

The Future is Trans...

*address by the Revd Dr Josephine Inkipin to the Future Church conference
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Acknowledgement of Country

Firstly, let me acknowledge the Spirit of this land and its traditional owners, the Gadigal of the Eora, and their elders past and present. I also acknowledge all First Nations people in our community, recognising that their lands and waterways were taken by violence, by people from my native land; and that there remains no treaty or adequate reparations.

Colonisation's effects are huge and complex, including in terms of gender diversity. Let us begin therefore with this short conversation between Miriam Margolyes and sistagirls of the Tiwi Islands – see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fc-WPnNH55c>

Do we, to use Miriam's words, really 'see' and 'understand'? How much are we seeking to fit others into our own concepts: whether of 'mateship', or anything else? I use that encounter to highlight not only the truth that gender diversity is universal, found and celebrated, in different ways, in all kinds of cultures, excepting quite modern Western formulations. I also use it to encourage us, like Jesus, to 'open our eyes and our ears' to difference, and to the ways in which God, is also moving among us afresh, as the *Holy Other*. For my address today is about what current transgender struggles might mean not only for humanity in our world today, but also for our ideas and experience of God. To put it another way, if some human beings are transitioning, and have always, transitioned, in various ways, then how is *God* also transitioning among us today? If we glimpse that, maybe we have an inkling of how the future is trans, among other things.

Now I hope this is not hard for anyone, but let me also say clearly at the outset, I am not going to justify transgender people. For our existence is non-negotiable. I am also not going to talk about words like 'inclusion', which, in my view, are highly problematic. Instead, I want to look forward with integrity and encourage us all to move beyond stale

and toxic conversations. There are an increasing number of fine resources which can help us with other matters also, including three books by my trans faith mentor, the second out trans priest in England, Dr Christina (Tina) Beardsley: namely *This is My Body: Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians*; *Trans Faith: A Transgender Pastoral Resource*; and *Trans Affirming Churches: How to Celebrate Gender-Variant People and Their Loved Ones*.

I want instead to talk about four things. The first is why transgender people are a cause for some others' concern. Secondly, I want to talk about God as transitioning. In other words, I want to place today's controversies in the context of the need, like Miriam Margolyes, to unlearn some of our presuppositions: in our case, theological ones. Thirdly, I want to speak, from my own experience, of transgender gifts for renewing faith and the world. And fourthly, I want to share a black trans faith message from the USA.

1) Why is 'trans' a public issue?

Partly, as the gay Catholic theologian Father James Allison has highlighted for queer folk as a whole, the answer lies in the age-old human tendency to scapegoat those seen as 'the other'. When I was younger, that included single-mothers. J.D.Vance chooses spinsters with cats. The Jews, and immigrants have been so used for centuries. For that reason, among others, marginalised folks need to stick together. However, trans folks have a particular significance today, even though we are so small in number, and lack real voice, agency and resources. The reason is well-expressed by the great queer theorist Judith Butler. For as they noted, back in 2021, the opposition to trans folk is actually very inconsistent and rationally incoherent – think Trump and MAGA. The anti-gender movement itself also constructs the supposed 'gender ideology' that they oppose. For their real aim is an actual ideological transformation of their own. As Judith put it:

(for) this reactionary movement, the term "gender" attracts, condenses, and electrifies a diverse set of social and economic anxieties produced by increasing economic precarity under neoliberal regimes, intensifying social inequality, and pandemic shutdown. Stoked by fears of infrastructural collapse, anti-migrant anger and... the fear of losing the sanctity of the heteronormative family, national identity

and white supremacy, many insist that the destructive forces of gender, postcolonial studies, and critical race theory are to blame. When gender is thus figured as a foreign invasion, these groups clearly reveal that they are in the business of nation-building. The nation for which they are fighting is built upon white supremacy, the heteronormative family, and a resistance to all critical questioning of norms that have clearly restricted the freedoms and imperilled the lives of so many people.

President Trump's recent behaviours are but one part of this. We see similar manifestations globally, notably in Hungary, Russia, and Italy, in rising right-wing populism elsewhere in Europe, and in Australia too. It is still built into official Vatican thinking, despite recent Papal charm offensives, and it is now baked into both Russian Orthodox and much US Evangelical Christianity. Butler's recent book (2024) *Who's Afraid of Gender?* analyses this further. Significantly, Judith names this movement as 'confessional'¹, in the sense that MAGA and its ilk need interpreting in more than the usual political terms. Rather, this is a psycho-social phenomenon, gathering up and organising an array of intimate fears and anxieties, 'using externalisations, projections, and reversals'. For, as Butler puts it:

those who imagine that something called gender will take all your rights away are attributing to gender what they themselves are doing, namely taking rights away.²

No wonder it has resonances with 20th century fascism, which was also a quasi-religious force 'sacralising politics'.³ As well as addressing its destructive impact and its co-option of many Christians, we need therefore to renew our spirituality. For as Judith Butler has indicated, if we are to counter a confessional movement which is not primarily founded on the intellect, we need to share stories, symbols and practices which offer positive living alternatives to those currently offered.

2) how is God transitioning?

¹ <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2024/05/13/judith-butler/>

² *ibid.*

³ cf. for example, John Pollard *Fascism and Religion* https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9780230295001_6

Trans concerns thus need placing into their context, namely the radical transformations of our societies, cultures, and environments. Like other great transformations in history, this is driven by profound changes in technology, communications, and shifts of power. We can identify similar features in other liminal periods: for example, in the so-called Axial Age, when, to quote one scholar, 'old certainties lost their validity and new ones were still not ready'⁴ and new wisdom traditions emerged, providing fresh meaning and purpose. In Christianity, the best known example is the Reformation era, when Western Faith forms were radically reshaped. So how well are we going with our own reshaping? How will we name and experience the living God in these days of techno-feudalism, with its fool's gold of resurgent patriarchy, white supremacy, and pelvic orthodoxy?

Transgender people of faith are only a small part of finding hope theologically, but a significant one. In 2009, in a book entitled *Trans/formations*, B. J. Hipsher put the invitation like this:

It is precisely because a transgender image of God is so unsettling to many people that we are compelled to argue for it.... To encapsulate God into any single gender identity or sexual expression limits the possibilities of God's manifestations in humanity... But is an image of a transgender God still too limiting, too small, to hold the God of the universe? The simple answer is yes. We need a *trans*-God all right...one that *transgresses* all our ideas about who and what God is and can be, one that *transports* us to new possibilities for how God can incarnate in the multiplicity of human embodiments, one that *transfigures* our mental images from limitations, one that *transforms* our ideas about our fellow humans and ourselves, one that *transcends* all we know and think about God and about humanity as the *imago Dei*."⁵

If a Future Church is to have value in fraught times, it has thus to move beyond many treasured preconceptions and embrace a trans-ing God. Now it is certainly true that the speed and range of today's great socio-cultural watershed is unprecedented. Churches can

⁴ Thomassen, Bjorn (2010), "Anthropology, multiple modernities and the axial age debate", *Anthropological Theory*, 10 (4): 333

⁵ B.J.Hipsher, 'God is a Many Gendered Thing: An Apophatic Journey to Pastoral Diversity', in Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Trans/Formations*, 2009, London, SCM, 99.

therefore be forgiven for some aspects in their struggles to respond, where they are responding. However, too often we have seen Churches freeze up or choose fundamentalist pathways. It is as if they have given up renewing the Faith as their forebears did for their own contexts. The practice of love then becomes propositional imprisonment. God him/her/them-self is frozen. Of course, we have seen some positive changes in some places. Nonetheless, it sometimes seems as if the best of mainstream traditions put their new wine into old wineskins and the best of newer Churches put old wine into new wineskins.

Joyful reception (beyond 'inclusion')

Back in 1986, Pope John Paul II said to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christians that:

You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.

Those words apply to all whose voices, bodies and cultures are subjugated. For a healthy Future Church needs everyone to have offered their contribution and requires that contribution to be *joyfully* received. In contrast, there have been two main recent trajectories of Christian responses to gender diverse people. The first is what has been called the Integrity framework, in which binary male-female bodily distinctions are regarded as sacred. The second is the Disability framework, in which gender dysphoria is regarded as an unfortunate burden or affliction deserving compassion. However, unless we fully embrace a Diversity framework, we not only deny the full image of God in gender diverse people, but also their/our contribution to the trans God we so badly need. This is way more than affirmation, and certainly 'inclusion'. It involves truly joyful reception and celebration of trans gifts as part of the renewal of the personal, social, and ecclesial body. For gender diversity is not a virus in the body of Christ or the body politic, but rather part of its vaccine.

3) what are trans gifts?

Let me briefly outline a few of the many gifts which gender diverse people offer to renew our Faith stories, symbols, and practices. For, like transgender surgery, we are not talking here of a wholly new body but about transfiguration of the body. As with other hitherto marginalised groups, this includes lighting up Scripture afresh. For example, one aspect is that the gender of Jesus the Christ is also then enriched. In a famous passage, in a letter affirming spiritual freedom against confining 'religious' law, you may recall that St Paul was explicit that this revelation of divine mystery was not specific to any human particularities. In Christ, he wrote, 'there is no longer Jew or Greek... slave or free... male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'⁶ In other words, all human binaries are transcended.

This was the Jesus I was attracted to as a child: a divinely human figure who transfigures human categories. For in my search for love and identity, Christ was, and remains, the ultimate 'ground of being' which cannot be pinned down. With other Christian feminists, I long ago learned to rejoice in how the Bible speaks of Jesus in many-gendered ways: for example, as a mother hen (Matthew 23.37), and as the divine feminine Wisdom who was with God in Creation. Transgender experience has helped me clothe this mystery with even greater love and depth. For fruitful spirituality is one which, far from solidifying binary divisions, seeks the 'beyond'. As mystics like Meister Eckhart and St Francis have taught, 'every creature is a word of God'.

The transgender 'word' is part of what Episcopalian priest Liz Edman calls the 'Queer Virtue' which sexually and gender diverse people offer to revitalising Christian faith.⁷ Justin Tanis, a leading transgender theologian, thus reflects on 'Gender as a calling,'⁸ as 'a way of being – a calling to awaken to, realize, and manifest who we are.'⁹ In this, four core aspects of Christian faith emerge from my own journey.

⁶ Galatians 3.28, NRSV.

⁷ Elizabeth M. Edman, *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity*, 2016, Beacon Press, Boston Mass.

⁸ Justin Tanis, *Trans-gender: Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith*, 2003, ch.7, 146-160.

⁹ Tanis 147.

i. love – beyond ‘the sin of self-sacrifice’

My journey has above all involved living into Jesus’ answer about the heart of faith:

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

It was only in coming out that I was finally fully able to love God with all that I am. Until then, despite my deep Christian commitment, I had held something back. Yet my gender identity is a creation of God, loved by God, and deserving of sharing with God. In loving God with *all* that I am, I am drawn closer and spiritually enriched.

The second part of Jesus’ teaching is just as vital. For, as others who have been marginalised have experienced, religious and secular authorities can inculcate false self-sacrifice. Of course, self-giving is essential to healthy and holy living. Yet it can be abused, if it is not balanced by love of the unique gift of the divinely created self created. True love of neighbour is impossible without this. Sin is not about particular acts but about whether we live in love: whether, to use sin’s biblical meaning, we are ‘missing the mark’ of the gift and potential of our lives. To fail to honour our authentic self is thus to commit what the early Christian feminist Emmeline Pethick Lawrence called ‘the sin of self-sacrifice’.¹⁰

As Jesus observed, faith is not falling into line with family, societal, religious, or other conventional demands. Clinging to misconceived ideas of order and ‘fall’ in creation, resistant religion insists on gender diverse people sacrificing their bodies and souls to placate a God of patriarchal power, binary division and cruel judgement. Transgender Christians instead affirm an ethic of flourishing and natality, in which sacrifice is part of giving birth, rather than a death centred problem about life.

¹⁰ E.Pethick-Lawrence, *The Sin of Self-Sacrifice*, WSPU, London, undated.

ii. healing with justice

Secondly, my journey affirms healing and grace as central to healthy spirituality. Now I was fortunate not to be raised in a religious culture obsessed with narrow ideas of sin, guilt and shame. My gentle liberal catholic Anglican upbringing recognised the reality of evil, but affirmed the greater power of love. It invited me into the beauty of holiness, an honest and open seeking after truth, and the mystery of being. Yet it too shared binary gender assumptions and failed to challenge society's transphobic bonds. It gave me vital space to imagine new horizons and honour difference, including part of the divine feminine, but no language to understand my gender identity or support my flourishing through it. Thankfully, times have changed.

In November 2000, as I read about the first transgender priest (Carol Stone) to come out in my native England,¹¹ a metaphorical bolt of lightning went through me. 'Can it really be true?', my heart almost exploded, 'and am I possible too?' Unfortunately, I was about to emigrate to Australia, seeking, successfully as it proved, health for family members. As part of my self-sacrifice (both good and bad), my own transition was consequently delayed. Yet the seeds of healing had been sown. For the mark of true spirituality is whether it leads to flourishing.

'by their fruits'

Remember how Jesus said that 'you will know them by their fruits' (Matthew 7.16). This is surely the ultimate test of any religious or political injunction: does it enable healing and justice? For transgender people, backed up by today's mountain of medical evidence and informed research, the fruits are obvious. They are evident in my inner peace. For years I thought that everyone struggled with their body as I did. Now I too am comfortable in my own skin. This has enabled me to be more loving towards others, as energy I used in fighting myself has been turned outward. My first questions to any supposedly religious

¹¹ See further https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/mbm4jp/carol-stone-first-transgender-priest

opponent are therefore 'why do you not want to share in God's gift of healing? Why deny the justice and mercy at the heart of Jesus?'

iii. true embodiment

Thirdly, my life witnesses to the deeper embodiment involved in transgender affirmation. Strangely, even some notable theologians have claimed that transgender people are victims of 'gnostic' thinking, affirming peculiar inner knowledge at the expense of the realities of the body and ordinary life. It is quite the reverse. It is typically not transgender people who despise the needs of the body and the world. It is conservative religious people who prefer to believe that holiness consists in affirming in a set of special 'saving truths' which are not open for scrutiny or debate. Instead, my experience of transitioning was one of 'incarnating': integrating my body with my mind and soul; becoming better related to all aspects of my life and world; and more aware of how power and privilege works in religious and political contexts.

beyond religious dysmorphia

For, tragically, some Christians distance themselves from, and even fear, the body. They officially proclaim a Faith which affirms the goodness of Creation, the incarnation of God in material form, and the resurrection of the body. Yet they are queasy, or worse, about the rich diversity of healthy sexuality and gender identity. Whilst proclaiming themselves to be part of the living Body of Christ, they also appear as dysmorphic, unable to relate properly to other members, despite St Paul's injunction (in 1 Corinthians 12) to honour all parts of the Body, particularly the weakest. Such people are hardly alone however in failing properly to treasure the gifts of the body, and our human and planetary interdependence. In contrast, transgender callings offer transformation of fractured understandings of love, of body and soul, whilst being particular incarnations of the embodiment of our sacred, but messy, bodies which cannot be simply be controlled. As

another English transgender priest Dr. Rachael Mann tells it in her fine autobiography, after her genital reconstruction surgery:

it enabled me to enjoy my body properly... I was a body and it was truly good...
God has no fear of bodies. This is the truth at the heart of the incarnated God.¹²

iv. relationship with a more mysterious God

Fourthly, and finally, my personal journey has led me to a richer understanding of God. For there are powerful common themes in gender affirmation as it affects relationship with God.¹³ These include honesty (with oneself, others, and crucially, God);¹⁴ and a new spaciousness and sense of peace.¹⁵ Significantly, and quite contrary to trans-ignorant theological allegations, it involves a deepening of personhood, embodiment and relationship.¹⁶ Transgender faith journeys thereby open up fresh spiritual pathways as well as renewing what is valuable in the old. One way I express this is, as I have said, to explore a *trans-ing* God. For it is often helpful to reflect on God as a verb rather than a noun, and as an artist rather than a source of will or power.

4) a trans faith 'word' from the USA

Let me conclude with one further example of those who are trans-ing God. There are increasingly, thank God, many more. Indeed, one reason I felt free to move back to Sydney was the emergence after me of two other trans priests in Australia, and a deacon too. Similarly, I rejoice that, over the last four years, I have seen the continuing emergence of lay, and soon to be ordained, gender diverse church leaders, in all kinds of spaces: not least extraordinarily gifted people like Steff Fenton, Gabi Cadenhead, Mikali Anagnostis, and Chalise van Wyngaard (part of whose wonderful creative work they will share later). Weary

¹² Rachael Mann op cit p.90 & 92, quoted in Alison Webster, *Found Out: Transgressive faith and sexuality*, 2017, London, Darton Longman & Todd, 99.

¹³ Ellen Clark-King, 'The Divine Call to Be Myself: Anglican Transgender Women and Prayer', in *Anglican Theological Review*, 98.2, 331-339.

¹⁴ Clark-King, 332.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Clark-King, 337.

as I am therefore with denominational inertia struggles, I am encouraged by those in whom the future is not only trans but beautifully so. My final example comes however from the USA where the trans struggle has taken a nasty turn.

This is the Revd Carla Robinson, an African-American Episcopalian trans priest who is right at the heart of current struggles in the USA. She speaks of bringing three gifts to the Church. The first, 'is the perspective of an outsider.' For transgender people can bring different perspectives and help others understand the Gospel from the viewpoint of those typically looking in from the outside. Indeed, in doing so, they can be tremendous people of reconciliation: not least, as they/we have spent so much time 'crossing over' and engaging in simultaneous translation of words and actions. The second thing is being 'the embodiment of death and resurrection.' As Carla expresses it: "as a transgender person I have literally passed from one life into another, and, as such, in a way I am an icon of resurrection – a different way of seeing what the resurrection looks like." Alternatively, this is to see transgender people as powerful symbols of being 'born again', or 'born anew', into new life.¹⁷ No wonder we are then seen by some as disturbing. Spiritually and ecclesiastically, as well as physically and politically, transformation is not an easy thing. Thirdly, and crucially for contemporary mission, transgender Christians can, as Carla puts it, offer "a road in, for those who would never think they could find a way in."¹⁸

Most of us will probably be aware of Bishop Mariann Budde's recent sermon challenging President Trump. Behind this is however are extraordinary trans and other activists like Carla, who offer us a powerful timely message. The Church, Carla says, must be a 'fighting church' when advocating for rights. The term may sound counterintuitive to Christ's message, she says, and I know she means nonviolent resistance, but, she says 'it takes me back to my spiritual roots in the Black church' in the 1960s and 1970s:

In those days it was not unusual for someone to ask you in church, 'How goes the struggle?' ... because the church was actively engaged in the fight for civil rights and justice. (For) We've been called to something much different than 'Nice.' (A fighting

¹⁷ cf. the Gospel of John chapter 3.

¹⁸ in *Voices of Witness: Out of the Box*, produced by Integrity USA, 2012, online at <http://www.integrityusa.org/ootb>

church – a Future Church?) acknowledges that there is a real struggle. ...It acknowledges the reality of who is being hurt – how they are being hurt – and it calls upon the church to not be shy about facing those realities... A fighting church [and, I 'd say, a trans-ing church] acts and speaks from its place as followers of Jesus.¹⁹

May it be so. Thank you for listening.

¹⁹ See further, and for Episcopalian trans resistance, <https://episcopalnewsservice.org/2025/01/14/400-episcopalians-join-church-webinar-to-learn-how-to-protect-transgender-nonbinary-people-in-uncertain-times>