

Pride Evensong 2017
St John's Cathedral, Brisbane
The Right Revd Jeremy Greaves
Bishop of the Northern Region, Anglican Church SQ

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes
I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is
I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey
she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to
Thanks God I said
And is it even okay if I don't paragraph
my letters
Sweetcakes God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is
Yes Yes Yes
(Kaylin Haught)

St Augustine says God's first gift to us is the glory of being able to say, "I am" ... and the twentieth century English writer and monk Harry Williams wrote, "I cannot truly say I believe unless it's another way of saying 'I am'"

And there's a wonderful story told by the Rabbis in the Jewish tradition of an old Rabbi who was dying...

On his death bed Rabbi Joshua was asked what he thought life beyond the grave might be like. The old man thought for a long time: then he replied, "I don't really know. But one thing I do know. When I get there I am not going to be asked, "Why weren't you Moses? Or "Why weren't you David?" I am going to be asked "Why weren't you Joshua?"

For 27 years, Brisbane's LGBTIQ community and their friends and allies have come together to celebrate diversity and to stand with Pride and say, "I am"

Through the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, through the fight for legal recognition of de facto relationships and the fight for the decriminalisation of homosexuality... and through the current fight for marriage equality, again and again, members of the LGBTIQ community have stood and declared "I am" ... this is who I am... and I claim my place in the world, I claim my place in the community... even I claim my place in the church...

Writing about her latest book, **THE SUMMER I WASN'T ME**, Jessica Verdi says the book is about seventeen-year-old Lexi—"she's known she is gay for a while, and, on the inside, has always felt content with it. It's the OTHER stuff, the outside stuff, that's hard. "The part I hated was the hiding," she says. "The pretending to be someone I wasn't; the steady, tormenting harassment that came in the form of Bible scripture and church sermons; the constant fear that if people found out, they would hate me, ridicule me, possibly even hurt me. *That* stuff sucked."

And when Lexi's mother, a woman trapped in a debilitating depression after the death of her husband, discovers Lexi's in love with a girl, she shuts Lexi out completely. Desperate to regain her mother's love and keep what's left of her family together, Lexi agrees to spend the summer at a camp that claims to turn gay people straight."

She finishes, "And let's be clear: Not only is it impossible to change someone's sexual orientation or gender self-identification, these programs are emotionally (and often physically and sexually) abusive.

But regardless of the moral wrongness and illegality of these places, they're a huge business. The desperation to "fix" gay people is rampant. And even many gay people (most often those who are devout in certain religions or those who have been threatened with disowning by their families) want to "fix" themselves."

It seems to me that the best way to fix ourselves is to know ourselves, to hear that insistent "Yes, yes, yes" from God in answer to our longing to know, "Is it really OK to be me? To say, 'I am'?"

"Sweetcakes, God says, what I'm telling you is Yes, Yes, Yes"

In his book, *Into the Woods: How Stories Work and Why we Tell them*, John Yorke writes, "Once upon a time 'God' was the story we told to make sense of our terror in the light of existence. Storytelling has that same fundamentally religious function – it fuses the disparate, gives us shape, and in doing so instills in us quiet. Storytelling, then, is born from our need to order everything outside ourselves. A story is like a magnet dragged through randomness, pulling the chaos of things into some kind of shape and – if we're lucky – some kind of sense."

Joseph Campbell once wrote, "If you want to change the world, change the metaphor."
Change the story!

And it seems to me that this is what the Pride movement has been doing for nearly 50 years, since Stonewall, telling a different story to the one we inherited from much of our faith

tradition, from many of our parents or grandparents or families... a different story to the one we hear and see in the media or still hear preached in so many churches. Pride has been about countering all those false voices that have marginalised and oppressed and vilified the GLBTIQ community for so long.

American writer, Kenny Pierce, tells the story of at last finding a Christian community where he might belong, and the essential work of “killing the false voices” and telling a new story.

“It took years to find my way to a banquet of Christian community again. Trust came slowly, largely at the behest of other Christians who had also been cast out of their communities. There was the woman, aching to be a pastor to her people, who was told that her gender made her unfit for the calling. There was the sexual abuse survivor who said that her short skirt brought on those “justifiable advances.” There was the man who was told that his beloved gay cousin, the one who had died by his own hand when his church and his family shut him out, was now burning in his rightful place in hell. There was the homeless man who was told that his sleeping that cold winter at the doors of the church was making the congregants uncomfortable and sullyng the sidewalk. In the end they nowhere to turn out in the wilderness but to one another.

We stumbled onto one another over time by happenstance or God’s hand. Over time we became slayers together, killers of the false voices within us that would have us believe the messages deeming us filthy and unworthy to sit at God’s holy table.

The essential work of killing those voices within has never been easy. In [finding a new story] I have learned what it really means... to be resurrected in community from the margins. Some three decades after I was first named unclean, the false voices are gone...”

If you want to change the world, change the story!

And perhaps, changing the story sometimes means reclaiming something that was always part of our story from the beginning. Because, it seems to me, in Jesus we see very clearly God’s “Yes, Yes, Yes”

And maybe we need to move beyond some of our carefully held notions about who Jesus is.

In the gospels we see Jesus giving his disciples some instructions about how they are to represent him. He doesn’t baptize them first. He doesn’t have them memorize a creed. He doesn’t give them an animal husbandry manual so they can identify sheep from goats. He certainly doesn’t ask them if they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. He doesn’t even give them the assurance of salvation. In fact he tells them it’s not about them at all. He

suggests they have to have a right attitude. He tells them their task is to represent him and in doing so they represent the ONE whom he represents.

I can hear the disciples saying, “What do you mean? How do we do that? Do we wear special clothes? Do we need a collar? Should we lug the Torah around and quote it chapter and verse?” I can see Jesus shaking his head with a bemused smile. “No, just welcome people into your lives. Welcome everyone, but especially welcome those no one else does. Don’t look so shocked. Even if all you do is give them a cup of water, you will find that most gratifying.”

“Is that all,” they ask.

“Yep. That’s it. Be hospitable and everything else will follow.”

Hospitality it turns out is the story at the heart of our faith that is our gift to the world and is the story we are called to tell in all of our lives. A Christian is simply someone who is hospitable.

Which sounds too easy until we think about what is required. It is easy to be hospitable to people we identify with, who strike us as interesting; who might be useful to know. It’s no problem to invite them to our homes for a few drinks and a meal. Those occasions are their own reward.

It is another story to invite those who are different: people of a different culture, gender-identity, class or race who can offer no obvious advantage to us. Being well-bred, we might invite them and make them feel at home, all the while wishing they would leave... but I don’t think that’s what Jesus had in mind. Why did Jesus make hospitality the basis for his ministry? Perhaps, because it is essential to building relationships. It is the first step to overcoming fear, finding understanding, and giving respect. Ultimately it is the foundation of a story in which there is room for all of us. (*adapted from Clay Nelson*)

And so as we celebrate Pride in this place, we remember this call to hospitality.

As we celebrate Pride we remember those for whom the only story they have been told is one in which they hear that who they are and who they love is sinful and sick, we remember those who have been told that being proud is a sin. We remember those who are terrified to speak their truth; who keep their identities hidden away as a matter of survival – who can’t or won’t say “I am”.

And we celebrate those who are telling a new story even in the face of hatred and violence. We celebrate those who put it all on the line, who refuse to be afraid. We hold up those who

live in places where their love isn't recognized, those who live in places where they are afraid they might lose their children, or their jobs, or their lives.

We celebrate those who have faced down violence, disapproval, and hatred to tell this different story with courage.

And we remember that there is so much work still to do; that in so many ways the struggle is just getting started.

So, together, let us tell this story, a story of hospitality to all, a story that enables all of us to stand with Pride and say, "I am" confident in the love of God who hears us and says, "what I'm telling you is Yes, Yes, Yes."