men whose sexual organs have been damaged or castrated males used in various forms of government service. They are men who cannot sire children and therefore, have no future. Their names will disappear with their death. The laws forbid the admission of eunuchs into the assembly of Yahweh. In other words, foreigners and eunuchs represent outsiders and were often stigmatized and represented as being morally and sexually distorted. Physical imperfection represented moral imperfection and this standard was held for the Priest as well as with the Sacrifice because the offering had to be ‘without blemish’. Hence, they were considered as fallen from the grace of God and in denial of the salvation of Yahweh.

A closer reading of Isa. 56:1-7 helps us understand the conditions under which the prophet envisions and weaves an imagination of the inclusion of the eunuchs. The prophet speaks from an eschatological perspective: “for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance will be revealed” (56:1).

Inclusion of the “Others”

In the context of the Israelites preparing to restore Israel and to reclaim their land and their identity, the prophet weaves a series of messages of good news of salvation to those who were once excluded. The text moves beyond legalities and orders and speaks from the perspective of divine grace that changes everything. Isaiah calls on a new life even in the midst of unfulfilled political hopes by proclaiming that God is continuing the new thing that had begun in Second Isaiah, creating something so new that this good news is even beyond the provisions of the Torah. The new age is not established by reconstructing the past, but by openness to the future, an openness available also to foreigners and eunuchs who once were ostracised by the society.

Dry tree (vv.3-5): He further elaborates this good news by announcing the surprising



birth of sons and daughters where they once thought was impossible. “Then you will say in your heart, ‘Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, so who has reared these? I was left all alone, where then have these come from?’” (49:21). The eunuch will no longer be a “dry tree” (56:3); because for the eunuch too, “nature” can be transformed by the divine word.

The Hebrew, *enosh*, is used here as “a man in humble life,” in contradistinction to Hebrew, *ish*, “one of high rank.” Even the humblest, as “the stranger” and “the eunuch” (Isaiah 56:4; Isaiah 56:6), are admissible to these privileges. The word *yad* is used here figuratively for manhood, honour, strength, and dignity. Far from hanging his head and lamenting, “I am a dry tree” (v.3), devoid of life, fruit or joy, the eunuch is brought near with all the others, and given “an everlasting name,” an abiding reputation, “which will not be cut off.” So that is the promise, that the Others of other sexualities, once excluded by the Levitical code will be welcomed into the kingdom.

Yahweh promises to give faithful eunuchs a monument “in my house and within my walls” as well as “a name better than of sons and daughters”, “an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off.” There is no such thing as a prescribed people, a people living outside the realm of Yahweh’s love. It opens up Yahweh’s salvation to the world.

This prophetic announcement is a prophecy worthy of the Gospel which calls all to be God’s children, and makes His house a house of prayer for all the peoples (v.7). What had been unproductive can become productive, a full member of God’s ecclesia. This text does not speak of anyone’s right to be included in that assembly but announces a divine gift, an unexpected grace that changes everything. The prophet’s message of restoration is that God would restore the honour of the eunuch, giving him back his manhood, and so he would have “a name better than that of sons and daughters” (56:5). This is not, of course, just a miracle of biological healing. Rather, God is saying that the eunuch will be accepted in God’s house, even as others were accepted. Though formerly shamed and excluded, the manhood, dignity and honour of the eunuch would be thus restored, and in this restoration the eunuch would find pride and greater joy than if he had begotten children.

Covenant keeping (v.6): The salvation promised is a free gift with responsibilities. It brings responsibility and engenders confession of faith. “To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give....” The message here is loud and clear that Isaiah is calling everyone who keeps the law and observes the sabbath to celebrate salvation, share this redemption with the lowly including in this message of salvation the eunuch and the foreigner. He also called them to maintain justice, and to do what is right. Their faithfulness demonstrates their desire to be included among the people of God.

Sociological analysts of the post-exilic period suggest that the community responsible for third Isaiah was, in fact, made up of outcasts, or at least people outside the hierarchical establishment. The prophet was a visionary, who embraced of the



possibility that God would yet do a new thing. For Isaiah, membership in the people of God is not a matter of blood but of commitment by condemning religious (chap 58) and social (chap. 59) economic status and inviting the humble and contrite in spirit into an intimate relationship with God (63:16; 64:8).

In the eyes of the prophet, God is gathering “others” and adding them to those considered to be outcasts of Israel whom God has already gathered. The people of Israel could accept the inclusion of others because they know that they themselves are outcasts and sinners who have been welcomed into God’s house because of who God is and what God has done, not because of their own righteousness. There is no “we” and “them” in this invitation it is derived from the eschatological and redemptive work of God rather than from particular cultural or social agendas. At the same time, the inclusion of “others” finds a way to uphold the prophet’s insistence that all insiders and outsiders alike are called to maintain justice and do what is right, to keep the sabbath and hold fast to the covenant.

Reflection

Contemporary cultural realities certainly play a role in the church’s ethical arguments on the LGBTQIA+ community based on creation and the command to love. The prophet welcomes them into full participation in the community of God’s people despite the knowledge that the biblical texts speak differently. Can we as a Christian community today speak the good news of the kingdom of God i.e. the welcome, we offer to the LGBTQIA+ community. Any attempt by us that challenges scripture and tradition, a word claiming authority in the church on the basis of the gospel, is, in effect, making a prophetic claim to speak to and for the universal church. A church that is inclusive, an ecclesia of equals, of all communities and all humans irrespective of gender, class, race or sexuality is a visionary church that has adhered to the message of “salvation for one and all”. Isaiah 56 demands of us that we re-design “who should belong to the ecclesia of God”? A charismatic claim against religious orthodoxy, traditions, cultures and doctrines needs to be spoken by counteracting old traditional norms of preaching the good news of salvation and restoration. We need to reclaim the message of the prophet by making an argument for why, today the inclusive word of the gospel allows or demands the welcoming into the church of those who are from the LGBTQIA+ community.

Ecclesia is the new Israel. The prophetic call for a renewed Israel is what the prophets desired. That which was previously excluded by Levitical code becomes included in God’s ever widening circle of love in the prophetic declaration of salvation. That in the renewed Israel there will be place for everyone including the eunuchs as Trito-Isaiah weaved into his vision. In such a scenario, the church today needs to exhibit its inclusive nature to be true to the call of God by including the LGBTQI communities.



BECOMING A JESUS COMMUNITY THAT WELCOMES

Aruna Gnanadason¹

Genesis 19 (selections)

This text in Genesis is the most used by Christians and even churches to condemn a whole section of our church membership. Even a mention of the text about Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis immediately evokes an almost unconscious cultural understanding of this ancient story - references to it are ingrained in our language: Sodomize. Sodomite. Sodomy. You don't even have to have read the Bible to know what this passage is about: homosexuality. The sin of Sodom – the curse which completely destroyed two entire towns.

This particular passage from the book of Genesis is one of the key scripture passages referred to when you hear people say, “It says in the Bible that homosexuality is a sin.” It says in the Bible! And the Bible is our authority – for many Christians in India it is the inspired word of God. We take it very seriously – but then we are selective in our choice of texts that we will take seriously. While we are quick to quote texts which seemingly condemn homosexuality - we often gloss over and even condone the many instances of how the human body is used in the story of the Jewish people. We read about the sexual games played by Ruth; of Lot's daughters; of Abraham and Isaac who pass off their wives as their sisters in clear violation of Biblical law; of Sarah who was taken into Pharaoh's palace, implying sexual relations with the Pharaoh, and of Abraham who is complicit in this. We read of Jacob marrying two sisters Leah and Rachel (also illegal according to Levitical law), and of the sexual transgressions that underlie David's lineage.

There is also in this very text in Genesis, reference of Lot “giving” his daughter to the visitors! Intrigue, lust and murder surround the stories of Abigail and Bathsheba

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(I took a lot of this message from an interesting web page and adapted it to our context. The web page <http://www.wouldjesusdiscriminate.org/> It is linked to the Metropolitan Community Church in Indianapolis, USA. A Church which was founded in 1968, has been at the vanguard of civil and human rights movements by addressing issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, economics, climate change, aging, and global human rights. MCC was the first to perform same-gender marriages and has been on the forefront of the struggle towards marriage equality. MCC recognizes a state of need around the world in the areas of human rights and justice including but not limited to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer community. As people of faith, MCC endeavours to build bridges that liberate and unite voices of sacred defiance. MCC leads from the margins and transforms.)



with David. These are but some examples, but we accept them as part of the history of the survival of the nation of Israel, and in fact acknowledge this as part of Jesus' lineage! These stories – all become “covertly positive in the political fate of ancient Israel: God, it would seem straddles both sides of the legal fence in order to advance the fortunes of his chosen people.”² We need to think about this and why the church and now we as members of the church gloss over these examples of the use of sexuality which render the women as either silent partners in the crimes or as victims of the political, economic and social designs of the men.

But to go back to the text we are reflecting on what is it actually saying – not just what we think it says, or what we have always been told it says. At the NCCI we have been focusing all these years since the last Assembly on “inclusive communities”. We have been calling for a commitment to an honest, open, kind and compassionate conversation which is fully inclusive of our LGBTQIA+ brothers and sisters. We as churches and church communities are being invited to take personal responsibility for ensuring that this is a Jesus community, i.e. the Church, is a place where we can differ respectfully, where we can name our own truth with humility, and where we can listen to others with compassion. Only communities that care can engage with the issues we will address only a transformed community creates space for “the other”.

In the story about Sodom and Gomorrah, the assumption which we have inherited about this text is that the sin of Sodom is homosexuality. Lot meets two angels disguised as men in the gateway of the town where he lives. In the ancient Middle East hospitality was held up as having priority'. You always took in strangers and gave them shelter and food if you could.

It is in this context that Lot, as the host, takes in the two men and is honour-bound to provide for them while they are in his house. But before too long, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man the bible tells us, surround the house; ‘where are the men who came to you tonight? bring them out to us, so that we may know them.’ (v.5)

Now this is a despicable request, but take a careful look at what it says: *all the men... both young and old...* (v 4). In other words, every man who lived in that city had gathered outside Lot's house and are demanding that the two men - visitors of Lot - come out. Every single man is there. What are the chances that every man in Sodom at that time was gay? Every man? It's impossible? How then can we say this of Sodom?

These men, the young and the old, haven't come to ask for the strangers at Lot's house because they feel sexually attracted to them. They have come as a mob. They have come to violate them and humiliate them. So, as we meditate on this word let us firmly remind ourselves that there is nothing in this text about homosexuality – which is a sexual orientation which a percentage of the people in the world are born with. But here it is about gang violence – which is a choice the people are making.

² David Biale, *Sexual Subversions in the Bible*, in *Sexuality (A Reader)*, eds. Karen Lebacqz and David Sinacore-Gunn. (The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, Ohio) 1999. 382



Lot comes outside his house and tries to calm the crowd. But when he sees they won't be dissuaded from their goal he says this, 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.' (v. 6-7).

Things are going from bad to worse here. Lot somehow decides that it is less "sinful" to offer the mob his own daughters, than to allow the strangers who have taken shelter with him to be surrendered to the angry mob. This is an incomprehensible choice which the church ought to roundly condemn! (This text is very difficult for women and should be for the churches too - remember the appalling status of women in India today). You can almost imagine it happening - remember also the absolute code of hospitality in those days. Lot is so honour-bound to protect the strangers that offering his daughters – to him it seems to be the lesser evil in this situation. We struggle to understand that today.

Let me draw your attention to another little detail in the text: Lot offers the mob two women to appease their appetites. If he thought the crowd was gay what would be the point of sending out two women to them? This is another clue in the text itself to underline that this is not about homosexuality at all – the men in the mob are straight.

So, let us reflect on what is really going on here? An angry mob has gathered and plans to sexually violate two strangers. This is not about love or attraction or relationship or tenderness or mutuality. This is about hatred. This is about humiliation and brutality.

All wars record instances of sexual brutality – women, young girls and sometimes men too are abused in contexts of war. The point of all of this, obviously, is to express domination over the enemy, to degrade them and to humiliate them in the worst possible way.

So, what was the sin of Sodom? There are 20 references to Sodom in the rest of the Bible – 20 times when later writers referred back to this particular story as an object lesson, and basically say: don't do what they did. Not one of those references has to do with sexuality at all.

Pride. Excess of food. Not aiding the poor and the needy. Being haughty. Those were the sins of Sodom. Turning against the stranger, not providing hospitality, being brutal. Those were the sins of Sodom, as later writers in the Bible describe these events.

So, what happened to us modern day readers of the Bible? How did we become so convinced that this story was about homosexuality that we were sure we were right about it? For many, many years ignorant straight people have assumed that people of other sexual orientations are sexual predators, pedophiles, rapists. For generations and generations, homosexuality has been associated in the popular imagination with the most disgusting forms of violation and humiliation. The angry mob made



up of the men of Sodom looked exactly like what many people think of gay people today. We have made up our minds and will not stop to check erroneous assumptions.

But we know more now. We know that same gender attraction is common – perhaps as many as 10% of the population may be oriented differently. We know now that there are many other sexual orientations, besides homosexuality: bisexual, asexual, intersex, lesbian. We know sexual orientation is most likely a genetic condition, like the colour of your eyes, it is not a learned preference, like your choice between Carnatic music or AR Rahman or Western pop music. We know it is about loving relationships, companionship and partnership. We know that many LGBTQIA+ persons yearn to make lasting, loving relationships with one partner expressed through mutual fidelity, just as many straight people do.

In other words, we can today read this passage differently than many generations before us have read it when they thought the angry mob was gay.

Now that we have revealed the original meaning of this text, we can hold it up and ask what we always ask when we gather as a community of faith around the Word: what is God trying to say to us? Where is God in this for us? And for me it is here: when have I acted like that angry mob? When have I closed myself and was determined that people of other sexualities are not welcome in my church? It is a text of judgment - but not about sexual orientation.

Then the Lord rained down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah - from the Lord out of the heavens. Thus, God overthrew those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities - and also the vegetation in the land. The cities were destroyed!

This text calls on us to recognise that God will not tolerate abuse of the vulnerable. And neither should we, if we claim to be God's people. The key question is whether we as the church are ready to welcome the LGBTQIA+ community have we prepared the ground – becoming an inclusive church can become an empty slogan if we are not (at the outset) ready to transform ourselves, our theologies and spiritualities, our forms of ministry our ways of being in the world. It is not about adding a chair into our churches crowded with many of us who are afraid of change; many of us who do not want to change; many of us who do not want to think differently and appreciate the diversity of the people of God. When we speak of an inclusive church – **we have to first become the Church of Jesus Christ that welcomes all!**



CHURCH'S ENGAGEMENT IN GOD'S VISION OF HOPE: TOWARDS THE INCLUSION OF GENDER DIVERSITIES

Rev. Dr. Prasuna Nelvala¹

We may be pastors with new congregant member who identify themselves as transgender persons; we may be theological teachers with transgender students; maybe we are faithful parents who come to know that our child battles as a transgender person; maybe we ourselves are transgender people struggling within; or we may be just casual listeners who are curious to know about transgender men and women! Whoever we are, as Christians we need to deal with the questions such as these: “What does the Bible say about the LGBTQIA+ community?” “Who is God to the LGBTQIA+ community?” “What should be our theological engagement in God’s vision of hope for the LGBTQIA+ community?”

To begin with, all the letters in LGBTQIA+ that are threaded together are not describing the same type of thing. They, represented by each letter of that acronym, all have something to do with sexuality or gender identity. While there are certain things in common, the letters overlap in certain ways. Therefore, comparing and contrasting the letters is problematic. Many people identify with more than one of the letters.

The letter T in LGBTQIA+ refers to the term “Transgender” and that is what I will talk about today. It expresses a gender identity that does not match a person’s genetic sex. Hence, I prefer to use the term “Transgender.” This is a call to the community to engage with God’s vision of hope in the context of LGBTQIA+ community by sharing three stories: My personal connections with a transgender man; a story of a woman who was transvestite who was conferred Sainthood in the history of Christianity; and the biblical story of a transgender prophet affirmed by St Paul.

My Personal Connections with a Transgender Man

My first close connection with a transgender man, Subbiah, goes back four decades. He used to live near our house, while his brother’s family lived behind our house. Subbiah’s family did not accept him; therefore, he had to live separately. His source of earning used to be working in a few houses as a house maid. According to dictionary, a maid is a “female domestic servant.” Yes, housemaids are usually females. Subbaiah chose to do a female job as his expression of his feminine gender identity. Subbaiah worked at our house for more than a decade, until we moved

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away from that particular neighbourhood. He has become a part and parcel of our family. Both our parents were government teachers who commuted to small villages nearby, and we siblings, four of us, had different timings to get home. Keys to our house, including the keys to our safe used to be with Subbiah. He used to help us in housekeeping, including bathing our brother who was young then. We shared a deep connection and relationship of trust with Subbiah. Looking back, I cannot remember any incident or event to show that we have treated him less than others based on his gender status. He used to join us in our daily family prayers.

We did not think much about his gender then, and it never came up in our family conversations that he was less than us. His gender may not have mattered so much to us that time, but I am sure it did to him. However, he could not and he did not hide his gender identity. Due to sensitivity, everyone used to respect his privacy. For some reason, people used to fear him and his transgender status. Especially Hindus in our neighbourhood didn't want to upset him or be unreasonable. Superstitiously, they believed his curse may have a spell on them. Hindus in that place valued him and I remember that many requested him to perform *Drishhti*/evil eye ritual to ward off harm.

Four decades ago, our family did not have a second thought in hiring him as our helper and he was almost like a family member and took part in all our family functions. "Was Subbiah sinful because of his transgender identity?" This was not a question in our mind decades ago. Today it is a serious theological question which we need to address in our theological language from the pulpit. "Is Subbiah not part of the creation of God?" What is our theological engagement with God's vision of hope?

Transvestite² Saint- Joan of Arc: An Inspiration towards Inclusion

In the history of Christianity, we have several medieval models of the "Transvestite Saints," such as Saint Joan of Arc, St Pelagius, and so on. I am inspired and draw strength from the story of St Joan of Arc.

Most Christians, and especially theologians and pastors, have heard about Joan of Arc. Yet very few know that she was burnt alive by the Catholic Church in 1431 when she was just 19 years old on the charge of heresy. Her crime was that she refused to obey the commands of church authorities and claimed that she had direct divine inspiration. Joan of Arc fits the medieval archetype of a transvestite. She was stubborn in cross-dressing which was considered illegal in those times. The Church and France buried the fact that she was a transvestite and burnt her alive.

Almost 500 years after her death the Catholic Church had canonized Joan of Arc "Saint Joan" because the Church needed a popular figure to connect to the church at a time of revolutionary turmoil worldwide. Joan of Arc was an illiterate daughter of the peasant class. But she was enormously popular, especially among peasants and workers.

² A Transvestite is not a person of transgender identity. The Medical Definition of transvestite: a person who adopts the dress, the manner, and sometimes the sexual role of the opposite sex. When a child is born a gender is assigned to a child - transgender people are persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behaviour does not conform to that typically associated with the gender and sex to which they were assigned at birth – many seek gender reassignment surgeries to deal with this.



The courage with which she defended her right was an extraordinary act. She was brilliant in her military leadership at the age of 17, which contributed to the emergence of the nation state of France. Her extraordinary courage in leading the army in war, and a will to die for her right to be what she was inspires the church today. Was Joan of Arc sinful, so that the church burnt her alive? Then how come the Church in 1920 made a transvestite Joan of Arc a Saint? Whatever may be the reasons, we have a lesson to learn from the life of St Joan of Arc and the then church as well. We need to learn lessons from the history of Christianity. Is it not the responsibility of the Church in India today to engage in a task of declaring the image of God in the LGBTQIA+Q+ community?

Transgender People and Biblical Affirmation

We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, it speaks to people, it transforms and affirms the image of God in people no matter what gender they belong to.

However, the Bible doesn't openly and explicitly address the issues of transgender people. But, some observations from the reading of the Bible might help us to reflect from the perspective of Transgender persons. For example, the Bible talks about eunuchs and for modern minds eunuch means a castrated male.

Eunuchs play an extremely significant role both in the Hebrew Bible and

New Testament. The Bible provides forty-nine uses of the explicit term "eunuch." Though Deuteronomy rejects the faith of eunuchs (23:1), they are fully welcomed by Isaiah (56: 3-5). Very significantly, the first Christian convert in Acts 8 was an Ethiopian eunuch, marginalized by both race and gender. Jesus promises hope to eunuchs in Matthew 19:12, saying "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves for the Kingdom of heaven." In this saying, Jesus is affirming their humanity rather than their gender identity. St Paul affirmation of a transgender prophet would inspire the church to engage in God's vision of hope in the midst of hopelessness.

Transgender Prophet and Poet (Epimenides): St Paul's Affirmation

Today medical science has proved that the sex of a child is determined by genetic, hormonal and other factors – the same is so for transgender people. But we know that millions in the world have a gender identity that does not match the sex they were assigned to at birth and some feel they need a sex reassignment surgery later in life because though born and assigned a gender they are uncomfortable with that gender. According to 2011 census there were approximately five lakh transgendered people in India and now it would have been doubled. How do we address the struggles of Transgender people from the pulpit theologically and deal with questions such as, "Is being transgender a sin?" or "a sickness?" or "a speciality?" or "a diversity in creation?" Transgender people experience high rates of depression, anxiety, and abuse of various kinds, rejection, oppression, victimization, and discrimination. Added to that, they experience conflict within between their



genital sex and the gender they realize they should be. The list goes on. What is God's vision of hope for Transgender people and how do we engage in that vision? St Paul engages in the vision of God in affirming transgender poet and prophet, thus setting a model for the church today.

The Jerusalem Bible, the Wycliffe Bible Commentary, Henry Matthews Commentary and other reliable works identify St Paul's usage of "The Cretans are always liars" in Titus 1:12 as a saying from Epimenides's oracles. Who is this Epimenides? Paul affirms Cretans' prophet (Titus 1:12), and affirms a poet's saying "...as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring' (Acts 17:28). New Testament scholars identify the prophet and poet who Paul is referring to as Epimenides. According to Greek sources, Epimenides was the shaman who purified Athens from plague and who assisted in famous reforms, including the institutionalization of homoerotic love as it was practiced in Crete. Epimenides of 600 BC, from Crete, a complex multifaceted religious identity was known as one of the "Seven Wise Men" of ancient Greece. He was also known as diviner, and also as a Trans person. In his book Greek Divination, William R. Holliday compares Epimenides to the Transgender shaman Tiresias, who changed sex several times and whose clothing was simultaneously "masculine" and "feminine." St Paul refers to Epimenides and I am sure Paul knows pretty well about his gender identity. He might know surely that his audience would know Epimenides' gender identity. Very interestingly, perhaps intentionally, Paul mentions Epimenides twice in his speech. Paul affirms prophet and poet Parmenides and quotes from his oracles. For Paul, Epimenides' gender identity does not matter but his attributes as prophet and poet matter. God's vision of hope is inclusiveness and affirmation of God's image in every human being no matter what gender they belong to. Can we be transformed into that maturity?

In conclusion, in my connections with the transgender man Subbaiah I spoke of earlier we as a family never made him feel less than us. This is my theological affirmation. What hope can we provide to people who live with diverse gender identities? A simple peasant girl Joan of Arc transvestite defied the authorities for her right to wear what she wants to. She was later Saint Joan of Arc a woman sainted by the Church. Are we challenged by both St Joan of Arc and her Church? For St Paul the transgender identity does not matter but the godly attributes of Epimenides.

Let us consider what matters to us today when we encounter transgender people around us? What is God's vision of hope? Can we become hope to the people who live in hopelessness?

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IN FRONT OF EVERYBODY

Junia June Joplin¹

Mark 2:1-12

GRACE AND PEACE TO YOU, beloved, in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Elizabeth and I have been friends for the better part of twenty years, since seminary in Richmond Virginia. Little did we know that Sunday, July 26 would be the Sunday after I lost my job, or the Sunday after my firing ended up making international news. But then, any one of us could make a laundry list of things we never expected would happen in 2020.

And hey, speaking of 2020, and speaking of things we didn't expect...

Do any of you remember crowds? Do you remember what it was like to be in a crowd of people? To be packed into a space with thousands of your fellow human beings? Do you recall what that particular sensation was like, back before social distancing took effect? Do you remember crowds? Sporting events? Parades? Mardi Gras? School Assemblies? Streetcars and subway trains where you couldn't find a seat? A good restaurant with an hour-long waiting list just to get a table? A special event at church when it's harder than usual to find a place in the pews?

Do you remember that feeling of showing up someplace only to discover it was way too crowded and you couldn't get in? It's bizarre, isn't it, that the sensation and the experience of being part of a crowd is only a memory these days. I have faith we'll get there again, but when? Who knows?

The story we've heard read to us is a story from the Gospel of Mark. It's the second book of what we call the New Testament, but in terms of publication it was the earliest one to be written. It's a story, from chapter two of Mark's gospel, that finds Jesus at the centre of a crowd. He's in someone's home, the story goes, and the house is so packed with people that nobody could possibly get in to see Jesus. It reminds me of rush hour on the subway, when the cars get so packed sometimes people don't even try to get on – they just stand on the platform and wait a few

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minutes for the next train. People are probably pressing against one another, taking up their neighbour's personal space, literally spilling out the doors.

That's the scene in Mark chapter two; social distancing is *not* in effect. And so, it is, when four people show up carrying their paralyzed friend in a kind of makeshift stretcher, they figure there's no way they'll be able to press through the crowd and get close to Jesus. They're pretty sure – they have faith – that Jesus, the renowned healer, can make their friend walk. But they don't know how to get to Jesus...

I imagine the friends were most disappointed to discover the human obstacles in their way that day. Maybe one or two of them said "well, I guess we should just turn around and go back home." Maybe they thought the situation was hopeless. Maybe they figured they could try again. Maybe the paralyzed man didn't like putting his friends through all that trouble, so maybe even he suggested they give up.

But it just so happened, in the middle of the disappointment and the maybes, one of the five friends noticed the roof of the house. He understood enough about how roofs were constructed in those days to say, "hey, I think there's a way for us up there. I think we could pull apart enough of that roof to make a hole big enough to lower our friend through." That's exactly what they did. So certain were they that Jesus could help their friend, and so convinced they were that humanity matters more than somebody else's damaged property, they climbed atop that house, dug a hole in the roof, and lowered their paralyzed friend right into the middle of that impenetrable crowd.

He is now the centre of attention. If he had hoped to be unassuming and inconspicuous... if he had hoped to avoid making a scene...well, that is no longer an option. He is now in the centre of a massive crowd. He is now the focus of that crowd, and it's not as if he can just walk away. Not yet, anyway.

Jesus, this story aims to teach us, is a liberator. More than just a healer, he is One who delivers people from whatever burdens they happen to be bearing. He is One who frees us to become the people we were created to be – to become resplendent bearers of the Divine image. So it is, Jesus says to the man "your sins are forgiven."

Maybe that isn't what he expected to hear. Maybe no one expected Jesus to say those particular words. But at these words, a lot of the very religious people in the crowd began to mutter. "That's blasphemy," they said. "This man is a heretic. He is insulting God."

They were wrong, of course, as so-called very religious people are often wrong when they begin muttering about (or posting comments about) what is and what isn't blasphemy. The Jesus we meet in this story gives you permission, friends, to roll your eyes when you encounter those sorts of comments...or at least to view those folks with the utmost scepticism.

Jesus could feel the disapproving glares of the very religious people in the room, so he asked them "What do you think is easier? To say 'your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'get up and walk?'" Are you trying to say "you can bring 'this' kind of liberation, but not 'that'



kind”? Are you trying to put me in a box? Are you trying to draw brackets around, or to assign conditions to, the ways I set people free?

Because if you are, Jesus says...if that’s what you’re trying to do...you’re about to be very disappointed. You do not know who you are dealing with.

“Get up,” Jesus said to the man on the mat. “Get up and walk. Take your mat, and go home.” This is a story about faith. It’s a story about friendship. It’s a story about perseverance. It’s a story about how, on the road to wholeness, we often face setbacks and obstacles. It’s a story about forgiveness, about liberation. It’s a story about healing. It’s a story about how, if religious people accuse you of blasphemy, you’re probably doing the right thing.

But it’s a story about something else, too. In the reboot of *Tales of the City* on Netflix, we meet Anna Madrigal, a gracious 90-year-old landlady to a group of mostly LGBTQIA+ tenants in a building in San Francisco. Anna, we learn by the end of the first episode, is a transgender woman. She came to San Francisco sometime around 1966, during a time when transition generally required trans folks to vanish, then reappear with new lives in new places.

In a flashback episode, we get to see Anna, some fifty years younger, arriving in her new hometown. The scene takes us to a city curb where a long silver Greyhound bus, the words SAN FRANCISCO posted above its windshield, is stopping to let off passengers. The last of the passengers to disembark is a woman in a pink shirt dress, nude pumps, and a medium brown suitcase. As she takes her first steps off that bus and onto the sidewalk, there is a sort of overwhelmed expression on her face. With hints of relief, perhaps some joy, and plenty of anxiety, she pauses a moment to take in her surroundings before heading down the sidewalk.

The look on that woman’s face tells us that she alone knows what she has had to overcome to get here. It’s a powerful scene, masterfully performed by actress Jen Richards, who is herself a transgender woman. The scene moves me, almost to tears, every time I re-watch it. It moves me, in part, because I know that look. I know that feeling. I know how simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying it is to take your first steps as your full, free, authentic self in the world.

I know how scary it can be to take those steps with other people watching. To feel like the gaze of the world is upon you, looking for reasons to pick you apart, to invalidate you, to say that what you’re doing shouldn’t be...even to say it’s blasphemous.

Here in Mark chapter two, we are being told a story about taking first steps. There’s a line in this story that, until I became self-accepting and began my journey of transition, I had never really paid attention to. It’s there in the last verse I read today – verse twelve of Mark chapter two.

It goes, “Jesus raised him up, and right away he picked up his mat and walked out **in front of everybody**. They were all amazed...they said ‘we have never seen anything like this before.’” **In front of everybody.**



We have already established that there are a lot of people in the house. A crowd so thick you can't get through it. A mass of onlookers, gawking at something that is astounding to some, infuriating to others.

In front of everybody.

Can you imagine taking your first steps – maybe ever, but certainly in a very long time – in front of a massive crowd of people? Can you imagine how *nervous* the healed man might have felt? How wobbly his new legs must have felt? How unsure his feet must have been? How imbalanced his body might have felt to be upright for the first time in who knows when?

For many of us, doing *anything* in front of a crowd of captivated onlookers would be difficult and scary. But just imagine having to do something so vulnerable, so tentative, so unfamiliar.

Beloved, I am convinced there's Good News for us here. Because I believe that the God who created us in love, the God who offers us healing and wholeness and forgiveness and liberation, is also a God who invites us to step out, maybe for the first time, *in front of everybody*. We are not simply to receive those gifts and keep them to ourselves. We are not to become who we're created to be only to hide ourselves away.

We are called to walk, in front of everybody, as bearers of light, as signs of grace, as testaments of hope. We are called to walk, in front of everybody, so that others may be inspired to take their own steps towards wholeness.

We are called to visibility, even in our vulnerability, because visibility is an engine that drives us further along the road of liberation.

Friends, the God who reaches out to us, who walks among us in Jesus, wants us to become our whole, authentic selves.

To walk in faith...

To walk in newness of life...

To take our first vulnerable steps...

In front of everybody, whether they like it or not.

Let them see you walking, beloved.

In the name and in the power of Jesus.

Amen.



An Ecumenical Document on Human Sexuality National Council of Churches in India

[Adopted by the General Body of the National Council of Churches in India, on 24 Sept. 2011 for implementation (vide Res. No.21/GB/2011)]

Preamble: At the heart of Christian faith is the core spirituality which each Christian is called to follow: Love God and love your neighbour as yourself. Based on the foundational theological understanding that every human being is made in the image of God, we urge the Churches to review and affirm sexuality as a gift from God. While we celebrate this divine gift, we lament the loss of its sacred character in the way in which we perceive and practice sexuality, resulting in acts of sexual violence.

Therefore, we affirm:

1. Love in all its forms, 'agape', 'philea' and 'eros', is central to the Christian understanding of the divine and the consequent ordering of human communities.

In essence, God is love. The Bible bears witness to this self-revealing God of love. It bears witness to a God who out of love reaches out to liberate creation. The New Testament suggests that the summary of God's Law is love. Accordingly, the Christian vocation is to love God and to love the neighbour as one's own self. The Christian faith tradition has understood love in three forms: 'Agape', 'Philea' and 'Eros'.

All these three forms of love are integrated and interrelated. In 'agapeic' love God gives God-self away for creation. In 'phileal' love God comes to dwell with us and befriends us. At the heart of this self-giving and befriending love of God is a desire within the life of God to know and to be known. This 'erotic' desire of God to know and be known makes 'agape' and 'philea' possible.

As God reaches out to us to know us, we are invited to enter into the triune life of God by "knowing" God. This "knowing" in the New Testament tradition is an 'erotic' knowing. It arises out of our "restless" quest for our life with and in God. At the heart of all our human relationships is the desire to know and to be known. This desire which is a gift from God as a consequence of being created in the image of God makes all human relationships possible.

2. Sexuality is characteristic of our being created in the image of God and has the potential to facilitate our becoming in God.



At the foundational core of Christian theological anthropology is the belief that we are all created in the image of God. As being counterparts of God, we reflect God's longing and capacity to love. To be in the image of God, therefore, is to be in love as relational beings. Our desire to know and to be known by the other is characteristic of the love that binds human communities, a manifestation of which we see in the making of love in a covenantal relationship. This form of love expressed in mutual respect, consensus and tender care enables us to grow in the bond of love thus facilitating the sanctifying process of our becoming into the likeness of Christ which is love.

3. Sexuality is essentially relational and has pluriform expressions.

Sexuality as an indispensable dimension of all human development and life is as complex and diverse as the human population, because each human being experiences and expresses sexuality in different ways. Sexuality is pluriform, ambiguous and fluid. Sexuality is essentially relational and involves human relations with the self, the other and the divine.

4. Sexuality can however be distorted.

Though human sexuality is an indispensable dimension of life, it can also be experienced and expressed in a distorted way. The beauty, sacredness and transcendence of materiality of human sexuality is distorted by unequal power relations, violence, objectification and commodification of the body and sexual reductionism instead of a liberative sexuality. This distorted concept of sexuality is underpinned by culture, theology and the judgmental moralizing of the church.

5. We need to re-read sexuality in scripture, tradition and liturgy

Readings of scripture, tradition and liturgy, with openness to sensuality, affirms sexuality. Scripture provides us with instances of deep love, sensuality and sexuality being expressed by biblical characters. The biblical vision of the future of the world is couched in a sensuous language of the union of the bride and the bridegroom.

Christian tradition in its mystic spirituality and the consequent aesthetic expressions; have embraced sexuality as a form of Christian love. Such awareness calls us to re-read the scripture and tradition to retrieve the sacred character of sexuality and its centrality in our spiritual pursuits.

5. The dichotomy between spirituality and physicality is blurred when sexuality is embraced within a horizon of human flourishing and covenantal love.

Our popular imagination of reality and the consequent spiritual practice is sometimes conceived in dualistic terms - of the dichotomy between the "spiritual" and the "material." Such a unfortunate dichotomy could result in trivializing sexuality, or relegating sexuality as being base and



hence profane. Such a dichotomy and the consequent distortion of sexuality can be overcome by embracing sexuality as a gift from God that is to be practiced with the recognition that it facilitates human flourishing and deepens covenantal love.

6. The Church has to be an inclusive and just community

A theological conversation on sexuality will further enable the church's self-understanding and witness as a welcoming and affirming community, making space within which the human rights and dignity of all will be upheld.



Theological Roundtable On Churches' Response To Human Sexuality

An ecumenical discussion

5 - 6 Dec. 2009, Kolkata

Message to the Indian Christian Communities

We, the participants of the Theological Roundtable on Churches' Response to Human Sexuality jointly organized by NCCI, SCEPTRE, CISRS, and SCMI, who are engaged in different ministries in Church and Society as bishops, church leaders, theological educators, research scholars, professional counsellors, lawyers, and activists, with different sexual orientations have met. After several brainstorming discussions and sessions on biblical, theological, ministerial, ecclesiastical and legal perspectives, we resolve to send the following message on Human Sexuality to all Christian communities in India in general, and to the NCCI member churches, regional councils, theological institutions, Christian organizations, and ecumenical partners, in particular.

We affirm that sexuality is a divine gift, and hence God intends us to celebrate this divine gift in committed, consensual, and monogamous relationships. It is in such celebrations of our sexuality that we grow into the fullness of our humanity, and experience God in a special way.

We believe that our negative attitudes towards sexuality and our body-denying spirituality stems from a distorted understanding of God's purpose for us. The embodied God who embraced flesh in Jesus Christ is the ground for us to love our bodies and to celebrate life and sexuality without abuse and misuse. So, God invites us to experience sexual fulfilment in our committed relationships of justice-love with the commitment to be vulnerable, compassionate, and responsible.

We recognize that there are people with different sexual orientations. The very faith affirmation that the whole human community is created in the image of God irrespective of our sexual orientations makes it imperative on us to reject systemic and personal attitudes of homophobia and discrimination against sexual minorities. We consider the Delhi High Court verdict to "decriminalize consensual sexual acts of adults in private" thus upholding the fundamental constitutional and human rights to privacy and the life of dignity and non-discrimination of all citizens, as a positive step.

We believe that the Church as a 'Just and Inclusive Community' is called to become a community without walls to reach out to people who are stigmatized and demonized, and be a listening community to understand their pains, desires, and hopes.

We envision the Church as a sanctuary to the ostracized who thirst for understanding, friendship, love, compassion and solidarity, and to join in their struggles to live out their God-given lives. So, we appeal to the Christian communities to sojourn with sexual



minorities and their families without prejudice and discrimination, to provide them ministries of love, compassionate care, and justice.

We request the National Council of Churches in India and its members to initiate an in-depth theological study on Human Sexuality for better discernment of God's purpose for us. This involves a deeper engagement with Bible, traditions, and other disciplines such as social theories, psychology, and medical science. This process should be an inclusive one where people with different sexual orientations can learn from each other and contribute to this process without prejudice and fear.

We also request the Theological Fraternities in India to further help this process through integrating issues related to Human Sexuality into the process of theological and ministerial formation.

We hope and pray that the embodied God will bless our endeavours to grow into the fullness of life, and to transform our faith communities into rainbow communities of the beloved and equals.

The Participants, Theological Roundtable on 'Human Sexuality', 06 Dec. 2009



National Consultation on Interfaith Engagement with Human Sexuality and Gender Diversity

July 13-14, 2018 Delhi, New Delhi YMCA Tourist Hostel, New Delhi

DECLARATION

While awaiting the judgement of the Honourable Supreme Court of India on Sec 377 of IPC — we the participants of the National Consultation on Interfaith Engagement with Human Gender, Sexes and Sexuality Diversities — organised by Aneka, Bangalore; and the National Council of Churches in India – ESHA, Nagpur; held in Delhi from 13th to 14th of July 2018; declare the following statement as an affirmation of our conviction — that human beings with diverse genders, sexes and sexuality minorities are God’s creation and are a part of natural order. This affirmation is done in the context of LGBTQHI+ phobia that attempts to criminalize gender, sexual and sexuality minorities in India.

We believe that love is the basis of all religions and hatred can have no place. However, historically there have been dominant interpretations that have been used to perpetuate oppressive systems against these minorities. As a result, gender, sexual and sexuality minorities are often rejected and alienated by many religious leaders and faith communities.

The insensitive response of different religious communities to the 2009 Delhi High Court verdict (to read down Indian Penal Code Section 377) is an example of the prevalent expressions of LGBTQHI+ phobia in the country. Such expressions, however, are often perceived as general expressions of the concerned faith communities, which is far from reality. We also witnessed the emergence of solidarity networks, inspired by religious faiths, upholding the rights of gender, sexual and sexuality minorities during this period. In a similar spirit, we commend the Honourable Supreme Court of India for furthering the rights to privacy as a fundamental right for every citizen, irrespective of gender, sexual and sexuality identities.

We see faith leaders and faith communities as allies and not as adversaries. We therefore recognise the need to understand and celebrate gender, sexual and sexuality identities within their respective faith perspectives. Through the deliberations of this consultation, we have come to recognise the innate ability of each faith community to understand, accept and celebrate gender, sexual and sexuality identities. We thereby recognise the presence of such identities within each faith community and encourage faith leaders to acknowledge, accept, nurture and continue conversations in the most inclusive manner.

It is to this endeavour and vision, we, the participants of this consultation, commit ourselves to demand for the reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and also demand the scrapping of several state laws that are harmful to the gender, sexual and sexuality minorities; including the problematic Karnataka Police Act: Section 36 (A); and The Andhra Pradesh (Telangana Area) Eunuchs Act, 1329 F.



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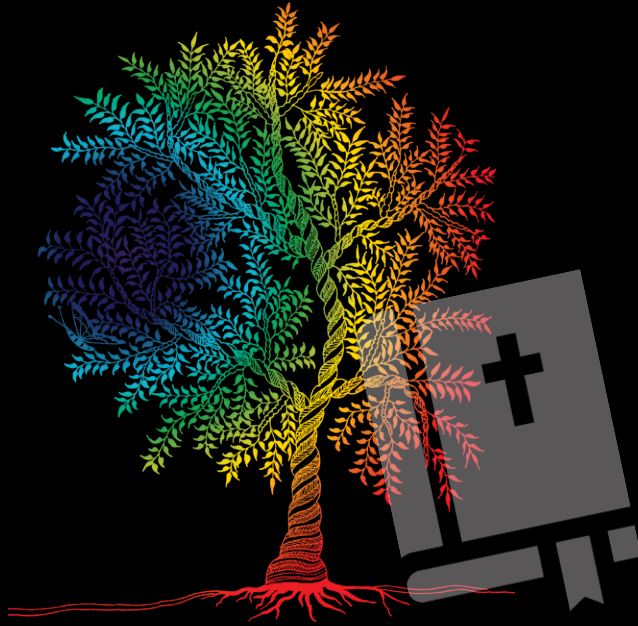




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**ESHA : Towards Greater
Inclusivity In Churches
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