Through the season of Lent this year, we are drawing together our liturgies and reflections under the theme Being...Together. The very essence of our very Being is in relation. And we understand God to be the Ground of our Being. As human beings, we become who we are in relation... from the time we are conceived in our mother's wombs to the time of our death when we return to the earth.

Lent also provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the ways and the times when rather than being true to this understanding of what it is to be human as connectedness, we acknowledge distance: the state of being in which we are distanced from the Creator, from each other and from the earth -and long for reconnection.

In Lent we pay attention for our longing for Being...Together.

In Lent we pay attention to people who are excluded from full community and thus full humanity by the structures and practices of dominating power.

The greatest threat to humanity is not violence, hate, or terror. The greatest threat to humanity is apathy, complacency, and silence. When we witness such terror and refuse to do anything about it, refuse to say anything about it, refuse to take a stand, then we let hate win.

The story of Jesus’ cleansing of the temple reminds us that living in connection and relation is not an easy or cheap journey. It's not a sentimental journey. It asks us to move out of our places of comfort and to disrupt the institutions that diminish some people, that render their humanity invisible.

Reflecting on this, my mind turns - over and over again - to asylum seekers who are banished from our sight and from the hearts of many Australians by their detention in Australia, in Nauru and PNG.

Yesterday, Clare and I, joined with 70 other Uniting Church people on the Mardi Gras parade. This is the second time we've been in the parade. This year the theme of the parade was Passion. Most of the parade is exuberant and fun. The colours of the rainbow and glitter and body paint abound. Some floats have pounding, pumping music. There is a sense of joy and celebration. There are sports groups, and professional groups, and businesses like Google and ANZ. Some of the floats are incredibly elaborate and clever. Some are risqué and some are very every-day.
We were part of the Uniting Network contingent. Uniting Network is the support and advocacy group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in the Uniting Church and also for straight supporters and friends. Pitt Street people have been involved in Uniting Network from its inception.

At the Mardi Gras parade, we were very intentionally a contrast to the glam and glitter. We wore black tee shirts with the words “Our Passion for Justice.” And our float and banners announced that we stood with LGBTIQ refugees. Clare and I, along with Ben Gilmour the minister from Paddington Uniting and his partner, and Nicole Fleming, the minister from Balmain Uniting, and her partner, led our group carrying a Uniting Church banner that said “Refugees are Welcome Here” and a Uniting Network banner that said “LGBTIQ Refugees Are Welcome Here”. The Q stands for Queer. You might think that the list of letters is getting a bit long. But in New Zealand we also add TF for takatapui and fafafine to include Maori and Pacific diverse sexualities.

Uniting Network had a rainbow coloured bus that was draped in black banners with the passion for justice and LGBTIQ refugees are welcome here messages. A brilliant team of a dozen drummers followed them, along with people on foot. On the roof of the bus, some of our group held lanterns aloft, symbolising the light of hope.

In a small but significant way, we disrupted the parade, a minor mirroring of Jesus disrupting the money changers in the temple. We disrupted the commercialisation and the loss of political focus that has become part of the reality of the parade in recent years. We were the only group that had a message about refugees and asylum seekers.

There is much to celebrate for the queer community in Australia and we were happy to be part of that too. Huge progress has been made since the first Sydney parade in 1978. That parade was a real protest against unjust and exclusive laws and police harassment. The marchers were cut off by police and some were beaten. Now those original marchers, the 78s lead the parade, following the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group.

But there is still much to do. Marriage equality was a theme for several floats. And others expressed concern for the mental health impacts of ongoing discrimination.

LGBTI people are among the asylum seekers who reach Australia’s shores because they have a well-founded fear of persecution in their home country. Asylum seekers who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, or Intersex face a particularly difficult situation. Firstly they fear, and have very often experienced persecution and trauma in their home country because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Secondly, the detention environment can be very hostile towards them, particularly in PNG, where homosexuality is criminalised. People are often forced to keep their sexuality hidden, even after having arrived on Australian soil.

During the assessment process, LGBTQI asylum seekers face a gruelling process. Under Australian law, they must reveal their LGBTQI status almost immediately upon arrival, and further down the track can be asked to produce incredibly private documentation and photographs as evidence of their claim. For those who will be resettled offshore, there is ongoing concern for their safety in countries that do not have adequate protections in place for LGBTQI residents. For those in Australia, there can be significant fear of ostracism and physical abuse from members of their home country community.
Along the Parade route, it was interesting to watch the crowd’s reaction to the Uniting Network. In front of us the Metropolitan Community Church members were following a big glowing cross and dancing to “We are family”. You could see people trying to work out what our more sombre message was. There were some blank looks but there were also responses of appreciation and recognition. You could see people remembering that the parade is not just about fun but also about politics and protest. We were making a statement about those who were not present in the Parade because they are held in detention or living in fear in countries where they are face oppression, violence and murder.

I was proud to be part of this protest. I was proud of the Uniting Network and the Uniting Church. Uniting Care also marched in the parade, celebrating the inclusion and welcome of LGBTI people in its aged care programmes and institutions.

I was also proud to be there as the minister in placement in this congregation. Under my “passion for justice” I wore my clerical collar. Protests and political events are generally the only times I feel comfortable wearing it.

This week the Happy Mardi Gras sign outside our church attracted some negative attention. On Wednesday night I discovered two hand written posters had been attached underneath it. Signs written by some anonymous person who had come under the cover of darkness to warn us that while God loves homosexuals, God hates homosexuality.

Those signs reminded me that it is important that we are visibly in solidarity with LGBTIQ people and that the work of progressive understandings of diverse sexualities is still a matter of life and death.

So what does this all have to do with Jesus and the temple? With Jesus anger and with his violence toward the property of the money-changers and sellers of animals for sacrifice.

Jesus was angry about the perversion of religion. A faith that had at its heart a covenant between God and the people, based on mutual respect and responsibility within relationships had been distorted. A community whose common life was grounded in a story of liberation had become practitioners of exploitation and oppression of the poor.

Anger raises discomfort for many people. It is worth remembering that the word comes from a Norse word that also gives us the word angst. In anger there is a sense of grieving. It seems to me that Jesus was grieving at what his faith had become.

The background for the story is what happened to God’s law when it was reduced to rules and regulations instead of being embraced as a liberating way of life.

The law had been intended to keep people in right relationship with God and with one another, but in this context it had become a means of exploitation. Jewish law required certain sacrifices which had to be paid for in temple currency, not the common Roman coins that people used day to day. The need to buy shekels allowed the temple pilgrims to be ripped off. Buying this currency could often cost a pilgrim two days wages. The poor who bought doves, the cheapest sacrifice were particularly disadvantaged and in many cases the law excluded them from the faith community.
Jesus’ response to the situation was passionate. His passion was for justice. How could the worship of God be made into such a travesty? In his eyes the law, which was meant to keep people in a close covenant relationship with God, had become a barrier to that relationship. Jesus protested in a way which makes us uncomfortable. He overturned the tables of the money-changers, released the sacrificial animals, and drove them all from the temple. It was a powerful, prophetic act that challenged the very authority of the temple and its control over people's worship of God.

In engaging in this act, Jesus places himself in direct danger. It is an act that makes him a marked man.

To follow him means to refuse to be a bystander in the face of injustice. It means to join the parade that disrupts the violation of being, of relationship.

In Lent, may we be empowered by the passion that Jesus had for his religion to transform our religion and our society.

Through Lent may we attend to the call to join the deep, disruptive compassion and justice of God so that we have the courage to refuse to be bystanders.