



11 April 2021  
The Second Sunday of Easter  
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly  
The Revd Dr John Russell

*May I speak in the name of God –  
Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.*

Now let's start by talking about Lil Nas X. And just in case you're not familiar with the work of this young American rapper, singer, songwriter, and internet personality, let me bring you up to speed... Lil Nas X is the stage-name of Montero Lamar Hill, 22 years old as of last Friday. A couple of years ago he released a single called *Old Town Road*, which became a popular mainstream breakthrough for the emergent genre of 'country rap', which is a blending of the musical styles of hip hop and country. The existence of this genre was in itself a contested topic, and given that hip hop was primarily identified as black music, and country as white music, it became a racially-heated debate. When the US Billboard chart removed *Old Town Road* from their Country music listings saying that it didn't properly fall within the country genre, it led to accusations of racism in country music culture. And when legendary country music star Billy Ray Cyrus gave his support to Lil Nas and did guest vocals on a remix, there was a phenomenal surge in popularity, and *Old Town Road* spent 19 weeks at number one of the US billboard chart, which is the

longest-running number-one song since that chart began in 1958.

And then while he was number one, Lil Nas came out publicly as a gay man. The first artist to do so while having a number-one record. His coming out triggered a homophobic backlash from amongst some people in both the hip hop and country music communities, which only further increased his cultural prominence. In 2019, Lil Nas began scooping up awards and achievements right, left and centre and, by the end of that year, Time magazine had named him one of the 25 most influential people on the Internet for his "global impact on social media", and "overall ability to drive news"

So then Lil Nas set off to work on his debut album, released a couple more singles in 2020. Nothing especially remarkable, until the 26th March this year, on the very cusp of Holy Week, he released his new single entitled *Call Me By Your Name*. It's a catchy little song about an ambivalent desire for fame, wealth, foreign travel and having exciting sex on aeroplanes – but it's the accompanying music video which has had a truly astonishing impact.

The 3-minute video moves through a triptych of short scenes. We begin in the Garden of Eden, where Lil Nas sits at the foot of the Tree of Knowledge strumming his guitar, wearing a sort of bejewelled body suit. And down around the trunk of the Tree of Knowledge slithers a half-human half-snake creature, which seeks to seduce him. Lil Nas runs away through the garden but the lascivious snake-demon quickly transfixes him, and pushes him down onto the ground and they embrace and kiss.

Cut to the second scene. Lil Nas has now been captured by pompadoured guards who lead him in chains into a coliseum of judgment, with a disapproving crowd thronged on balconies around him, booing and throwing metal butt-plugs at him. He sings a defiant protest until a missile hits him in the head and he's stunned into unconsciousness.

Cut to the third scene. Lil Nas is now floating up to heaven, his body shimmering silver, a winged angel hovering in the clouds ahead of him. But then a pole shoots up past him and his hand grasps it. And instead of continuing heavenwards, he now launches himself downwards. He's suddenly naked apart from a tight pair of Dolce and Gabbana monogrammed boxer shorts, and thigh-high boots. He has long red braids that his

whips around as he pole-dances down into the fiery depths of the earth. He swaggers confidently through fire and brimstone into the Great Hall of Hell where a horned Satan – dressed in bondage gear and body piercings - sits upon his throne. And in his boxer shorts and kinky boots, Lil Nas proceeds to give the Lord of Hell a vigorously sexual lap dance with much lusty groin-thrusting and buttock-grinding. And then he stands behind Satan seated on his throne, and sensually caresses the devil's red chest, but then suddenly Lil Nas takes hold of Satan's head, breaks his neck in one swift movement, and then lifts off Satan's horns, places them on his own head, at which point Lil Nas's eyes become aflame with power and he opens wide an impressive pair of black feathery wings. And there the video ends.

Now I understand that not all of you will have all seen this video yet because I know lots of you are too busy watching The Repair Shop on BBC 1, but it's had the most phenomenal impact across popular culture. Released barely two weeks ago, the video has already had over 100 million views on YouTube, and the song is now number 1 in the UK and the US pop charts, as well as 17 other countries around the world.

Unsurprisingly it's been condemned by conservative Christians who have spewed

tirades of abuse that Lil Nas is 'sick and depraved and attempting to destroy our society', a good portion of which he has responded to on social media – mostly seeming wryly amused by it all, relishing the controversy, openly laughing all the way to the bank, often quoting lyrics of his song back at his critics as if they were bible verses. Now it's certainly not the first time that conservative Christians have been outraged by pop culture's appropriation of religious imagery. It's now over 30 years ago since Madonna was condemned as blasphemous by the Catholic Church for chastely kissed a Black Jesus in her *Like A Prayer* video, but I'm not sure that we've ever seen something so fiercely and passionately queer gaining such mainstream prominence.

Because – while Lil Nas clearly understands the PR value of being embroiled in a controversy - this isn't just indiscriminate shock tactics. It's a very specific and intentional performance that defiantly embraces the prospect of being condemned to hell for being gay and turns that into a source of queer power. Over the past couple of weeks, Lil Nas has talked on social media about his miserable experience of being a church-going teenager coming to an awareness of his gay sexuality and praying, praying, praying that it would change.

"i spent my entire teenage years hating myself because of the shit y'all preached would happen to me because i was gay"  
Lil Nas tweeted on 28th March in response to homophobic attacks from Christians "so i hope u are mad, stay mad, feel the same anger you teach us to have towards ourselves."

The song, the video and his explanation for it has garnered a huge amount of popular support. Lil Nas has 7.2 million followers on Instagram who are posting their fan-videos in which they share the non-traditional sexual and gender identities and practices for which they believe they would be rejected at the heavenly gates. This week, the gay newspaper *Pink News* predicted that thanks to Lil Nas, 'Satanic fashion' will be the top summer trend and included a shopping list of devil-themed clothing and jewellery that LGBTQ+ people may wish to wear to annoy conservative Christians.

I don't think it's ever been demonstrated on such a vast and visible scale the extent to which so many young people appear to view the Christian church as primarily a vehicle of sexual judgement and repression, and thus the challenge that faces the LGBTQ+ affirming churches of the world in seeking to change that perception.

By a fabulous divine coincidence, we land today on one of the queerest passages in the New Testament. We're in the Gospel of John, the most artfully constructed of the Gospels, written about 100 years after the events it describes. There are 3 resurrection stories in John: Mary at the tomb, Thomas in the Upper Room, and Peter at the Sea of Galilee. Each one presents us with a disciple of Jesus in an emotionally-heightened state of longing: Mary is grief-stricken, Peter is guilt-ridden, and Thomas – well Thomas expresses his longing as a desire to touch our Risen Lord. And over the past 2,000 years, Thomas's desire for same-sex touching has both fascinated and troubled the Church.

In his new book, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender and Race in the Middle Ages* (2020), Roland Betancourt devotes a whole chapter to unpacking the multiple layers of queerness in the Thomas story. He presents a wealth of homilies and icons from the Early and Medieval Church that saw something disruptively erotic in the scene of Thomas touching Christ. It was interpreted as a climatic mirroring of the Annunciation: in the way that Mary consented to the incarnation of Christ in her closed womb at the beginning of the gospel, at the very end of the gospel within the closed doors of the Upper Room Jesus consents to open his body to

Thomas. There was an intense forensic focus on the moment of Thomas's fingers penetrating Christ's wound as an unprecedented occasion when a human being physically puts their hand into the divine fire of God's body, and much speculation as to what manner of ecstasy Thomas experienced in this union. But after the Reformation, lots of Protestant theologians began to argue that Thomas was so ashamed by Christ's invitation to touch that he came to resurrection faith without actually touching our Lord at all.

Our holy gospel doesn't say precisely what Thomas did. All three of John's resurrection stories include an intentional lacuna – there is a deliberate puzzling gap in the narrative which you can only solve by praying yourself into the story, taking on the yearning feelings of the disciples for their beloved friend and Lord, and having your own intimate personal encounter with Christ.

In both the stories of Mary and Thomas, there is a desire to physically touch our Lord. And it's striking how a sense of shame has crept into our interpretation of these stories, because it is not present in our scripture. Most artistic representations of Mary and Jesus at the tomb will depict Jesus as physically distant from Mary, spurning her advances as he says 'Do not cling to me!' But Sara Maitland once told

me a story about going to a cinema to see *Four Weddings and a Funeral* with a friend who was a nun. And there's a scene towards the end of that film when Scarlett (played by the late Charlotte Coleman) spots her Texan lover approaching after a long separation, and she squeals 'Oh my God!' and runs towards him and leaps into his arms and wraps her arms and legs around him in a great full-body hug. And at this point, Sara's religious companion jumped in her seat. And afterwards, when they were discussing the film, Sara asked what that reaction was about. And the nun said, 'Oh, well I've always imagined that's what Mary Magdalene did at the resurrection!'

We know very little about the sexual orientation of anyone in the New Testament and it's unlikely they would have even conceived of sexual orientation in the ways that we understand it today but our holy scripture has a rich, subtle multi-faceted approach to the many languages of love. It's a terrible indictment of the modern church that young people who want to manifest a sexuality other than heterosexual monogamy feel so alienated and persecuted by the Church that it now feels most appropriate for them to articulate that through demonic imagery.

How on God's earth have reached this point, and what – as an LGBTQ+ affirming

church - are we called to do about it? It would seem to me at the very least that if the Church wants to stop Lil Nas and his fans from lap-dancing Satan, the first thing it should do is to announce loudly and clearly that lesbian, gay, trans and queer people are the blessed children of God and queer sexuality is not condemned to hell.

*Amen*