

## **Reflection Resources for the Transgender Day of Visibility (March 31)**

### ***Seeing ‘with gender diverse eyes’***

One of the great gifts of transgender visibility is the fresh insight which gender diverse people are bringing to our understanding of both holy scripture and fruitful spiritual life. Some pointers to the growing range of such materials can be found in a later section of this resource. Among the many scriptural texts which have been found particularly rich and affirming are the following (any of which might be helpfully used at times and in spaces of affirmation and celebration):

*Matthew 19.11-12* (Jesus himself speaks positively about sexually and/or gender diverse people)

*Isaiah 56.4-8* (eunuchs are promised ‘a monument and name better than sons and daughters’)

*Psalms 139* (the psalmist speaks of how we are all ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’)

*Acts 8.26-40* (the Ethiopian eunuch)

*Galatians 3.26-28* (‘there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’).

### ***Reflections on the readings from the Revised Common Lectionary for Sunday 31 March 2019***

The readings for Sunday 31 March 2019 in the Revised Common Lectionary are also illuminating for gender diverse people, speaking as they do about vital features of many gender diverse people’s journeys, including:

- \* alienation, broken & changed relationships and the powerful theme of coming home (in Luke 15.11-32)
- \* new creation and God’s ministry of reconciliation (in 2 Corinthians 5.6-21) &
- \* the ending of disgrace and being fed with good things, with genital surgery (Joshua 5.2-12)

below are some further thoughts (including on the Anglican celebration of Mothering Sunday) which may be helpful....

### **Luke 15.11-32 – coming home with God with generous hospitality**

This well-known parable of Jesus has been read in many ways over the years. Indeed, various titles – not least those of the parable of the Prodigal Son, the parable of the Father’s Love, and the parable of the Two Sons – have also helped to highlight different features. In the context of celebrating gender diverse people, some of these traditional emphases also speak profoundly, not least:

- \* the experience of alienation from home – whether from self, body, family, and/or God (or all of these)
- \* the vital importance of being fully embraced by family and/or other loved ones
- \* the resistance of others – often close family relations – even when faced by the joy of renewal
- \* the importance of genuine celebration of coming home – whether to self, body, family and/or God (or all)

Other features also emerge however when viewed ‘with gender diverse eyes’:

- \* a question about why the ‘prodigal’ left their home in the first place – in what ways did they not feel ‘at home’ and able to be their true selves?
- \* empathy with the journey of the ‘prodigal’ – to what degree were they pouring themselves out in activities which perhaps brought no release to their troubled soul and body because of their alienation?
- \* identification with the plight of the ‘prodigal’ – their sense of shame and being outcast symbolised by a willingness even to be among the pigs
- \* the joyful, and sadly unexpected, surprise when family (personal, church or other) actively goes out of their way, not only to accept or even to affirm, but to celebrate them ‘with the fatted calf’

As scholars of the biblical context have identified, one of the most startling aspects of the story is the behaviour of the father who rushes out to greet their child, leaving behind the conventional demands of law, dignity and restraint. Their extraordinary generous hospitality offers a profoundly challenging model to us in our welcome and relationship to others. No wonder then that the father in the story has sometimes been seen as a figure of God in God-self. Yet perhaps the three key figures are best seen as aspects of the same humanity we share: part of which is lost or full of shame, part of which needs to learn to love with a full embrace, and part of which still remains resistant to full acceptance of those who take different paths. For

gender diverse people, like other LGBTI+ people at this time, it often seems as if too much of the Church remain like the elder sibling. The parent's response to their child who is returning home provides us with a better pattern. For it is not enough, the parable suggests, to welcome the one who has been 'lost'. Their very personhood and gifts must also be fully celebrated. This is not after all, a simple return. It is a new creation, a fresh beginning, if we would grasp it, for all.

## **2 Corinthians 5.16-21 – new creation and the ministry of reconciliation**

The theme of 'new creation' is very strongly to the fore in the second reading from 2 Corinthians. Again, read and heard 'with gender diverse eyes' this is a resonating vision of hope and a call to the transformation of attitudes as well as actions. For in this passage:

- \* we are encouraged not to regard others 'from a human point of view' – as if, for example, they are shaped by former, by-gone, worldly ideas of physical limitations or biological or other determinism
- \* the fundamental declaration is that when someone finds their true self in Christ 'there is a new creation', in which that which is old passes away and 'everything has become new' – in other words, when we rest in our true identity, we transition into something new
- \* it is as transformed beings, as new creations, that we become 'ambassadors for Christ' – for we witness by our very bodily transformations, to the fruitful reconciliation of hurts and divisions

Of course St Paul speaks here of the greater breadth and depth of the mystery and ministry of Christ in which all share. Yet do gender diverse people not embody this message in a fresh and liberating way? When not seen in a false 'human' way, gender diverse Christians can indeed be seen in new life-giving ways – as some of those who can witness, in their bodies and souls, to the transformation of old shapes and sufferings into new creations of growing joy and peace, ambassadors of Christ's re-creating love, reflecting 'the righteousness of God.' Coming home to one's true self is an infectious coming home to God's love.

## **Joshua 5.2-12 – marked as God's own, fed by grace beyond disgrace, with genital surgery**

'New creation' is also at the heart of Joshua 5.1-12, which speaks of the new home into which the redeemed people of God are now entering. Again, read 'with gender diverse eyes', it offers some striking resonances with the experiences and faith of gender diverse people, speaking of:

- \* an end to exile and oppression – 'the disgrace of Egypt' – alienated, and being treated differently, from that which is one's true identity and dwelling place
- \* finally dwelling, after long struggles, and a passover, in the promise which often seemed so distant, and even at times impossible
- \* being marked, as an embodied symbol of new creation, with the alteration of intimate parts

This last element of the story is striking. In the Hebrew story of the people of God, circumcision becomes a powerful feature of saving identity, witnessing to the fulfilment of God's promise of liberation and coming home. How strange then that transgender genital surgery is not more fully celebrated as a similar mark of freedom and new life. As with Christians generally, after the acceptance of Gentiles in the early Church, it is not necessary for all gender diverse people to bear the marks of new creation through the alteration of their genitals. Nor, particularly like female circumcision, should it ever be inflicted on those who neither need nor ask for it. Yet, in a powerful sense, genital alteration is much more than merely a physical change. For many transgender people, it is also sacramental of truly 'coming home' and to a new beginning in love.

## ***A reflection on 'Mothering Sunday' – a time for generous hospitality for all coming home***

In the Anglophone Church tradition, the Transgender Day of Visibility falls in 2019 on what is also called 'Mothering Sunday.' This reflects an old British and Irish custom of people returning to their 'mother church' on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent: a day on which they might, at least for one day, 'come home' to family. One vital contemporary dimension would thus be to enable gender diverse people to come home safely, and joyfully, to their selves, bodies, church families and God. The parable in Luke 15.11-32, the Gospel story for the day, is again an encouragement in this. The figure of the father in the story after all shares a very motherly-fatherly love, transcending the constraints of traditional male patriarchal expectation. Like Christ who calls us all to be embraced as their bride – whether male, female, or other, non-binary, gender – what we have been, and what we are, does not ultimately matter. What matters is what we are called to become: new creations who know ourselves as fully loved, whatever we are, and who love others accordingly.