

SEEKING PEACE

Pilgrimage through God's word
in God's world with God's people

RENÉ AUGUST



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Pilgrimage through God's word
in God's world with God's people

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THANK YOU

I am so grateful to all the people who made it possible to produce this resource. Thank you to Veena O'Sullivan, Mariam Tadros, Hannah Swithinbank, Natalia Lester-Bush and the rest of the Tearfund team. Thank you to Liesl Stewart, friend and listener to my ramblings. Thank you to The Warehouse team, without whom I would not have been able to do this. I am deeply grateful for the many ways I get to express my faith and live out my vocation.

WELCOME LETTER

Thank you for your interest in this resource. I am delighted to find ways to journey with you into the stories of God at work in our world. My name is René August and I live in Cape Town, South Africa. Born in 1971 during Apartheid into a black, Christian family meant that handling paradox, ambiguity and careful listening were some of the things I had to learn quickly. It gave me many opportunities to ask questions about the Bible, how it is read and how we can make sense of a world of oppression and resistance, and still be faithful disciples of Jesus. As such, I can draw strong parallels between the world of Jesus and the world I grew up in.

When I finished high school I studied theology and then pursued ordination. Ordination for me became an issue of timing, so it was only much later in 2011 that I completed the discernment process and training, and was ordained as an Anglican priest.

I think that reading the Bible is not our only work. Who we read the Bible with, where we read the Bible, why we read the Bible, and how we read the Bible, will influence the conclusions that we come to and what we believe the Bible is saying. Therefore, it is important that we read the Bible with people who do not look like us, who do not think like us, and who come from contexts that are different from ours.

In 1st century Palestine, the Roman Empire was the known oppressor and the Jewish people lived in a land of foreign occupation where people were classified and given certain privileges according to their race. The privileged groups were Roman citizens and the underprivileged were Jewish and other non-Romans. In South Africa, the privileged groups were defined, not by nationality, but skin colour: the whiter your skin, the more privileged you were. As such, my chocolate-coloured skin dictated where I lived, where I went to school, and where I was allowed to walk in the city, on the beach or in the neighbourhood.

I grew up with the words of many modern-day South African prophets who reminded us that Jesus was just like us. Jesus was part of a despised race, and like us, he was poor. This context has shaped the lenses through which I read scripture today. Over the past ten years, I have been trying to find ways to read scripture more intentionally, to allow for better theological reflection on the issues we still face 28 years after the release of Nelson Mandela. I do this in my work on reconciliation and decolonising the gospel with The Warehouse (www.warehouse.org.za), a worshipping community organisation in Cape Town that works alongside churches responding to issues of poverty, injustice and division in a city that struggles with some of the worst inequality in the world.

In many ways, the issues in the world of Jesus and in South Africa today have changed in how they present themselves, but not much has changed in their content. There are 'goodies' and 'baddies' but mostly, there are people like us who live in a world where the lines between good and evil are not so clear. Moreover, life demands that we have to choose between good and best, and better and quicker.

This resource aims to help us read the Bible in the context of our countries, communities, and daily lives. The lenses through which we read scripture pre-determine the conclusions we come to in making sense of God's word in God's world.

Together with Tearfund, UK and The Warehouse, Cape Town, I'd like to invite you on a journey of exploring the story of God within the contexts that we find ourselves. We will seek to listen to the stories of others – from history, from our world today, and from scripture – to create spaces where we can share stories of current concerns and develop tools for re-reading our stories in the bigger story of God at work.

Most of the examples in this resource are from a South African context and the discussions are for said context. In order to make this a useful resource, it is important – in fact, *essential* – that you not only read this, but find examples from *your own* **historical** and **contemporary contexts**, and apply them to the topics and themes that are being explored.

This resource is not comprehensive, but rather a starting place for some work that, I believe, we all must do.

I pray that as you explore this work and take these pilgrimages, you will be led and guided by the Holy Spirit. I pray that God will deepen your faith and enlarge hope in you. I pray that you will fall more in love with Jesus and that the word of God will draw you deeper into the stories of God at work in your community; that you will have your eyes opened to find friends and siblings on the way, as we walk together while following Jesus.

Blessings,

René

AN INTRODUCTION FROM TEARFUND

The vision for this resource was born out of an Integral Mission gathering on Robben Island, South Africa, in January 2017. There, René August led us in this process of reading Scripture through a method of pilgrimage and context. As we walked around the island, reading the gospels at the sites of injustice, encounter and key events, they came alive in a way that gave the current situation a new lens.

Tearfund has a commitment to contextual theological reflection in the course of all of its work so that it is theologically shaped in ways that are contextually generated, articulated and applied. This enables our corporate theology to reflect our global identity. As Tearfund has developed and outworked its peacebuilding strategy since August 2016, one of the key threads of our work has been developing our theological framework and understanding of scripture through the lens of peace. This has led us to look deeper at concepts such as Moral Imagination, Hospitality and Embrace and how these ideas interact with being a peacebuilder and doing peacebuilding. We also recognise that each of the places of conflict in which we work has its own history which tells the story of its people, its land and its places, and that scripture can speak through these and allow people to understand and seek God within their spaces.

This guide is a direct result of that journey and our hope is that it will provide a resource-bank of bible studies and methodologies to help you read scripture in your places of history and conflict.

We are immensely grateful to René for sharing her gift, her vision and her time to bringing this resource to life and offering us a fresh way to seek peace through scripture.

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¹ http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/Ujamaa_CBS_Manual_part_1_3.sflb.ashx

² <http://www.christenacleveland.com/blog/2016/12/new-series-how-to-be-last-a-practical-theology-for-privileged-people>

FOREWORD

What does the Bible say about Apartheid? In South Africa, when we asked this question, we found that the Bible was used in turn to ignore, defend and oppose Apartheid. When we asked what the Bible had to say about human enslavement, the Bible was used to both support and oppose slavery. When we asked what the Bible says about women leadership in the church, the Bible was used to both support and oppose women in leadership.

To simply ask the questions, 'Is it biblical?' or 'What does the Bible say about...?' does not help us live in faithful obedience. We need to develop other tools and ask different questions of scripture in order to deepen our understanding of who God is, drawing us into lives of obedience.

Throughout the history of the church, context has played an important role in determining the conclusions we have come to when we answer the question, 'What does the Bible say about...?' For theologians answering this question, their time in history, nationality, socio-economic and political contexts significantly influenced the conclusions they reached. It is critical for every generation and every community to do their own readings and studies of God's word together. Each must ask the question afresh, 'What does the Bible say about ...?' so that we can join in the work that God is doing now in our neighbourhood.

To this end, we want to reflect on how, where and why God worked in *scripture*; how, where and why God worked in history; and so better expose to us, how, where and why we can collaborate with God in our world, making the story of God bigger, more visible to us, bearing prophetic witness to those around us.

Through this resource, we are promoting a three-fold interconnected pilgrimage. This approach can be used in any order, to connect the following three 'texts':

- the **historical context**
- the **contemporary context**
- the **sacred text**

But, why the use of the term **sacred text** and not the Bible? Throughout this resource we will be referring interchangeably to the **sacred text** or Sacred Story rather than the Bible. The reason is because the Bible first existed as a collection of stories, part of an oral tradition. Each story is connected in some way to the BIG story of God. The story is about God at work in the world. It is not an ordinary story, but it is a story of ordinary people. These stories had no chapters and verses; they were whole stories.

Eugene Peterson, in his book *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, explains that as the stories of God were told, shared and later read, it was made possible for people to see themselves as actors or characters in the story of God. This same God is at work in the books from Genesis to Amos, from Acts to Revelation, but it does not end there. **The story of God at work in the world continues today.**

God, the author of this work, makes these stories sacred. We become participants in this Sacred Story when we join God in what we see God already doing in our community and church.

I have found that using these three terms instead of the Bible invites the participants of the pilgrimage into a wider picture of the biblical narrative and opens the possibility of using other **sacred texts**, such as church liturgies, vision statements, hymns and songs, inspiring books or other formative texts that are meaningful in a person's tradition or community.

I hope to guide you through learning this methodology by the use of questions. These will vary depending on what you already have or know. You may be a leader of a community, a church, a small group, or someone who would like to work with other people to read scripture together. You will be approaching this resource with your own questions, needs and desires to see growth in yourself and your community.

If you choose to use a single pilgrimage as a standalone, please read carefully through the methodology. All have **historical** and **contemporary contexts** that are uniquely South African: do note that these are only examples. Remember, to make full use of this resource, you will need to apply the methodology to your own context, and do your own research to find examples for the group you're working with.

Below are some suggested ways you can use this resource and methodology:

Scenario 1

You may have a group that has a keen interest in your **historical context**. In this case, they may be asking how they can link their faith to their **historical context** in order to better understand how to faithfully live in the present.

A particular commemoration day or national holiday³ that seeks to remind your community of a person or an event or an issue from long ago creates a great opportunity to engage with these questions. This could be, for example, 1 May, Workers' Day; 19 November, World Toilet Day; 4 July, Independence Day; 4 February, World Cancer Day; 8 March, International Women's Day; 3 May, World Press Freedom Day; 20 June, World Refugee Day; etc. Similarly, a national monument, statue or museum, etc, that honours an historical occasion can provide a valuable site for such a pilgrimage, as you will see in the examples later on in this resource.

In this scenario, we begin to explore the connections between the **historical context**, the contemporary parallels, and the **sacred text**. How can we understand God's work in history? What could this issue look like today? And consequently, what is God saying and doing today?

- What are the contemporary parallels of this event?
- What does this issue look like today?
- What does our Sacred Story teach us about this issue?
- How can we understand it more biblically?

Scenario 2

You may be a leader of a community or church group who has a concern for issues and challenges within your neighbourhood or **contemporary context**. These issues may include, for example, unemployment, poverty, food security, education, climate change or civil war, etc. Bear in mind that these issues might have commemoration days that help link them to an historical event or person, or may have active expressions of where these issues are being addressed in life-giving ways, for example, a local food garden at a historical place of conflict. Feel free to also use examples from outside your own faith.

³ For other examples of international days, visit www.unaa.org.au/un-observance-days.

This pilgrimage will explore the historical parallels of the issue, looking at how God responded to this issue in history and how God responded to this issue in our Sacred Story.

In this scenario, the **contemporary context** is known and we aim to identify the **historical context** of the issue. We also want to see how God has responded to this issue in the past and in our **sacred text**.

- What are the historical parallels?
- What did this issue look like 20, 50, 100 years ago?
- What does our **sacred text** teach us about this issue?
- How can we understand it within our **sacred text**?

Scenario 3

You may be a leader in a Bible study group that has a particular interest in understanding what our **sacred text** has to say to the social, political or economic issues and challenges that we face today. These could include, for example, unemployment, poverty, food security, education, climate change, civil war, etc.

This pilgrimage aims to explore what the issue looks like in modern day history compared to the span of biblical history in our **sacred text**.

- What are the historical parallels for this issue?
- What did this issue look like 20, 50 or 100 years ago?
- How can we understand God's response to this issue in history?
- And consequently, how God worked and spoke in the past?
- What are the contemporary parallels?
- What does this issue look like today?
- How can we hear and see what God is doing today?
- How can we live more faithfully in the Sacred Story that God is telling about ourselves and our neighbours?

The greatest assets in this entire resource are you and the people you will be journeying with. Your lives and the issues that concern you are the most ideal starting point. Who you are right now is the best person to do this work. You can only be where you are, so start there. You already have all you need.

**WHO YOU ARE RIGHT NOW IS THE
BEST PERSON TO DO THIS WORK.
YOU CAN ONLY BE WHERE YOU ARE,
SO START THERE. YOU ALREADY HAVE
ALL YOU NEED.**



Section 1

A GUIDE TO DESIGNING A BIBLE PILGRIMAGE THROUGH SACRED TEXT AND TIME

SECTION 1: A GUIDE TO DESIGNING A BIBLE PILGRIMAGE THROUGH SACRED TEXT AND TIME

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

There's a Celtic term called 'thin places'. They are said to be those places where it seems that the distance between heaven and earth is so thin that they begin to mingle and provide us with an opportunity to stop, reflect, listen, draw back the curtain and, at last, see a bigger picture of 'the story that we find ourselves in' – to borrow a phrase from pastor and author, Brian McLaren.

TO TAKE A BIBLE PILGRIMAGE
REQUIRES US TO TAKE
A JOURNEY

To take a Bible pilgrimage requires us to take a journey. We connect our feet to the geography, history and land of a particular place. We allow that context to connect us with the stories of that place, space and time. Using that as a lens, we explore the current challenges of our context, and hopefully find connections with our sacred stories and **sacred texts**. This journey gives us new invitations to live more faithfully in the story of God in the world.

There are many ways to read the texts of scripture within the context of our world. It is my hope that this tool is an alternative response to the question: 'What does the Bible say about...?'

The key concept is to find ways to weave together and make connections between the three aforementioned primary 'texts': **historical context**, **contemporary context**, and **sacred text**. As these texts are considered, we will be able to read and understand scripture better. As we do this in community, the hope is that, together, we will find a more comprehensive perspective of scripture and appreciate the endless value of God's words for us, the people of God.

Inviting participants

Participants of a Bible pilgrimage must be people who are interested in finding ways to read the text in context. This is not an apologetic reading. It is for people who desire new lenses for reading the text, and for exploring and interrogating meaning that we have ascribed to the text. This kind of reading will interrogate and critically evaluate assumptions of scripture, the role scripture plays in our lives, how we extract meaning from it, and for what reasons.

Whenever we read scripture, the people we read it with become part of the lens through which we read the text. Reading scripture with a diverse group of people and listening to more than one voice about the text, exposes the biases that determine the conclusions we come to. The participants together form a community, and that community becomes the lens through which a text is interpreted. It is important to think about those you invite into the space. The greater the diversity of the group, the richer the experience will be.

THE GREATER THE DIVERSITY
OF THE GROUP, THE RICHER
THE EXPERIENCE WILL BE

Methodology: preparation framework

Where is the best place to start? **Historical context**, **contemporary context** or **sacred text**? This methodology does not have a particular order. You can begin anywhere. Why not begin with a question? It could be a question about a Bible passage, a current concern, a recent issue in the news, or the result of visiting a storyteller in your community.

I hope to guide you through learning this methodology by the use of questions. These will vary depending on what you already have or know. You may be a leader of a community, a church, a small group, or someone who would like to work with other people to read scripture together. And, no doubt, you will be approaching this resource with your own questions, needs and desires to see growth in yourself and your community.

FRAMING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

What it is

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines context as 'the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs: an environment or setting'. Historical events take place within particular contexts. The **historical context** refers to the narratives, systems, moods, attitudes and conditions that existed during that time period. When referring to the **historical context** of a certain event or period, we are referring to the elements, conditions and characteristics, and their relationships to the historical event. We also interrogate the impact that these factors had on the specific event being considered.

The **historical context** also helps us critically evaluate how this history is remembered, and/or recorded, and/or memorialised. These help to point to what systems were operating and how they impact how we remember this event. For example, what were the economic systems? Health systems? Education systems? Political systems? Social systems? Did the event disrupt or challenge any of these systems, assumptions or narratives? Knowing the **historical context** helps us to better understand the event's importance, its shape, or even the timing – the history of the event itself. Knowing the **historical context** allows us to better understand our past, which in turn allows us to understand our present. This can provide us with insights with which we might be less familiar, thereby increasing our awareness and understanding.

When to use it

Historical events have relevance for our lives today. In this methodology, we pay attention to history because it helps us to make connections between our **contemporary context** (and its challenges) and our **sacred text**. When we ask the question, 'What is God doing here at this moment in time?', history helps us explore how God has been at work among us in our past, echoing how God has been at work among us through scripture.

How to set it up

Do some research and interview a few elders and local people in your community. Talk to them about your neighbourhood or city; ask them what historical events, dates and people have shaped your area. If possible, visit places of historical significance together. Go to the local information centre and, as you walk around the area, notice any events that are commemorated. Learn about the anniversaries and people who are celebrated. Spend some time with your local storytellers and listen to them.

As you listen to the stories of others, try to ask questions and identify the history of an event:

- What issues am I able to identify when I listen to these stories?
- Are there any recurring themes?
- Is there anything unique about this place/geography?
- Are there any significant actions?
- Is it a place of gathering, lament, celebration, protest or witness?
- How do the actions above help in the telling of the story of this place?
- What systems or narratives or unquestioned assumptions are still part of this story?

How to facilitate it

There's no set idea about how this should happen. You may be fortunate to have some kind of memorial in your city or neighbourhood marking a specific event. You could take participants to the site to learn more about the **historical context**. If there is not a specific site, put together as much information as required around the history and context of the specific event. You may need to find the people in your area who can recall their significant events and are willing to share about them. Be sure to include elders and storytellers in your process. They will help root your study of the **sacred text** in a real context that will help you with 'meaning-making' in your reflections. As you learn about the history and context, give the participants time to process what they are hearing.

How to bring closure

Allow the participants time to share their thoughts, feelings and responses to what they've heard. If it is a large group, break the participants up into smaller groups. The small groups should best represent the diversity in the room. Find ways to receive feedback based on what people heard and try to come to some consensus about what was heard before taking the next step together.

Finally, if possible and/or necessary, close the time with prayer, giving opportunities for prayers of repentance, forgiveness and commitments.

Helpful questions

- What was the relevance of the event to the people living at the time?
- How did this specific event resonate with the people's experiences, beliefs or situations at the time?
- How has this event shaped, framed, entrenched, contradicted or contributed to the identity of this community and their understanding of themselves today?
- How has it been remembered within the collective memory of a group?

IDENTIFYING THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

What it is

A **contemporary context** is the environment or setting in which we find ourselves in today. Contemporary events take place within particular contexts too. Each story takes place within set community narratives, systems, moods, attitudes and conditions. When referring to the **contemporary context** of a certain event, we are referring to the elements, conditions and characteristics, and their relationships to current events. We also interrogate the impact that these factors have on any understanding of current events. We could ask how they frame and give voice to specific contemporary events being considered.

The **contemporary context** helps us critically evaluate how history is lived out and/or repeated. We interrogate it, asking what systems are currently operating and how they impact how we now see and understand events around us. For example, what are the effects or consequences of the current economic system? Health system? Education system? Political system? Social system? What events today disrupt or challenge these systems, assumptions or narratives? Knowing the **contemporary context** helps us to better understand the history, maybe even the causes, of the challenges that are facing and shaping our current context.

When to use it

It is always essential for us to not only know our **contemporary context** but to engage with it, being aware of what it is. The incarnation of Jesus happened within a social, geographical, political, economic and religious context/reality. Who we understand Jesus to be comes from our engagement with an understanding of the context in which he lived. John 14:27 has one meaning when we read it a-contextually; but when we read it in the context of the Roman Empire and Pax Romana, in which Caesar promises peace, Jesus comes to contradict: '...not as the world gives...' Understanding Jesus' words in the **contemporary context** of his day changes the meaning of his words. Similarly, today, we cannot understand what God is saying or doing unless we engage with our **contemporary context**.

How to set it up

Do some research in your local community. It may be helpful to do this with a group of local people, including young people from your neighbourhood. Ask them to tell you about what's happening in your community. Encourage them to listen to one another.

How to facilitate it

Again, there's no set idea about how this should happen. Allow people to share their stories about the particular event or issue you are researching. You may need to find some people who are willing to share stories about their lives and the challenges they face. Be sure to include a diverse group of storytellers in your process. The more diverse the group, the richer and deeper the stories will be. One of the aims of this method is to weave together the sacred and the historical with the **contemporary context**. This helps us understand God's word for God's work.

How to bring closure

Allow the participants time to share their thoughts, impressions, feelings and reflections. If it is a large group, break the participants up into smaller groups so that the small groups best represent the diversity in the room.

It might be helpful to end the time with prayer and an opportunity to respond to what people have heard God say to them.

Helpful questions

- What are some of the issues that emerge from their stories?
- Are there any recurring themes?
- What do they love about the neighbourhood/city?
- What are the places of pain?
- What are the expressions of power?
- What are the signs of the kin-dom⁴?

CHOOSING THE SACRED TEXT

What it is

Scripture is full of stories about God. Scholar and author Eugene H Peterson reminds us that the people in the stories are there to teach us about who God is, how God works and who God loves. Scripture teaches us about God's dreams for the world, and invites us to be collaborators and co-creators with God in the stories of salvation, redemption, community and self-giving love.

Scripture invites us into these stories and requires us to live in them – not just to read them but also to become *participants* and characters in the story that God is writing in the world today.

THE GOD WHO ACTED IN
SCRIPTURE IS THE SAME GOD
WHO ACTED IN HISTORY AND IS
THE SAME GOD WHO IS WITH US
HERE TODAY IN OUR OWN STORIES

⁴ Following the Mujerista theologians, I use the word 'kin-dom' rather than kingdom because it is class and gender inclusive, and because it aptly describes the kinship to which we are called as human beings who are created in the image of a relational God.

Our participation in God's story requires us to live in relationship with others and for the benefit of others. The work that God has done in scripture, God has also done in history and is doing among us now. In this methodology, we read scripture to ask the question: 'How can we live more faithfully in the story of God in the world, echoing the way God has worked in the past?'

When to use it

Every day! For this tool, however, the hope is that you will not read scripture alone, nor will you simplify your reading of scripture by asking: 'What does the Bible say about...?'

When you read the **sacred text**, become aware of your mindset as you approach the text; that you come in curiously, inquisitively and in community. Come to listen and learn, and allow your assumptions and pre-suppositions to be suspended. When we read scripture, we don't just come to learn about a story; we come to imitate the work that God is doing in that story. That work often requires courage, wisdom and obedience. God challenges and shakes systems of power, and requires us to face up to our prejudices and the assumptions we make about other people.

Jesus, the Living Word, is allowing himself to be broken and poured out. We too must give ourselves to being broken and poured out because of this Word. This is our deepest pilgrimage, the journey from self to surrender.

THIS IS OUR DEEPEST
PILGRIMAGE, THE JOURNEY
FROM SELF TO SURRENDER.

How to set it up

This requires 'prayer-peration' from us. Take some time to pray and listen to God:

- Spend some time thinking about God's dreams for the world. Think about the person of Jesus. Take some time to pray and ask, 'What are you doing in this city in response to these stories?'
- See if you can identify one or two actions. What work is God doing in the stories you have heard about **historical** and **contemporary contexts**? How do I see God doing that work in these stories now?
- Try to identify one or two issues. For each issue, choose a few Bible passages that speak to this issue or help shed light on it. It's not always easy to find one passage, verse or story that answers the question directly. It might require you to unpack the issue, exploring the context of the Bible story itself.
- Think about the Genesis to Revelation big story of God, the parables Jesus told and other images of, or references to, this issue. Don't be limited by chapter and verse references.
- How does our reading of the **sacred text** invite us to imitate what we see God doing in the stories from our **sacred text** readings?



How to facilitate it

Different ways of reading the **sacred text** during a Bible pilgrimage are outlined below.

How to bring closure

Ways of bringing closure are outlined below under each method of reading the **sacred text**.

Helpful questions

- What does the Bible say about this issue?
- How was this issue dealt with in scripture?
- Are there particular stories or passages that speak to, or help us understand, God's heart, dreams or response to these issues?
- As we examine the life of Jesus, is this an issue that Jesus deals with in teaching, parables or actions?
- How does scripture help us catch a glimpse of this issue in the kin-dom of God, or as a redeemed aspect of the kin-dom of God?

After selecting a few passages or verses, read through them and through the wider context of the passages of scripture in which they are located. Spend time praying and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to the best passage(s) to help you explore this issue. Don't worry too much about getting the right passage!

Preparation reflections

Before we proceed to the **sacred text**, these may be some helpful things to bear in mind while in the preparation phase:

If you are starting with the **historical context**

From the issues you could identify in your **historical context**, ask yourself:

- Are there any contemporary parallels?
- What do these same issues look like today?
- Are there any recurring themes or repeated actions?
- How have they progressed?
- How are they the same?
- How are they connected, if at all?
- Can I tell a story about it, or find a similar story about it in the news?
- Are there similar stories or issues in the **sacred text**?

**GOD'S WORD IS LIVING,
BREATHING AND ACTIVE;
GOD STILL SPEAKS TO
US TODAY DESPITE OUR
LIMITATIONS AND FAILURES**

If you are starting with the **contemporary context**

From the issues you could identify in your **contemporary context**, adapt the above questions:

- Are there any historic parallels?
- What did today's issues look like then?
- Are there any recurring themes or repeated actions?
- How have they progressed?
- How are they the same?
- How are they connected, if at all?
- Are there historical stories around this?
- Are there similar stories or issues in the **sacred text**?

In the quest to stay faithful to the stories, if you see a link between historical and contemporary issues, test it by asking people in your community or city if they can see the connection.

If you are starting with the **sacred text**

From the **sacred text**, ask the following questions:

- How is this Sacred Story being played out in my context today?
- What was scripture teaching about this then?
- What does scripture want me to know now?
- Is there an act of obedience I must engage in for my current context?
- Is there a parallel historical injustice in my community that needs the light of the kin-dom brought into it?

METHODS OF READING THE SACRED TEXTS

Introduction

There are as many ways to read the **sacred texts** as there are ideas about the texts. One of the most difficult things to do is to help guide people to see an old story in a new way. If I looked at a drop of water with my naked eye, I would see some detail. If I magnified it five times, I would see something different, but I would still be looking at a drop of water. If I magnified it 50 times, I would see something else that was different, but I would still be looking at a drop of water. If I magnified it 100 times, I would see something even more different, but I would still be looking at a drop of water. In the same way, we still want to look at scripture, but through the lenses of the issues and pains in our community, such as the environment, economics, power and politics, etc. By doing this, we help people become like the scribe in Matthew 13:52: 'And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kin-dom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'" We create spaces to see new stories in old texts.

For our purposes, we are simply trying on glasses *with new lenses* through which we will read scripture. New lenses will help to expose the biases we bring to the text which blind us and which, in some ways, take away our power for a while, and will allow the power of the text to shape us again. New lenses will also help us notice different things that were always there but which we hadn't noticed. This will help us live more faithfully as participants in the story of God in the world.

It is important to do some research about the selected passage and focus on the **three dimensions** of the text:

- Behind the text (focusing on the socio-historical worlds that produced the text)
- On the text (focusing on the text itself as a literary composition)
- In front of the text (focusing on the possible worlds the text projects beyond itself towards the active reader).

This is what Contextual Bible Study (CBS) calls reading 'behind, into and in front of the text'⁵.



**BEHIND
THE TEXT**



**INSIDE
THE TEXT**



**IN FRONT OF
THE TEXT**

Below is a selection of four methods from which to choose your reading of the text.

NARRATIVE READING

What it is

When using a narrative reading, the aim is to read the text in a way that helps the participants to imagine or, for a short while, to 'live' the text. The narrator can be anyone in the group, chosen in advance in order to give that person time to prepare. The narrator's work is to help connect participants to the story in helpful ways.

I suggest you do this in small groups of three or four so that everyone can participate and there is enough time for discussion. Start with what strikes you in the story or passage. Needless to say, it's easier to use this method with stories than with the epistles and genealogies. With this method, there is only one rule: stay in character!

The participants could choose to be a single character, multiple characters, or just be themselves as witnesses in the story. Being a witness is especially easy when there is a crowd in the story. It is even possible to use personification of objects and to try out different ideas. For example, someone could be the five loaves in the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand.

The use of **sacred texts** or other significant stories is a powerful tool for exploiting the power of a narrative method to create space for people to share in the stories of others, while sometimes subconsciously telling their own story in a 'new' language. It helps give people a compass bearing on their journey, as well as harnessing their imagination for creative engagement with their stories, history, current reality and faith.

When to use it

Narrative reading is helpful to use when:

- You need to connect the story or experience of a group to their spirituality, in order to help them reflect on their own story.
- People are too close to or too stuck in their story, for example, in a story of pain or even trauma.

⁵ http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/Ujamaa_CBS_bible_study_Manual_part_1_2.sflb.ashx

- Narrative reading helps participants reflect on it from a distance in order to be able to move forward.
- People can be stuck in their own rhetoric and opinions of what the Bible says. Narrative reading helps bring new perspectives.

How to set it up

It is best to divide participants into smaller groups of three or four.

- Prepare the room with enough seating for each person to be able to sit facing the members of their group. The choice of venue is an important factor and will determine the ability of participants to engage with one another.
- Each participant will need a copy of the text.
- The narrator must be chosen in advance and be well prepared, having read the story a few times. As was mentioned in the introduction, do some research on the passage prior to the group time, reading 'behind, into and in front of the text'.
- After doing some research, the narrator needs prepare questions to help the participants enter more deeply into the story. During this process, provide opportunities for people to reflect and draw out contemporary insights for their context, where they live out their faith.

How to facilitate it

- Give each participant a copy of the text.
- Seat people in a way that they can face one another and hear each other speak.
- Read the text out loud three or four times.
- With the participants having put their texts away, the narrator guides them into the story. The participants assume characters in the story.
- Using the story as a basis, the narrator retells the story and punctuates it with questions allowing the participants to respond out loud, or in quiet reflection.

How to bring closure (small groups)

Remaining in character, spend some time reflecting on all you have just experienced. Ask: 'Is there anything you would like to say to the group? Is there anything you feel like asking anyone? What has surprised you most in this story?'

- Allow conversation, based on the last question, to continue for a while but bring it to an end before the 'buzz' stops. This leaves people with a desire to continue, rather than a desire to end the discussion.
- Give some time for quiet reflection or prayer.
- It may be appropriate to allow people to be on their own (while in character), but do set a time limit if you are going to do so. Don't forget to tell people how/when this time alone will end.
- Enable people to re-enter the room and the group. Allow them a chance to give feedback where appropriate.

How to bring closure (large groups)

It is important to debrief after the discussion. Ask each participant to leave their assumed character behind.

Reflect on the experience of the imaginative journey. Discuss how this journey connects and interacts with our present reality or shared stories.

How to debrief

- This is not always necessary but may be a good thing to offer. End with a natural break, for example with tea or lunch, or give free time to allow people the chance to talk about their experience.

Example of narrative reading: Jeremiah 29.1-4

Divide participants into groups of four. Participants must assume the character and identity of an Israelite who has been living in Jerusalem and who has been taken into exile in Babylon. Each participant enters the story and responds to the reflective questions of the narrator, all the while remaining in character.

The narrator says:

You have been walking for two days and you have blisters on your feet. The last picture you remember of Jerusalem, the temple and the holy city, is of it burning; of soldiers and Babylonian Gentiles desecrating the temple. As you are walking, you are asked to make way for the priests to pass – the priests who told you over and over again, 'Jerusalem will NEVER fall!'

Examples of narrator's questions:

- What do you see, hear and smell around you?
- Who is walking with you?
- What do you want to say to them?
- What do you feel like doing?

How to bring closure (small groups)

Examples of closure questions:

- Remaining in character, spend some time reflecting on all you have just experienced. Is there anything you would like to say to the group?
- Is there anything you feel like asking anyone?
- What has surprised you the most in this story?

Allow conversation, based on the last question, to continue for a while, but bring it to an end before the 'buzz' stops. This leaves people with a desire to continue, rather than a desire to end the discussion.

How to bring closure (large groups)

Ask each participant to leave their assumed identity of a character in the story behind, for example by saying 'We are no longer exiles, Hebrews, Israelites. We are no longer in Babylon; we are in ...' (describe your current context).

How to debrief

It is important to "debrief" after the discussion. Ask each participant to leave their assumed identity of a character in the story behind. E.g. We are no longer exiles, Hebrews, Israelites. We are no longer in Babylon; we are in ... (describe your current context).

Examples of debriefing questions:

- What links can you see between this imagined journey and our present reality?
- What has this imagined journey shown us that is relevant to our situation today? (Invite people to share stories)

PARAPHRASING THE TEXT

What it is

This method uses the eyes and ears of another participant to be the senses through which to see and hear the text. To paraphrase, here, is to repeat the quality and not the quantity of what someone says. This is done in pairs and works best if sufficient time is allowed. There are at least two rounds to this method and it works with any text, including epistles and genealogies. The aim is for each participant to 'hear and see the text' through the eyes of at least two other participants. It is helpful when there is rich diversity in the pairing of participants. In this method, the lens is another participant, their ideas, their journey and their agenda. We become listeners to the text through the 'other' and not ourselves.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO AFFIRM THAT THE WORD OF GOD IS LIVING AND ACTIVE, AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD SPEAKS TO US IN MANY DIFFERENT WAYS, EVEN THROUGH OTHER PEOPLE

When to use it

Use this method when there is enough time for participants to have time alone, and/or in pairs, and/or in groups of four. Sometimes there is not an even number of participants or multiples of four. It is, therefore, important to know beforehand what you will do if there is not an even number.

How to set it up

- As mentioned, you will need an even number of participants so be prepared to participate yourself, if necessary.
- You will need enough space so that each participant can spend some time alone to write down his or her reflections.
- Prepare the room with enough seating for each participant to sit with at least one other participant to form a pair and talk. Then, for that pair, to either join with another pair to form a group of four or to form a different pair.
- Each participant will need a copy of the text.

Note: Not much preparation is needed here. The hard work is preparing questions for individual reflection to help the participants enter more deeply into the story.

How to facilitate it

- Give each participant a copy of the selected text and some questions for reflection.
- Choose volunteers ahead of time to read the selected text aloud.
- Allow participants some time on their own to read the passage and answer a few questions for themselves:
 - i. What do you see in this passage?
 - ii. What does this passage say to you about... [the selected theme or issue].
- Each participant then pairs up with another. Encourage participants to choose someone who is 'least like them' in the room.
- Taking it in turns, each participant listens to their partner's reflections on the questions and paraphrases back to them what they heard, noting their observations and insights.
- Once the participant who was sharing feels that the listener has adequately repeated back to them the quality – and not quantity – of what they said, they then become the listener.
- After each participant has had their turn, the pair joins with another pair to make a group of four, or finds a different partner to form a new pair.
- In the case of a new pair, simply repeat the exercise.
- In the case of four participants, each is only allowed to share what their partner's insights were, even if they leave out some details.

The aim of this method is to hear what God is saying through the other person.

How to bring closure

- Be aware that participants may feel vulnerable and may need to spend some time alone.
- After each participant has had a chance either to be in a group of four or to have two different partners, they take some time on their own to reflect on what they have heard.

How to debrief

Paraphrasing can be painful for participants who may have felt unheard or overlooked. While it is a helpful tool, it may also leave participants feeling frustrated or annoyed. At times, participants may need to apologise to one another or ask for forgiveness. Do invite them to do so. Allow them time to process and reflect; for example, use a natural break such as lunch or tea to help facilitate good closure.

Helpful questions

- What did you notice that your partners noticed too?
- What new insights did you glean?
- How does this deepen your reflection on the issue at hand?
- How does this help you connect the text to the **historical** and **contemporary contexts**?

REWRITING THE TEXT

What it is

This tool can be used with a group of any size. It helps give new contemporary language to the text, as well as new geography and perspectives. This method also provides participants with the opportunity to be introspective. It allows time for deeper personal reflection. Essentially, the participants become the writers of the text. It is important only to do this once there has been time to explore the **historical context** and the **contemporary context** related to the issue. The participants are invited to pretend that God is asking them to be the authors of the scripture, only this time their **contemporary context** is the audience to whom they will write. Rewriting the text is a way of re-phrasing the text by using your own words to update it for your contemporary community and audience.

When to use it

Generally, it is better to do this when participants will have more than one opportunity to read scripture together. It balances the group-time and alone-time well, and can be helpful to balance the introvert/extrovert combinations.

How to set it up

- Prepare the room with enough seating and provide spaces around the venue for each person to have time alone and where each person has a suitable writing surface.
- Each participant will need a copy of the text.
- As with paraphrasing, choose volunteers to read the selected text aloud.

Note: Again, not much preparation is needed here. The hard work is done in framing the historical and contemporary contexts, and in using that to prepare questions for individual reflection in order to help the participants enter more deeply into the story.

How to facilitate it

- Give each participant a copy of the selected text with some questions for reflection.
- Allocate two-thirds of the time for participants to be on their own.
- Each participant spends time reflecting and exploring the questions and related issues.
- Each participant then becomes the author of the text, but writing to a contemporary audience.
- After two-thirds of the time has passed, gather participants in groups of three or four and ask each one to read their paraphrased, rewritten passage to the group.
- Depending on time, you could get the group to write a combined piece, or have time for feedback in the bigger group.
- Be careful to manage your time well.

How to bring closure

Once again, not much is needed in this method, but pay attention to what is said. Be aware that you may be needed to clarify a few things, or help deepen the listening, especially when there are diverse theological ideologies and interpretations.



How to debrief

- Invite participants to own what they bring to the text.
- Remind them that they are not biblical authors or trying to nullify scripture. This is simply a tool to help them see different things in the text and find new questions to explore.

Example of rewriting the text

In the example below, a group was asked to read Ephesians 2 and to rewrite it as a letter to the church in South Africa in 2016.

My beloved friends, I see you. I know you. I love you. I remember where you have come from. You were as good as dead. Your life and actions were leading you down a dead-end street and you were hopeless and lifeless. You were left for dead and ignorant of your own spiritual bankruptcy, caused by your own stupid action of comparison, hatred, competition, greed, pride and racism.

'But God', the single most important words in our salvation story. But God... our loving, kind, generous and forgiving God, who sees us, not as we are behaving right now, but who sees us as we will one day be, stepped in and reminded us of what the truth is. We are one body and God sees one church when God looks at us.

God came along and performed mouth-to-mouth on our lifeless body and breathed new breath into us. God is the one whose blood runs in all our veins and whose spirit lives in all of us. This means that we are the most alive when we are together. We are together when we sit in the company of Jesus. These are front row seats that give us a clear view of all that Jesus is doing and even give us backstage passes so we can talk together and admire Jesus together. Jesus loves this so much that we even get to take selfies together.

This aliveness is not because we are fit or healthy, but because Jesus has been so patient and kind to us. Jesus shares his very breath with us. Like divers sharing an oxygen tank in the ocean, so we get to breathe together.

LECTIO DIVINA

What it is

Latin for 'Divine Reading', this method of reading scripture is very old and is common practice for many Christians around the world.

According to Pope Benedict XVI, Lectio Divina is broken down into the four steps:

- i. Reading – *Lectio*
- ii. Meditation – *Meditatio*
- iii. Prayer – *Oratio*
- iv. Contemplation – *Contemplatio*

Then, as a result of the encounter with God in scripture, we are also called to Action – *Actio*.

**MEDITATION IS ALSO AN
OPPORTUNITY TO SEE
OURSELVES IN THE TEXT**

When to use it

It can be used with any number of participants. It works well when there is enough time to read scripture, meditate on it and have time for personal prayer. It balances group-time and alone-time well, and can be helpful to balance the introvert/extrovert combinations.

How to set it up

- Prepare the room with enough seating and provide spaces around the venue for each participant to have time alone and have a suitable writing surface.
- Each participant will need a copy of the text, and each participant will need a copy of the four steps of the Lectio Divina (see below).
- Choose volunteers to read the selected text aloud.

Note to leaders of small groups: *Not much practical preparation is needed here. Instead, the important work is your individual preparation of questions for participants to reflect on, to help them enter more deeply into the story. To do this, make some time to read the text and pray, and meditate on it beforehand.*

How to facilitate it

- Familiarise yourself with the four steps of Lectio Divina – see the notes below.
- Carefully explain the four steps to participants.
- Give each participant a copy of the selected text.
- Each participant spends time going through the following four steps: Reading, Meditation, Prayer and Contemplation.

These steps form a process through which we encounter God in the **sacred text** and respond to God's grace. They form parts of a larger whole, but each one comes with a certain set of skills for us to master.

Lectio Divina Step 1: Reading

In the first phase of Lectio Divina we understand what the passage we are reading says in itself. This is the literal meaning of the scripture passage and the lessons everyone should recognise in reading it. At this stage, we do not yet consider our own lives in connection with the scriptures. We do not let our opinions influence our reading, but seek to understand the message of the passage as interpreted by the church independently of anyone's opinions.

This phase is summarised with the question: 'What does the text say that everyone should understand?'

Lectio Divina Step 2: Meditation

In the meditation phase of Lectio Divina, we ask: 'What does this text say to me, today, and to my life?' We allow God to pull up certain memories of people, places and events in our lives that relate to the passage we are reading.

Meditation is also an opportunity to see ourselves in the text. We can consider our own feelings as if we were a participant in the text, or try to understand what it would be like to be one of the people represented in the text. In this way, we come to a deeper appreciation of how God is working in our lives through the sacred word. Having entered into the story ourselves, we can return to the present and consider the areas in our own lives that God is calling us to contemplate.

Lectio Divina Step 3: Prayer

Through a meditation on scripture, we experience an intimate encounter with God that leads us to respond in prayer. Having met God in Holy Scripture, we courageously speak to God in our own words. In this way, we consider prayer to be a simple conversation with God. It is a conversation that comes in various forms: praise, adoration, thanksgiving and petitions or requests or intercession.

At this phase, we can ask ourselves: 'What can I say to the Lord in response to what I have heard?'

Lectio Divina Step 4: Contemplation

A true encounter with the God always leads to transformation. Through contemplation we come to an understanding of the parts of our lives that need to be transformed by God's grace. We humble ourselves and open our lives up to the transformative power of our loving God. This step comes with the willingness to change; an openness and trust in God, and the decision to follow God's will rather than our own. With this decision comes a fear of losing what we find comfortable and safe. At the same time, we respond in faith to the heroic adventure and a hopeful future of living the life we are meant to live.

At this step in the Lectio Divina process, we ask ourselves: 'What conversion of the mind, heart and life is God asking of me?'

How to bring closure

The final step in this method is fused on action. This may not be needed just yet, but can be helpful.

This phase is often not considered to be a part of Lectio Divina; it is an essential result of the encounter with God in the Sacred Story. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in *Verbum Domini*, 'We do well also to remember that the process of Lectio Divina is not concluded until it arrives at action, which moves the believer to make their life a gift for others in charity'.

Having received God's love and grace, we respond to serve others out of the love we have been given. **How can I live a life faithful to the story of God in my world? How can I become a part of the story God is writing in my community, country or the world?**

How to debrief

No particular actions are necessary, but helping participants to connect their insights and learning to the **historical** and **contemporary contexts** will be important. It may be helpful to allow some time for sharing in groups around a few connecting questions.

From the issues you could identify in your **historical context**, ask yourself:

- Are there any contemporary parallels?
- What do these same issues look like today?
- Are there any recurring themes or repeated actions?
- How have they progressed?
- How are they the same?
- How are they connected, if at all?

Drawing together the reading of the text

Remember the purpose

The purpose of this pilgrimage tool is to help us make connections between the text and our **historical** and **contemporary contexts**. The authors of our scriptures never wrote in isolation from their contextual and historical realities.

The book of Isaiah, for example, was written to people in exile (**contemporary context**), in light of the law and the people of God (**historical context**). When we read scripture, we want to look at the relationship between text and contexts, so that we hear and live the story of God in our own contexts of time, place and space.

Helpful questions

- Which issues are the same in this text as in our own contexts?
- What is God saying to you through these words of scripture?
- What may God be inviting you to?
- Are there 'blind spots' that are being removed?
- How does this passage provide you with a new prophetic imagination to respond to the issues that challenge you?
- What threads can we weave together from these three contexts, **historical context**, **sacred text** and **contemporary context**, that:
 - i. Invite us to live more faithfully in God's story?
 - ii. Make us think about this issue in a new way?
 - iii. Help us connect this story to God's story in the world today?
 - iv. Help us reframe the issue as one that is of concern to God, or part of the work of God in the world?
 - v. What is God's dream for the resolution of this issue?



Section 2

EXAMPLES OF BIBLE PILGRIMAGES USED IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

SECTION 2: EXAMPLES OF BIBLE PILGRIMAGES USED IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

DATE OF SIGNIFICANCE: 16 JUNE 1976

Introduction

On June 16, 1976, an uprising that began in Soweto and spread countrywide profoundly changed the socio-political landscape in South Africa. Events that triggered the uprising can be traced back to policies of the Apartheid government that resulted in the introduction of the Bantu Education Act in 1953. The rise of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and the formation of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) raised the political consciousness of many students while others joined the wave of anti-Apartheid sentiment within the student community.

Framing the historical context

When the language of Afrikaans, alongside English, was made compulsory as a medium of instruction in schools in 1974, black students began mobilising themselves. On 16 June 1976, between 3,000 and 10,000 students, mobilised by the South African Students Movement's Action Committee and supported by the BCM, marched peacefully to demonstrate and protest against the government's directive. The march was meant to culminate at a rally in Orlando Stadium, Soweto.

On their pathway, heavily armed police fired tear gas and live ammunition at the demonstrating students. This resulted in a widespread revolt that turned into an uprising against the government. While the uprising began in Soweto, it spread across the country and carried on until the following year.

The aftermath of the events of June 1976 had dire consequences for the Apartheid government. Images of the police firing on peacefully demonstrating students led to an international revulsion against South Africa as its brutality was exposed.

The education laws were unjust and discriminatory. In 1966, the National Party government spent 75 Rands per day on every white child in education, but only 15 Rands per day on every coloured child's education and only 5 Rands per day on every black child. This unfairness is closely mirrored today when we look at the disparity between rich and poor in South Africa.

This is a story about an unjust education system that only serves the wealthy few and the courageous actions of young people who decided to do something about it.

Identifying the contemporary context

After 22 years of democracy, the educational system in South Africa has not yielded results very different from those of 1976. The disparity in wealth, and access to good education, remain two of the country's bigger challenges. In 2015, the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements called our attention to the dissatisfaction of young tertiary students with the current education system. Like Jesus and his young disciples, they are finding ways to subvert the system as they seek decolonisation and de-commodification of education.

Choosing the text

What does God's word say to us in this story, then and now? What is God's dream for learning and sharing of knowledge? What is God's response to unequal education and the limitation of human potential? What is God's dream for education and the role education plays in the transformation of the world? What does God teach us about the valuing of people when education and information have become commodities? What does the life and work of Jesus model for us and teach us about who needs to teach and who needs to learn? What stories within scripture speak about education? If you were to preach a sermon on the issues related to education, inequalities within the system of education, the commodification of education or the need for education in our world, which texts and stories in scripture would you use?

In Rob Bell's Nooma DVD *Dust*, we are reminded that the primary education system of Jesus' day was for all Jewish boys. After primary education, secondary education was for a select elite who would become disciples of Rabbis. Those who didn't make the grade became the labour force of Jesus' day, learning crafts such as carpentry and apprenticing to become fisherman.

Jesus enters into this economy, culture and context, and invites the 'non-elite' to become disciples (see Mark 1:16–20). Jesus trains them, educates them on Torah and then instructs them to become teachers themselves, sending them into the whole world to share the knowledge that they had acquired. Jesus too was unsatisfied with the education system of the day. When Jesus educates these non-elites, he is subverting and challenging an education system that excluded a majority and favoured an elite minority.

Methods of reading the text

A narrative reading of Jesus calling his first disciples in Mark 1:16–20 was used and the background information was gleaned from Rob Bell in *Dust*.

Drawing together

Jesus was born into a society where education, including tertiary education, did not happen in a classroom. There were no institutions and therefore no commodification of education. Any education that went beyond the study of Torah was usually reserved for people of privilege and those who had access to Rabbis and teachers of the law. This system, which is Jesus' context, excluded many and included few, much like the South African students in the stories of protest in 1976, 2015 and 2016.

Helpful questions

- Which issues are the same in this text as in our own contexts?
- What is God saying to you through these words of scripture?
- What may God be inviting you to?
- Are there 'blind spots' that are being removed?
- How does this passage give you a new, prophetic imagination to respond to the issues that challenge you?
- How does this help us respond to the issue?
- What is God's dream for responding to this issue?
- Jesus, by his actions, challenged and subverted the education system of the day. Jesus chose to include the excluded from the education system of the day and then sent his student disciples out to teach the rest of the world. How does this help you think about education?
- How can you live more faithfully in the story of Jesus, imitating him by educating those who are 'non-elites'?

PLACE OF SIGNIFICANCE: THE SLAVE LODGE

Introduction

In 2014, South Africa had a series of mining strikes and labour unions were calling for public support. On a few occasions I was asked, 'What does the Bible say about striking?' This got me thinking about the issues related to labour and how these current stories come to be. As I said earlier, it's not necessary to start with the **historical context**. So, in this case, my starting point was the **contemporary context** of the striking workers and their appeal for support from civil society and the church. Exploring the history of these issues of labour conditions, labour relations, just compensation and labour rights led me to visit the Slave Lodge in the heart of Cape Town.

Framing the historical context

In Cape Town, the Slave Lodge is a memorial to the trading of human cargo during the time in South Africa's history when it was legal to own other people. By virtue of their race, it was possible to enslave them.

The Cape was the place of colonisation by the Dutch and the British interchangeably over many years. People were bought and sold for the purpose of free labour. People who were enslaved were displaced, forced to work in countries and cities not their own. They were surrounded by languages unfamiliar to them and not compensated for their labour in any way that was just or humanising. Forced to work long hours, they were at the mercy of those who exercised power over them. They were given no choice in the kind of labour they did and there was no chance for promotion or retirement, to say nothing of the harsh punishment and inhumane sleeping conditions. Many kinds of violence were used to enforce productivity. There was a gross failure to recognise the humanity of those who provided this free labour in fields, on farms and in homes.

Economies of European nations and the United States of America were built on this free labour. Raw materials were extracted from this continent and trade laws were put in place that forbade African countries from developing raw products. These unjust laws gave exclusive rights to Europe to add value to raw material for resale and ultimately to their enrichment off the backs of free slave labour. The Slave Lodge is the place that remains for us the symbol and reminder of unjust worker agreement and practices, and unjust trade.

Identifying the contemporary context

Are there any current labour practices that are similar to those used by the British and the Dutch in the past? Are there any people today who labour under the same conditions as those who were enslaved? Are there any experiences shared with the people in these stories, no matter which character they played in the stories and irrespective of the positions of power or powerlessness? Are there any enterprises that continue to commodify people with the use of words such as client, retailer, consumer, customer, human capital or labourer?

Even though people who work in the mines today do so by choice, as a form of legitimate employment where there are agreed terms and conditions, the parallels do not escape me.

I noticed the following links between the two stories of the Slave Lodge and the striking miners:

- Often miners too are internally displaced from the communities in which they grew up.
- Labourers live in artificial mining towns and hostels that provide temporary accommodation for the purpose of productivity.
- Many are disconnected from family and community.
- They are forced to live with people with whom their only guaranteed point of commonality is the work they do.
- In both stories there was injustice in the compensation; there was the issue of extraction of raw materials with no development of product; there was the issue of the enrichment of a minority at the expense of the majority. The mining industry has been built on the backs of poor migrant labour.

Choosing the text

As I sat with these stories, I asked these questions: What does God's word say to us in this story then and now? What is God's dream for just labour? What is God's response to slavery? What is God's dream for just wages? How does God teach us about economies and valuing the people as the most valuable commodity within an economy? What does the life and work of Jesus model for us and teach us about this issue? What stories within scripture speak about labour relations, working conditions, servant/slaves and commodification of 'the earth is the Lord's and everything in it'?

We all bring our own experience and bias to the text. My experience, for example, includes my ancestors who were enslaved in South Africa. If you were to preach a sermon on the issues related to current labour practice, which texts and stories would you use?

Consider the following texts to see how God may respond to this issue:

- Exodus 2:23–3:10
- Exodus 20:2
- Luke 19:12–27
- Matthew 20:1–15

These passages speak about God's response to slavery, God's dream for generosity and our response to unjust systems that support unjust labour practices.

My reflections led me to a new understanding of slavery. For Pharaoh, the practice of enslaving people meant that how he valued slaves was determined by how many bricks they could make in a day, even without straw. In the cotton fields of Alabama USA in the 1800s, the value of the slave was determined by how many bags of cotton they could pick in a day. In the coffee plantations in Costa Rica, the value of a labourer is determined by how many baskets of berries they can pick in a day. When we determine the value of another human being by what they are able to produce, we behave like slave masters. Similarly, when we measure the value of our lives by what we produce, or have produced, we too are enslaved. When we use currency of any kind to determine the value of any human being, including ourselves, we participate in slavery. How then can we value people more than production?



Methods of reading the text

When running Bible pilgrimages, I allow participants and venue size to guide the methods I use so as to allow for maximum participation and engagement with the text.

When using a narrative reading of Matthew 20:1–15, people were asked to play different characters in the parable and then asked to discuss the following questions:

- What is the story about?
- What was common practice?
- What kind of people worked as day labourers?
- If you were choosing labourers for a day, who would be your first choice?
- What is Jesus saying about money in the kingdom of God?
- What do you think Jesus is saying about wages?
- What do you think God dreams of when it comes to wages?
- Who benefits in this story?
- Who sacrifices in this story? And why do you think so?
- What is Jesus saying about the value of work? And the value of wages? And the role of employers?
- What will it mean for you to imitate Jesus in this story?
- What will that mean for our story of the Bible and striking workers?

Note: Christena Cleveland has done some creative work with this parable in a blog post. See the appendix.

Drawing together

In small groups, ask participants to read the scriptures and discuss the questions above. In addition, ask how one can participate in God's story of ending human slavery or the conditions of labour that make people feel enslaved. How can we participate in God's story of generosity when we pay wages, imitating the generosity of Jesus in the parable of Luke 19? How can we treat people like the third set of hired workers in Matthew 20, and refuse to participate in unjust systems that enrich a minority at the expense of the cheap labour of the majority?

PLACE OF SIGNIFICANCE: ROB BEN ISLAND⁶ (OVER AN EXTENDED TIME)

Introduction

The examples above all fall within the template that has been provided. Below is an example of a pilgrimage done over an extended period of time. *This example does not follow the order or format of the methodology template provided.* In this example, we would like to demonstrate how these tools could be used in a variety of combinations, mixing up the order. This is taken from a pilgrimage on Robben Island that took place over five days with people from 19 different countries, who met together to reflect on the question: 'What does forgiveness have to do with justice?'

The **historical context** was from the lives of two well-loved South African justice advocates: Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela and Desmond Mpilo Tutu. Both of them are known around the world for two things: 1) their work for justice and 2) their commitment to forgiveness. This pilgrimage sought to explore the connections between those two ideas and the value they offer to those who work for justice today.

⁶Robben Island, located off the coast of Cape Town, was used by the South African government as a prison for political prisoners and convicted criminals. Nobel Laureate and former President of South Africa Nelson Mandela was imprisoned there for 18 of the 27 years he served behind bars before the fall of Apartheid. Community organiser and community activist, Robert Sobukwe, was housed in solitary confinement on the island for six years.

In groups, participants visited four different sites on the island, spending time in reflection with a liturgy to help them engage with the history, the injustice and our current realities.

I have spent many hours on Robben Island as a place of significance, thinking about its historical importance within our **contemporary context**. As an Anglican priest, I use liturgy frequently, and I chose to use it as one of the ways to get people engaged with the **historical** and **contemporary contexts**.

Pilgrimage of reflection, repentance and forgiveness

Our hope is that this place and these sites of sacred and historical significance will evoke memory, emotion and reflection. We invite you to participate and be present in these spaces. It is written through the eyes of South Africans but our story is not *the* story. As you listen to the details, we invite you to also reflect on the stories from your own context, and help us draw together the bigger story of God at work in our world, as well as the pictures of God's dreams for us.

The liturgy is an offering to help kindle your contemplation. It is an opportunity for you to clothe the words with your devotion. This liturgy is intended to serve you and not rule you. Take your time with it and allow the Spirit to speak to you.

Site 1: The visitors' centre

Take some time to walk around and imagine what it must have been like to visit your loved ones, or to be visited by your loved ones, in a place like this.

Reader 1

Here political prisoners received visits from their families and lawyers. Plate-glass separated prisoners and visitors. They communicated with the use of sometimes-faulty sound systems as physical contact was not allowed. All conversations were listened to and there were strict rules for what could and could not be spoken about.

We gather at the prison visitors' centre remembering the hope and pain shared by both the banished prisoners and their visiting family members. These visits were long awaited. There was so much to be said about life at home and life within the prison; so much to be shared through the glass in such a short time. Yet, with little reason, guards cancelled the visits of people who had travelled long distances, censored information that was shared and prevented real connection.

Reader 2

'Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'"

Mark 3:31–35

Talk

What does 'family and community' look like for you? Share with one another the importance of family and community to you.

Prayers

Lord, sometimes obedience to you has caused us to suffer premature endings and even brokenness in relationships with those we love. Sometimes, we have walked away and cut ties with people whom you have called us to love. We live with indifference and disconnectedness, while you call us to community, love and relationship. We practise censorship more than trust.

We long for true connection. Forgive us for the times our actions have caused distance, pain and endings.

Communication is difficult at the best of times. We pray for all who sat in this room. For every relationship that still bears the scars. For every heart that still feels the pain; Lord, we need your healing.

In this place, we remember so many who suffer displacement, betrayal, rejection and pains. For those who have been censored and judged. Their crime: being black. We too, have known this pain and injustice.

For those guilty of a debt to us, that can never be repaid to us and that may never be acknowledged, we forgive them.

Site 2: The main prison doors

Reader

We stand outside the Maximum Security Prison for men. Reflect on the suffering of long-term imprisonment. Think about those who sacrificed their lives for the ideals of freedom.

1960 and 1961 were key turning points in South African resistance politics and in the way the state responded. In March 1960, the Apartheid state responded violently to protests against 'pass laws' in various places, including Sharpeville, Langa and Pondoland. The Apartheid state crushed the uprising and arrested hundreds of people. A number were imprisoned on Robben Island. Even though they were charged with offences under the common law, they were really the first political prisoners on the island under Apartheid.

They suffered at the cruel hands of the prison guards and the devastating conditions of daily torture. Many were promised that they would never leave this island alive. There were no windows, just cold bars and exposure to the harsh and extreme weather. Their bodies endured physical pain and unimaginable suffering: blood, sweat and tears; pain, sorrow and hopelessness.

We remember the bodies that were beaten; the bodies that toiled, endured hunger and pain; the bodies that longed for relief, for life, for freedom. We also remember the camaraderie. This helped to counteract the cruelty and brutality of the conditions and the wardens.

Site 3: Inside the prison

Take some time to reflect on the significance of this place. This prison cell on this prison island has come to signify freedom.

Think of your own context, your own story, your own country. Share, in the big group or in smaller ones, some of those stories that echo in these corridors.

Prayers

We remember why these men were behind these bars. We will remember all people around the world who find themselves in prisons and stuck behind metal bars. In metal cages of greed, hatred, fear and pride. We also remember our siblings in places of military conflict and abject poverty. Lord, have mercy.

Lord, graciously show your mercy. When our actions cause pain and our victories come at the expense of another's freedom; when we care nothing for the wellbeing of those in chains; when the seduction of comfort makes us forget the suffering of our neighbour. Lord, have mercy and forgive us.

Lord, show us your mercy and forgive us. When we have paid the price again and again, for the freedom of others, and we are forgotten and our pain is ignored by our offenders. Lord, we forgive.

When we have allowed incarceration and injustice to define us and shape us and limit us and shut us up. Lord, help us and forgive us.

For those who live lives of careless ease, and care nothing for the sacrifices of others and ourselves, we forgive. Lord, we want to choose forgiveness.

Site 4: Robert Sobukwe house

Robert Sobukwe, leader of the Pan African Congress, was held in solitary confinement for six years. He was not allowed to communicate with anyone, including his warders. Here, at the house where Robert Sobukwe was imprisoned, we hold onto the lessons that he taught.

He was, perhaps, the most unjustly held man on the island – imprisoned not by a court, but by an annual review by the Minister of Justice. Yet Robert Sobukwe teaches us to celebrate our identities, our heritage and our culture, and to celebrate the identities, heritage and culture of others around us. His teachings hold us to the peoples of our continent, consciously connecting us with Africa while forcing us to encounter ourselves.

Sobukwe used various gestures to communicate symbolically with other prisoners, such as clenched fists full of sand, holding them aloft and opening his fingers so that the sand fell to the ground, indicating that the land belongs to the people.

Discuss in pairs

Are there parallel stories from your home? As you think about them, what does it mean to you that 'the land belongs to the people'?

Prayers

Our God and our help, we too have done what was done to Sobukwe. We have silenced and excluded and labelled as 'enemy' children that you have created. We have feared ideas and opinions that are different from ours. We have kept 'in solitary confinement' the ideas that threaten our dreams and way of life. Forgive us and free us from fear.

We pray for all who live this way knowingly and those who continue to plot the isolation of others. We remember those who have done this to us. When we were silenced, isolated, excluded, hidden away. Lord, we forgive them and release them.

Site 5: The lime quarry

Lime was first quarried in South Africa during the Dutch colonial period. From 1963, political prisoners were forced to labour here. The glare of the limestone and the dusty conditions caused permanent damage to prisoners' eyes. Much of the limestone was used to surface the roads, giving them their shimmering glare. This quarry was where warders committed the greatest dehumanising abuse. There were no taps or toilets. No chairs or shade. The prisoners hewed rock and mined lime to build their own prison.

WORK MAY ALLOW US TO EXPRESS GREAT CREATIVITY AND GENEROSITY, OR ENTRAP US IN PATHS NOT OF OUR OWN CHOOSING.

Despite these grave injustices, the political prisoners decided to turn this quarry into their 'university'. Through lobbying and correspondence programmes, many completed high school here. This university produced graduates with Bachelors and Masters degrees, and even some Doctorates. No textbooks or desks, no stationery, no lectures, no fees, no internet. Just a slogan: 'Each one, teach one.'

Discuss in pairs

Take a minute to think about the labour issues in your context. In your context, of what value are the words 'Each one, teach one' to you?

'They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant vineyards and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord – and their descendants as well.'

Isaiah 65:21–23 (NRSV)

Reflect in silence on the following quotations:

- 'Work is for people, not people for work. Everyone should be able to draw from work the means of providing for their life and that of their loved ones, and of serving the human community.' Catholic Catechism 2428
- 'A just wage is the legitimate fruit of work. To refuse or withhold is a grave injustice. In determining fair pay, both the needs and the contributions of each person must be taken into account. Agreement between the parties is not sufficient to justify morally the amount to be received in wages.' Catholic Catechism 2434
- Globalisation, exploitation, monopolies and empires of capitalism drive ever-increasing gaps between those who have and those who need. Exclusive education and over-resourced minorities keep many trapped in 'lime quarries' around the world today.

Prayers

Where our treasures are, our hearts are too. We have stumbled and fallen victim of consuming people and valuing things. We have lived like people enslaved, measuring worth by the same measure as production. Forgive us, Lord.

We have treated the contributions of others with mockery and diminishment. Graciously forgive us.

For each time we were measured by what we produced, and not who we are. When our labour was considered worthless and our sweat was for the benefit of those who have enough. We forgive and we remember.

At the end of the pilgrimage, in your mother tongue, let us say the prayer that Jesus taught us together in Luke 11.

Identifying the contemporary context

Are there similar stories in your community and country? Are the issues the same or different? Are there places that tell stories of these issues? Are there places that require landmarks or memorial sites of significant events in the history of your community and country? Are there significant dates that you commemorate? Are there figures or people whose life and work have been instrumental in shaping your current community and country?

In groups of four, share with one another the following:

- Share with the group an injustice that is currently affecting you. How does this injustice affect you?
- What do you imagine justice will look like in this story you have just shared?
- What role do you think forgiveness could play in helping to bring about justice?
- Pray for the person who has just shared.
- Each take a turn sharing your story.

Sacred text

We used different methods to read the text together in small groups. We used the Lectio Divina method, and over two days we used the narrative method – on one of the days just as a witness to the story and on the other imagining that we were the paralytic, the one who is granted forgiveness without even asking for it. We explored the role of faith that comes from our community and the role of friends and the ways they carry us to places of healing.

‘When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’, or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”— he said to the paralytic – “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Mark 2:1–12 (NRSV)

Section 3

ADAPTABLE BIBLE PILGRIMAGES BASED ON THEMES

SECTION 3: ADAPTABLE BIBLE PILGRIMAGES BASED ON THEMES

The aim of this section is to enable participants to design their very own pilgrimages, using and applying the tools presented above. Theme by theme, the level of support provided is reduced to encourage participants to test how best to adapt the tools for their situation. They should contextualise material as appropriate, using their own examples and stories.

THEME 1: JUSTICE

Introduction

'He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

We do justice when we give all human beings their due as creations of God. Doing justice includes not only the righting of wrongs, but generosity and social concern, especially toward the poor and vulnerable. This kind of life reflects the character of God. It consists of a broad range of activities, from straightforward, fair and honest dealings with people in daily life, to regular, radically generous giving of your time and resources, to activism that seeks to end particular forms of injustice, violence and oppression.

In his book *Just Mercy*⁷, Bryan Stephenson says:

No matter how justice is defined, we can't talk about justice without talking about injustice. And we can't understand injustice without talking about the causes of injustice. In this instance, we are talking about social justice, which is different from criminal justice or moral justice.

**'THE OPPOSITE OF
POVERTY IS NOT WEALTH.
THE OPPOSITE OF
POVERTY IS JUSTICE.'**

Justice is systemic and always has more than one source. The same is true for injustice. Globalisation has contributed to the interconnectedness between global injustices and inequality, both consequences of imperial ideologies. Stephenson also says in his book, 'We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation.' I think that the same can be said globally.

Not everyone lives in a democracy. And some people find themselves in a country where they don't agree with their political leader's ideology and their beliefs about God. Some political leaders are xenophobic, sexist, bigoted or corrupt, etc. How do we participate with others to bring about justice in the face of unjust rulers?

⁷ Stephenson, Bryan, author. (2014). *Just Mercy: a story of justice and redemption*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.



Photo: Agustín Díaz/Unsplash

Framing the historical context

Egypt is one of the first known empires in the world and in the Bible. The great Pharaoh was both a god and king, feared and revered around the known world. What could anyone do in the face of the power of Pharaoh? In Egypt, along the River Nile, lived the people of Israel. Pharaoh legislated oppression, infanticide and slavery through militarised force. He built a large city for the benefit of himself and other Egyptians, at the expense of the descendants of Abraham.

Identifying the contemporary context

On 8 November 2016, the United States of America (USA) elected their 45th president, Donald Trump. When he launched his bid for Presidency on 16 June 2015, Trump promised, among other things, to build a wall along the country's southern border to keep 'undesirable' immigrants from Mexico out of the USA. On 27 January 2017 he signed Executive Order 13769, banning people from certain Muslim-majority countries from entering the USA.

If you were born in a Latin American country or a Muslim-majority country, what could you do in response to this president?

We can find a response to this question in the story found in Exodus.

Choosing the text

In scripture, doing justice is often achieved through subversive action. Action challenges the status quo, challenges power structures and authority, and sometimes requires civil disobedience. There are three such examples demonstrated to us in the story of Moses' birth in the book of Exodus. I have chosen to use a narrative reading to explore these actions.

Bible reading: Exodus 1:8–2:10

'Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore, they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birth stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, God gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water." (NRSV)

What can women do in the face of an empire? As we examine the text, we see a number of women who act in courage and out of fear of God.

The midwives

The midwives are summoned into the presence of the king. Midwives were often seen as powerless, never allowed to speak in front of a man, let alone disagree or question a king. Pharaoh commands them to kill when their vocation is to bring life. They, however, choose to disobey the king and let the boys live. Their act of wilful disobedience is both rebellious and courageous, rebellion against the kin-dom of darkness and courageous in the kin-dom of God.

Moses' mother and sister

Moses' mother gives birth to a boy. She knows it's not the king's will that he lives; but it is God's will that he lives. And so, in rebellion against the will of the king, she makes a plan to hide her son. Together with her daughter, they hide him in a river. Moses' sister kept a close watch, proclaiming humanity over the baby brother when he was found and identified as a refugee and descendant of enslaved ancestors.

Pharaoh's daughter

The disobedience and generosity of Pharaoh's daughter who, when listening to the humanising words of Moses' sister, begins to see a baby, a hungry baby; and takes him into her home, into her care, and feeds him at her table, educates him and trains him for leadership.

These courageous women were the undoing of the entire Egyptian Empire!

Method of reading the text

I've chosen to use the narrative method for reading the text.

Remember: stay in character!

The midwives

Imagine the scene. Pharaoh sitting on his throne. Imagine the people around him, serving him and listening to his every word. Some on their knees, trembling for fear that they may be chased out of his presence and perhaps even killed. The air is thick and everyone knows 'Don't mess with this man. He is the embodiment of power'. Imagine you are a midwife. Notice your clothing. What does your face look like? Your hair? How tall are you? Where do you live? Who is your neighbour? What does the street just outside your door look like? You are always walking the streets, visiting women who are pregnant. Some of them excited about growing their families; others, growing their family by choices not made by them. Every day you see pregnant women. Hopeful women. Women who carry life and the future in their very bodies; their vulnerable, enslaved bodies. Their ability to fall pregnant, and to reproduce, is what the mighty Pharaoh considers a threat.

There is a knock at your door, and the commotion outside your quiet street tells you that all is not well with the world. You hear the sound of Egyptian voices in your Hebrew home. Pharaoh wants to see you! Yes, YOU! Your mind races through every act and every word you've ever spoken about him. 'Am I in trouble?' you wonder. Maybe he wants to impose his harsh working conditions on you too! The men in your family have lived at the will of the whip and now, you may too. As the sun sets, you pray to God for deliverance to come sooner. Before you get to enter his court. Not today... You walk up to where you are shown to wait. Kneeling with your head bowed down, your chest down on your knees, you hear him speak. He is addressing you. 'When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birth-stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.' (Exodus 1:16) You are dismissed and led back to the road that takes you home.

That night, another knock at your door wakes you up. Another Hebrew woman is about to give birth. As you listen to the expectant mother breathe and groan, you hear Pharaoh's voice... his words... you remember his power. The baby is delivered. 'It's a BOY!' the other women explain. You hush them and try to mute the jubilation. You know what you must do. Pharaoh is not to be disobeyed. He is powerful and he has an army that will crush you and make your family less than a memory. Your heart is racing and you hold the little boy in your arms... He is beautiful! Full of life. His beating heart summoning you to choose whom you will serve. Life or death? With no plan in place, you tell the mother of Pharaoh's plans and his words to you. and together you agree to hide the gender of the baby for as long as you can. No customs and rituals for celebrating the birth of a boy.

As you go home that evening:

- What do you think of?
- What do you pray? What do you need? Whom do you confide in? What is important to you at this time?
- What gives you strength?
- What helps you to keep on going?
- All you know is you are choosing life, even if it is risking your own.

Moses' mother and sister

You are pregnant. You have a daughter and a son, and now you are close to your delivery day. The baby inside of you is turning, waiting to come out. The space inside your tummy is too small for this baby and it's keeping you awake at night. You know about the new law: all boys are to be killed. Soldiers are doing inspection of babies and you, a pregnant woman, are followed and harassed with reminders of the danger of having a boy. You pray for a girl... 'Please God, let it be a girl!'. It's not fair! You don't get to choose if you want a girl or a boy. You don't get to choose if you want to be born Hebrew or Egyptian. You have no power. Where you are born and the race

and nationality you are born, determine whether you live or die. You make a plan. You refuse to be defined by hate and unjust laws. You refuse the power of the laws to define who you will be. Pharaoh and his power and his laws, will not define you, nor the life of your unborn child. You weave a basket... just in case... just in case it's a boy. Lovingly, forming a lining of reeds and pouring all the love you have in the basket, you make sure that it will keep your boy warm, dry and safe from bloodthirsty soldiers. Your prayers and tears fill the basket too. As the pains of labour call the midwives to your home, you hear the words you have been dreading all these many days. In a hushed whisper, the midwife says, 'I'm sorry, it's a boy' and with those words, you become an enemy of the state. A rebel in the reign of Pharaoh and one of the many women who ask, 'What can I do in the face of such great injustice? I am just a poor, powerless woman!' You call your daughter. You know the plan to save your son will put her young life at risk too! But she asks, 'What can I do? I'm just a girl child. I have no power, but my love for my baby brother.' Moses' sister loves life. She chooses life, even if it is risking her own.

Pharaoh's daughter

You are pampered from the time you open your eyes to the time you go to bed. Days are for pleasure and luxury. Women and men tend your every need. As you go to the river to bathe, as you usually do, there is an object that catches your eye. The object is a basket. Carefully woven and waterproofed, it hides inside it a baby boy. But... this is a... a slave boy! You hear the voice of a young girl calling you. You've never really spoken to any strangers before. This little girl looks harmless. She is not talking to you; she is talking about the baby boy. Do I want to have the baby fed? I don't know? Do I? Do I want to make decisions for this baby? It's not mine! I am not a mother, and what if something is wrong with this baby?

The boy is crying now, and I can't help the baby. Wow, he is so cute, and so tiny. I guess it won't hurt to get someone to feed it. The little girl arrives with her mother and the baby is fed. You go ahead and bathe, but you can't forget about this little one. Maybe I can keep it! But what about my Dad? Can I hide a baby from him? For how long? He may become a friend for my brother, who is also tiny and has no one else his age in the house. That's it! A friend for Rameses! What a good idea. If Dad doesn't like the idea, I'll have to get rid of the baby, but he may not mind.

So, you get one of your servants to wrap him up and bring him to the house to bathe and clothe him and get him ready for 'a play date'.

Below are some helpful questions to consider asking after reading the **sacred text** and knowing the **historical context**. You may have a group that has a keen interest in your **historical context**. In this case, they may be asking how they can link their faith to their **historical context** in order to better understand how to faithfully live in the present.

From the issues you could identify in your **historical context**, ask yourself:

- What are the contemporary parallels of this event?
- What does this issue look like today?
- Are there any recurring themes or repeated actions?
- How are they connected, if at all?
- What does our Sacred Story teach us about this issue?
- How can we understand it more biblically?



Photo: James Motter/Unsplash

Drawing together

- How do these women navigate the decisions to 'stand for justice' instead of injustice?
- What do you think these women believe about themselves and about life?
- When we see unjust laws, that say no to life, no to the humanity of others and laws that affirm xenophobia, how might we rebel against them, so that we say 'Yes' to God and affirm life?
- Regarding refugees, how could we speak words of humanising love, so that they are seen as people, not just a problem?
- When the 45th president of the United States says 'America First' to prevent immigrants from taking jobs, how might we promote a view of the world as a place for all to live and work and share and dream?
- How might we affirm the cry from #BlackLivesMatter for all to see humanity in descendants of those once enslaved?
- Whom may we need to welcome into our homes?
- Whom may we need to welcome at our tables?
- Whom may we need to help educate and whom may we be able to love, so that in collaboration with them we bring about liberation from oppression?

THEME 2: FORGIVENESS

Introduction

Many scholars have written about the benefits of forgiveness on a person's health and psychological well-being, a topic studied across many disciplines around the world.

There are many people around the world who have been instrumental in changing their communities because they have chosen to forgive the injustices of others. We are unapologetic in presenting forgiveness as a biblical and faithful response to the life and teaching of Jesus. The prayer in Luke 11 that Jesus taught his disciples is one of many examples of this: 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us' (New International Version). This suggests that we cannot follow Jesus and not be willing to forgive.

Forgiveness has a personal, communal, familial, tribal and national aspect to it. How you forgive your mother or spouse is different from how you forgive a nation or a system of injustice that has no face or name!

Forgiveness is *not*:

- Agreeing that injustice is okay
- Excusing injustices, especially if they continue to occur
- Saying that what happened was okay and can be ignored
- The same as continuously crying out for justice
- Saying, 'You were right and I was wrong'
- Saying, 'Let's put the past behind us and move forward'
- Making yourself forget your pain, or ignoring your pain; instead it is going deeper into those places of pain and injustice.

Framing the historical context

Robben Island can be found off the coast to the west of Cape Town and is a place of deep significance; it was used as a place to incarcerate and dehumanise political leaders who fought against the Apartheid government of South Africa during the 1960s, until the release of all political prisoners in 1990. On the island is the cell of the Nobel Peace Prize Winner and first democratically elected President of South Africa: Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela.

Many prisoners who came off the island spoke of and demonstrated forgiveness. They invited dialogue and were willing to forgive people for injustices they had to endure.

**'HOLDING ON TO
UN-FORGIVENESS IS LIKE
DRINKING POISON AND
EXPECTING THE OTHER
PERSON TO DIE.'** (UNKNOWN)

If you need help in this section in your own context, try starting with the **sacred text** or **contemporary context** and then ask:

- What are the historical parallels for this issue?
- What did this issue look like 20, 50 or 100 years ago?
- How can we understand God's response to this issue in history?
- And consequently, how God worked and spoke in the past?
- What are the contemporary parallels?
- What does this issue look like today?
- How can we hear and see what God is doing today?
- How can we live more faithfully in the Sacred Story that God is telling about ourselves and our neighbours?

Identifying the contemporary context

Today, South Africa seems to have regressed with regard to transformation of the old systems and the socio-economic injustices that have yet to be addressed. The gap between rich (mainly white) and poor (mainly black) is growing. Where forgiveness was once 'enough', some are saying that it has not gone far enough. Forgiveness from black people has generally not been met with repentance or generosity from white people. Stevenson says, 'The opposite of poverty is not wealth. The opposite of poverty is justice.' The poor in South Africa have not yet seen justice. What then needs to be done? Should we withdraw the offer of forgiveness? Especially in the face of repeated injustice and the absence of repentance on the part of (mainly white) South Africans?

Choosing the text

This area of forgiveness is not an easy topic, nor an easy action. Often, it's a source of controversy and I'm aware I don't come to this topic in a neutral way.

I would strongly recommend the following:

- Before choosing a text, spend some time alone with God.
- Research some passages or stories that speak of forgiveness.
- Spend some time asking God if there's anyone you need to forgive, even if you need to write a list.
- Before God, speak words of forgiveness and blessing to these people, releasing the debt of the offence, injustice or wounding.

Sample prayer: *'Dear God, thank you for forgiving me of all my sin and offences against you. Help me now, by your Spirit, to imitate you, and forgive those who have sinned against me. I remember in particular ...[name]... and choose to forgive them now for every injury, every offence, every injustice and every debt that they owe me. I acknowledge that they are your child, that you love them. I pray that you bless them, and they would know your love today.'*

If the person is no longer alive, pray forgiveness; ask God to bless your memory of them.

If I'm honest, sometimes I have to do this multiple times ('seventy-seven times' – Matthew 18:22).

When you are ready, here are a few passages that may be helpful for you to consider:

- Genesis 50 (the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers)
- Matthew 6: 12 (the Lord's Prayer)
- Matthew 18: 21–35 (the parable of the unforgiving servant)
- Mark 2: 1–12 (a paralytic is forgiven without asking for forgiveness)

Method of reading the text

The chosen text will help determine the method of reading the text. For this theme, I will use the method of paraphrasing for Genesis 50.

Spend some time consolidating the group's knowledge of the story of Joseph and his brothers. Read through this last chapter of the book of Genesis and spend some time on your own to explore the story a little more.

Again, below are some questions you may wish to consider after reading the **sacred text** and knowing the **historical context**. You may have a group that has a keen interest in your **historical context**. In this case, they may be asking how they can link their faith to their **historical context** in order to better understand how to faithfully live in the present.

- What are the contemporary parallels of this event?
- What does this issue look like today?
- What does our Sacred Story teach us about this issue?
- How can we understand it more biblically?

From the issues you could identify in your **historical context**, ask yourself:

- Are there any contemporary parallels?
- What do these same issues look like today?
- Are there any recurring themes or repeated actions?
- How have they progressed?
- How are they the same?
- How are they connected, if at all?

Drawing together

In small groups, discuss the following:

- After you met with the others and listened to their insights, what do their insights help you see differently?
- What in their response helped you connect with God's story?
- How did their perspectives help reframe the issue of forgiveness for you?
- What do their insights tell you about God?
- Can you apply this on a communal or national perspective?



THEME 3: RECONCILIATION

Introduction

'So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.' Matthew 5:23–24 (NRSV)

Reconciliation is often a communal word in scripture. It is a clumsy idea on its own, but in the context of the bigger story of God it has to be seen as one step in a series of actions towards repairing love and relationship. The movement of reconciliation is a movement towards others; especially those least like me. It is a movement towards loving more people, sharing more of my resources and myself. It is a movement towards needing one another, and towards community.

Like forgiveness, reconciliation has a communal aspect, a familial aspect, and/or tribal and national aspect. How you are reconciled with your friends, parents or spouse is not the same way that you are reconciled as a nation or with another nation. For example, reconciliation among Kenyans after the post-election violence of 2008; or the ongoing reconciliation (peace process) between communities in Northern Ireland. It is not easy to reconcile what was never 'conciled'. This is even more complex when talking about a country or a system of injustice that has no face or name.

Writer and speaker, Lisa Sharon Harper, in her book *The Very Good Gospel* reminds us that the Greek understanding of goodness suggests that goodness is inherent to a person or thing. The Hebraic understanding of goodness is different. It locates goodness in the relatedness between things. In Genesis 1:31, God declares that all creation is very good. The relatedness between the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the waters and the dry land, the vegetation and the sky, the stars and all living creatures is very good. If there is not goodness between you and another person, and between you and creation, and between you and God, and between you and other families... then reconciliation is necessary.

Framing the historical context

In order to help contextualise the following example and learn to apply some tools previously described, work in groups of four. Share stories from your own contexts and then apply the questions below to enable you to come up with a way of reflecting on this theme historically, biblically and contemporarily.

Are there stories you've heard where relationships between people, creation or families have been restored? Have you heard stories where those same relationships have been broken? Are there any people who are celebrated for helping to heal the relationships between people? Are there any stories of healing between communities that were once divided? Perhaps there are stories of communities being reconciled with creation? Are there stories of 'goodness'?

If you need help in this section in your own context, try starting with the **sacred text** or **contemporary context** and then ask:

- What are the historical parallels for this issue?
- What did this issue look like 20, 50 or 100 years ago?
- How can we understand God's response to this issue in history?
- And consequently, how God worked and spoke in the past?
- What are the contemporary parallels?
- What does this issue look like today?
- How can we hear and see what God is doing today?
- How can we live more faithfully in the Sacred Story that God is telling about ourselves and our neighbours?

Identifying the contemporary context

Are there any current or contemporary situations where two groups of people, factions, religious groups or tribal groups are in conflict with each other? Is there any place in your community or neighbourhood where you notice an absence of goodness between people and creation? Are there stories of broken relationships?

Choosing the text

For this section, I want to suggest Luke 19:1–9 as a text.

If we think of the creation story and the way God's goodness is not inherent in one thing, but in the relatedness between things, then there are many stories in scripture where the characters are in need of reconciliation (for the goodness in the relationships between them to be reconciled). This biblical idea of 'very good' ('tov meod' in Hebrew) is better translated as 'forcefully good'. This 'very goodness' is dynamic, transforming all things into very good-ness. Even the chaos was transformed into very goodness, because of the Spirit that hovered over it.

WHEN OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH
ONE ANOTHER ARE IN CHAOS OR
DISREPAIR, THE FORCEFUL GOODNESS
OF GOD WANTS TO TRANSLATE OUR
RELATIONSHIPS INTO VERY GOODNESS

Similarly, if there are historic divisions between people, the work of the Spirit of God can create very goodness even in places where it had not before existed. In Luke 19, there are stories of relationships that did not demonstrate goodness between them. In the story of Zacchaeus, it doesn't seem that Zacchaeus, a tax collector, had ever enjoyed good relationships with his neighbours. But the goodness of Jesus comes to call out goodness in Zacchaeus, inspiring and creating goodness out of his broken relationships, and transforming them into good relationships between him and his neighbours. This is a biblical picture of reconciliation.

Method of reading the text

Whichever method you choose, spend some time exploring the world of Jesus and the dynamics of relationships with tax collectors in the Roman Empire. Allow the participants to explore these relationships and their dynamics and give an opportunity to reflect together.

Below are some questions that may be helpful after reading the **sacred text** and knowing the **historical context**.

You may have a group that has a keen interest in your **historical context**. In this case, they may be asking how they can link their faith to their **historical context** in order to better understand how to faithfully live in the present.

From the issues you could identify in your **historical context**, ask yourself:

- What are the contemporary parallels of this event?
- What does this issue look like today?
- Are there any recurring themes or repeated actions?
- How are they connected, if at all?
- What does our Sacred Story teach us about this issue?
- How can we understand it more biblically?

Drawing together

We see in scripture, in Genesis, in the story of Zaccheus and in the life of Jesus, God is busy doing the work of reconciliation, making good all the relationships between things and people that are not good. This work continues through history and even today.

**GOD IS IN THE BUSINESS OF
MAKING ALL THINGS VERY GOOD**

Are there any relationships in your life, between you and other people, between you and creation, between you and economic systems, between you and political systems, or between you and social realities of your context where things are not very good? It is in these places that the Holy Spirit of God wants to hover and make them very good.

THEME 4: DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Introduction

Inclusion does not produce diversity, but diversity will always require inclusion. The pages of scripture are littered with stories of diversity and inclusion. The repeated commandments to welcome the stranger and the alien are an indication of how much this is a priority for God. The invitation keeps expanding. The people who are invited in become more and more varied. The story of diversity and inclusion is a story about God, not a story about us. God wants everyone to be welcomed in. Genesis 12:1 expresses God's desire for ALL nations to be blessed. This is no clumsy idea. It is a theme that runs all the way from Genesis to Jesus to Revelation to us. It includes Hagar, Rahab, Cornelius, Saul who becomes Paul, the thief on the cross, the Good Samaritan and the Canaanite Woman with a sick child, a bleeding woman, a Zealot and a tax collector, and even the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost. All these people become participants in the Sacred Story of God's love in the world. The story of diversity and inclusion is the most repeated story in all of scripture! If the death of Jesus is indeed for the whole world, the life of Jesus in us must create the space for that expression. Inclusion helps to tell the sacred love story of God to the whole world.

Diversity and inclusion have personal, familial and communal aspects. There are many expressions of diversity: nationality, gender, age, disciplines, economic, etc. Diversity is reflected in our friendships, families, occupations, even in our parents or spouses. How can we imitate the all-inclusive love of God for all God's children?

Framing the historical context

A story from Germany:

'Nazi Germany' is the common English name for the period in German history, from 1933 to 1945, when Germany was under the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler through the Nazi Party (officially the National Socialist German Workers' Party or NSDAP). Racism, especially anti-Semitism, was a central feature of the regime. Millions of Jews and other peoples deemed undesirable by the state were murdered in the Holocaust.

Hitler created a narrative both inside and outside Germany. This narrative was about being the same and being exclusive – not only excluding difference, but seeking to eliminate difference altogether.

If you need help in this section in your own context, try starting with the **sacred text** or **contemporary context** and then ask:

- What are the historical parallels for this issue?
- What did this issue look like 20, 50 or 100 years ago?
- How can we understand God's response to this issue in history?
- And consequently, how God worked and spoke in the past?
- What are the contemporary parallels?
- What does this issue look like today?
- How can we hear and see what God is doing today?
- How can we live more faithfully in the Sacred Story that God is telling about ourselves and our neighbours?

Identifying the contemporary context

After the efforts of the Nazis to sustain a story of exclusion and homogeneity, following generations of Germans have worked hard to face up to their history and taken steps to ensure it is never forgotten. As a result, most Germans now embrace diversity and inclusion. This sits happily alongside the country's economic need for population growth and immigration.

Use the questions below (from Scenario 1 on p9) to explore the **historical** and **contemporary contexts** of Germany. Look at the events in 2015 that led to Germany opening their borders to an estimated 900,000 Syrian refugees and the doors of their churches to the many who are Muslim.

You may have a group that has a keen interest in your **historical context**. In this case, they may be asking how they can link their faith to their **historical context** in order to better understand how to faithfully live in the present.

- What are the contemporary parallels of this event?
- What does this issue look like today?
- What does our Sacred Story teach us about this issue?
- How can we understand it more biblically?

Choosing the text

I suggest the Book of Ruth or Acts 10:1–11:18. In the story of Ruth, she is a refugee and a Moabite woman. When Naomi, her mother-in-law, instructs her to return to her family, she utters those well-known words of inclusion: 'Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.' (Ruth 1:16). Ruth later becomes the wife of Boaz and the great-grandmother of King David. The story of the Moabites is included in the lineage of Israel's greatest king and Ruth is a matriarch in the line of Jesus himself.

In the opening scene of Acts 10, Cornelius is introduced as an Italian centurion. 'Roman' and 'centurion' are not words usually associated with people who God speaks to. Just as with Mary and Joseph, an angel visits Cornelius. Simon Peter, a Jewish man and disciple of Jesus, also receives a message from God. While Peter is praying he falls into a trance, and God invites him into the bigger story of salvation and inclusion. To visit the home of a Gentile, and to eat food that no Jewish person would touch, is to Peter a sign that the gospel knows no limitations, no dietary restrictions, no nationalities nor even religious commitment. Through this story, God reveals to Peter a picture of the kin-dom of God. We all are included; all are welcome.

Method of reading the text

I would suggest a narrative reading of the text in order to allow participants to engage more deeply with the characters and the implications. Finding contemporary equivalents for Jewish-Moabite relationships, or Jewish-Roman and Jewish-Gentile relationships in first century Palestine under Roman occupation, will go a long way to exposing the power of this story, and demonstrate the inclusive agenda of the kingdom of God.

Drawing together

Diversity and inclusion are two sides of the same coin. The story of God at work in scripture and in our world goes out of its way to identify characters who we would consider to be not like us – people who are different, with different beliefs, from different countries and with different ways of thinking – as full citizens of the kingdom of God, with every right and privilege that we enjoy. When diversity is celebrated and people who are different from us are included, we become participants with God in that same work.

THEME 5: MORAL IMAGINATION

Introduction

John Paul Lederach describes moral imagination as having a quality of transcendence, the ability to break out of what seem to be pre-determined structures, situations and dead ends. Doing this requires 'paradoxical curiosity' (desire to seek to understand, holding things in tension without reducing complexity to binary options). It also requires a willingness to embrace risk, setting out on a journey without necessarily knowing all the steps on that journey. He sees Romans 8:22 as a metaphor for the birth pangs of something that is longed for and possible, but does not yet exist. It may be used to describe the possibility for peace to be born out of conflict, given a vision and a catalyst – as the death, resurrection and hope of Christ do for the new creation that the old has been awaiting:

'The north of peacebuilding is best articulated as finding our way toward becoming and being local and global human communities characterized by respect, dignity, fairness, cooperation, and the nonviolent resolution of conflict. To understand this north, to read such a compass requires that we recognize and develop our moral imagination far more intentionally.' (The Art and Soul of Building Peace, John Paul Lederach)

Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar and theologian, uses the term 'prophetic imagination' and it carries the same idea of transcendence and engagement with its context. The Hebrew Scriptures are littered with conversations between the prophets, poets, philosophers and priests in their work of meaning-making, as they comment on events unfolding in their worlds.

The prophets are those who have had a long, hard look at the world. They have examined their context well and listened to the pain of those on the margins. They have seen the contradictions, injustices, idolatry, hypocrisy and hopelessness that surround them. They then give themselves to the work of remembering. As they remember their own stories and the stories of God at work among them, they remind themselves of the things God dreams about. They then go beyond dreaming to doing the work of 'imagining'. What would their world look like if God's dreams for their world came true? Based on their knowledge of who God is, they begin to tell new stories about their world. They do this in community, never alone. New Testament scholar NT Wright says we don't know the future or how things will end, but we know the trajectory of God's story and so we can faithfully improvise. This invites us to anticipate the best possible future, a future that gives hope. Imagine what happened to the people who were listening to Martin Luther King Jr on that day while standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, hearing 'I have a dream...'. The letter from the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 29 is such a text.

Framing the historical context

At the same time that Martin Luther King Jr was making his famous speech, the Apartheid dream of some in South Africa had come true. For others, the horror of Apartheid was not a dream, but a nightmare. This nightmare was the result of the immoral imagination of some people. It was not possible to fight the nightmare with arguments. We needed something more powerful. We needed a new dream... but who would be courageous enough?

If you need help in this section in your own context, try starting with the **sacred text** or **contemporary context** and then ask:

- What are the historical parallels for this issue?
- What did this issue look like 20, 50 or 100 years ago?
- How can we understand God's response to this issue in history?
- And consequently, how God worked and spoke in the past?
- What are the contemporary parallels?
- What does this issue look like today?
- How can we hear and see what God is doing today?
- How can we live more faithfully in the Sacred Story that God is telling about ourselves and our neighbours?

An extract from Nelson Mandela Rivonia Trial

'Africans want to be paid a living wage. Africans want to perform work, which they are capable of doing, and not work which the Government declares them to be capable of. Africans want to be allowed to live where they obtain work, and not be endorsed out of an area because they were not born there. Africans want to be allowed to own land in places where they work, and not to be obliged to live in rented houses, which they can never call their own. Africans want to be part of the general population, and not confined to living in their own ghettos. African men want to have their wives and children to live with them where they work, and not be forced into an unnatural existence in men's hostels. African women want to be with their menfolk and not be left permanently widowed in the Reserves. Africans want to be allowed out after eleven o'clock at night and not to be confined to their rooms like little children. Africans want to be allowed to travel in their own country and to seek work where they want to and not where the Labour Bureau tells them to. Africans want a just share in the whole of South Africa; they want security and a stake in society.

Above all, we want equal political rights, because without them our disabilities will be permanent. I know this sounds revolutionary to the whites in this country, because the majority of voters will be Africans. This makes the white man fear democracy.

But this fear cannot be allowed to stand in the way of the only solution which will guarantee racial harmony and freedom for all. It is not true that the enfranchisement of all will result in racial domination. Political division, based on colour, is entirely artificial and, when it disappears, so will the domination of one colour group by another.

During my lifetime, I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal, which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.' Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela articulated a dream; he had imagination for a world that transcended his reality. At the same time, it was not a dream that would create inequality. It was not a dream that would only benefit a certain group. It was a dream that could and would benefit everyone.

Identifying the contemporary context

Use the questions given earlier to explore this idea and what it looks like in your own context.

You may have a group that has a keen interest in your **historical context**. In this case, they may be asking how they can link their faith to their **historical context** in order to better understand how to faithfully live in the present.

- What are the contemporary parallels of this event?
- What does this issue look like today?
- What does our Sacred Story teach us about this issue?
- How can we understand it more biblically?

Choosing the text

Whichever text you choose, make sure that you explore the original context and engage people's imagination.

- Genesis 1 and 2 (God's imagination for the beloved community and the world)
- Exodus 20:1–17
- Jeremiah 29:1–14
- Isaiah 61
- Micah 4:1–5
- Galatians 3:26–29

The passage below (Exodus 20:1–17) is known as the giving of the ten commandments. The context of this passage is the narrative around which the people of God have shaped their identity and their knowledge of God.

'Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

‘...FEAR CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO STAND IN THE WAY OF THE ONLY SOLUTION WHICH WILL GUARANTEE...HARMONY AND FREEDOM FOR ALL.’

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for, I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.' (NRSV)

Method of reading the text

Take some time to be alone and read the text [see *methodology*]. Do some background study on the text. When was it written? By whom? Why was it written? What date is given to the text? The date will offer insights into the context. What was going on in the life of the author at the time? What was going on in the life of the hearers at that time? What was possible for them to believe? What was possible for them to know?

Many scholars are convinced of a post-exilic date for the writing of this text. They estimate that it was written as the Hebrews were getting ready to return to Jerusalem after 70 years in exile in Babylon. They would have had time to tell and retell the stories of God, passed on to them by their ancestors. (The date and authorship of this passage won't influence the outcome in any critical way, but it will determine the questions asked.)

After discussing some of the background to the text, allow people to spend time alone, reflecting and reading.

Ask them to rewrite the text in such a way that they imitate the style of Martin Luther King Jr. Instead of saying, 'I have a dream...', begin each new commandment with the words: 'God has a dream...'

You could also combine this method with Paraphrasing [see *methodology*] and then give everyone a chance to write up a final copy to present to the group.



THEME 6: HOSPITALITY

Introduction

The painting on the previous page is called *The Trinity* and is the most famous work of 15th century Russian monk artist, Andrei Rublev. The image depicts the three angels visiting Abraham at Mamre, as in Genesis 18 (NRSV).

Many scholars have reflected on this work, offering different interpretations of the image. It is widely accepted that this icon provides us with a beautiful representation of Rublev's idea of the Trinity.

This icon also helps us with an image of hospitality. Hospitality is portrayed in the presence of the table, food and company. The image also shows us that hospitality happens within the community. The image creates room. There is within it the opportunity to be included just as you are. The image evokes the memory of places where we find invitation, welcome and belonging. Hospitality, as it is presented to us in the stories of scripture, comes to us in our very imagination of who God is.

God is a community, One-in-Three and Three-in-One. In Genesis 18, three angels visit Abraham. This painting conveys to us the hospitality of Abraham, but it also communicates to us the origin of hospitality, which is the triune God. God initiates the contact, the invitation, the promise, the community and the covenant, and God is the very 'stickiness' that is, and creates, hospitality. God, by being God, One-in-Three, is community and holds community together. Hospitality is inherent in the repeated commandments of God to love our neighbour as ourselves, and to care for the orphan, the widow and the refugee.

The parable Jesus tells in Luke 14 is one such example. Guests are invited to a great dinner. After the invited guests decline the invitation, the master opens the invitation and invites everyone from streets and lanes of their town, bringing in the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. So too it is with the kingdom of God. The invitation is for us to bring even the parts of ourselves that are poor, crippled, lame and blind, so that we can be welcomed by God and find our place of belonging.

Hospitality is named as a gift of the Spirit. Not all of us have been given all the gifts. Paul recognises that there are some who have been given particular gifts with exceptional ability to exercise these gifts, and the body of Christ is built up and strengthened when they do. Just like the gift of faith, hospitality is also a fruit or consequence of being a disciple of Jesus. Acts 2 and 3 give us multiple examples of how the early church shared fellowship and possessions and went from home to home, meeting to pray, encourage one another and break bread together.

Perhaps print a copy of this painting for each participant and allow him or her to reflect on it for a few minutes. Ask them to discuss what they see in the painting and what it suggests about who God is, and what it says about hospitality.

Framing the historical context

Is there a story in your context where someone offered hospitality and that act helped to transform the community? Where the people who were welcomed became a gift to that very community?

If you need help in this section in your own context, try starting with the **sacred text** or **contemporary context** and then ask:

- What are the historical parallels for this issue?
- What did this issue look like 20, 50 or 100 years ago?
- How can we understand God's response to this issue in history?
- And consequently, how God worked and spoke in the past?
- What are the contemporary parallels?
- What does this issue look like today?
- How can we hear and see what God is doing today?
- How can we live more faithfully in the Sacred Story that God is telling about ourselves and our neighbours?

Identifying the contemporary context

You may have a group that has a keen interest in your **historical context**. In this case, they may be asking how they can link their faith to their **historical context** in order to better understand how to faithfully live in the present.

- What are the contemporary parallels of this event?
- What does this issue look like today?
- What does our Sacred Story teach us about this issue?
- How can we understand it more biblically?

Is there a story in your context where someone is practising hospitality and it's transforming your community? (For example, a story as in Acts 2 and 3, or the story of Ruth, or Acts 10.)

Choosing the text

- Acts 2 and/or 3
- Genesis 18
- Acts 10 (Peter and Cornelius)
- The book of Ruth

I would like to reflect on the story of Ruth and Boaz where we see many different examples, and even helpful actions, to follow when demonstrating to other people the hospitality of God who is Three-in-One.

Method of reading the text

Ruth is a short book. Read it together by dividing people into small groups of three or four. Then divide the book up into three or four equal(ish) parts, depending on who reads quickly or more slowly. Give each person some time to be alone and read through the passage they were assigned. After a reasonable amount of time, gather the group and, in chronological order, allow each person to retell in their own words the story they read. Pay attention to the examples and actions of hospitality. Have each person share their summary and insights with their group. By the end of the exercise, each group should have an overview of the book of Ruth.

Bringing closure

Once there has been sufficient time to read and reflect, allow time for a weaving together of the **sacred text**, **historical context** and **contemporary context**, asking how can we imitate what God is doing in the world? What kind of dream does God have for hospitality? And for us?

Drawing together

As you think about your context, please give yourself some time to think about how you could draw this together. Is there a story, a comment, an illustration, or an example that can allow you to draw together the **contemporary context**, the **historical context** and the **sacred text**. I encourage you to be courageous in trying this for yourself.

THEME 7: EMBRACE

Introduction

Theologian Miroslav Volf explores the issues of exclusion and reconciliation within and between communities. He uses the metaphor of 'the embrace' as a process for reconciliation and peacebuilding. This is a metaphor born out of the belief that the kin-dom of God is a kin-dom of love, and that therefore liberation and reconciliation must occur in a place of love. Volf's theology of embrace has four key elements:

- Repentance
- Forgiveness
- Making space in oneself for others
- Healing of memory

The movement towards the embrace is a journey that both sides of a conflict need to take. They can journey on their own, as part of their own healing process, moving towards repentance or forgiveness, as is relevant. But ideally each will undertake this journey in sight of the other, coming to hear what the other has experienced and having understood their perspective on a situation.

'The answer, I hope, would be that at the core of the Christian faith lies the persuasion that the 'others' need not be perceived as innocent in order to be loved, but ought to be embraced even when they are perceived as wrongdoers.'

It needs to be said, very clearly and without reservation, that the movement towards embrace does not mean the following:

- Putting oneself in harm's way when relationships with 'the other' have been violent or abusive.
- Trusting everyone.
- Remaining in relationships with people who have repeatedly abused power.

Writer Lisa Sharon Harper in her book *The Very Good Gospel* explains that 'goodness' is not inherently in anything, but that it lies between things – between people, between relationships and between ideas of 'the other'.

Repentance, forgiveness, making space in oneself for others and healing of memories are not to be seen as four steps to fixing what is wrong. They do, however, provide milestones on the journey towards righteousness. The words depend on each other to provide markers on a journey that looks more like a spiral than a straight line. While the trajectory is forward, we also sometimes circle back, revisiting the same places with different perspectives and new insights.

Barbara Brown Taylor, American Episcopal priest, professor, theologian and preacher, in her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark* puts it this way: 'The journey of life is more like that of a sailboat than a train. On a train, the stations are predictable and clearly marked and are accompanied by a timetable with perfect estimated times of arrival. A sailboat is dependent on the movement of the wind [Spirit] moving and detours and stops and rough waters and stillness.'

Framing the historical context

Within the four elements of repentance, forgiveness, making space and healing of memory, there is an implied injustice or a record of an historical wound or conflict. I would suggest that this reflection begins with framing the **historical context**.

This is a story about a young, white South African man named Stefaans Coetzee. He and his friends were motivated by racism and planted bombs in a shopping centre in a 'black neighbourhood' one Christmas Eve. All of them ended up in prison. There, Stefaans met a key figure of the Apartheid government. They were both serving long sentences for hate crimes and murder. Stefaans underwent the 'Restorative justice' training and began a journey toward his own healing. To cut a long story short: the victims of the bombing went to see the judge and advocated for his parole. Today, Stefaans is a free man and involved in that same community he once tried to harm.

If you need help in this section in your own context, try starting with the **sacred text** or **contemporary context** and then ask:

- What are the historical parallels for this issue?
- What did this issue look like 20, 50 or 100 years ago?
- How can we understand God's response to this issue in history?
- And consequently, how God worked and spoke in the past?
- What are the contemporary parallels?
- What does this issue look like today?
- How can we hear and see what God is doing today?
- How can we live more faithfully in the Sacred Story that God is telling about ourselves and our neighbours?

Identifying the contemporary context

Think about the metaphor of the embrace. As you listen to stories from your **contemporary context**, ask yourself where you see this metaphor.

You may have a group that has a keen interest in your **historical context**. In this case, they may be asking how they can link their faith to their **historical context** in order to better understand how to faithfully live in the present.

- What are the contemporary parallels of this event?
- What does this issue look like today?
- What does our Sacred Story teach us about this issue?
- How can we understand it more biblically?

Additional questions:

- Who is Jesus?
- What does Jesus do in Luke 19 that shows us an example of embrace?
- What other revelation is Luke giving to us about who God is and what God desires from us?
- What will it mean for you to follow Jesus in this way?
- How do the four elements that Miroslav Volf explores help you consider this journey towards embrace?

Choosing the text

- Acts 9 (Saul's conversion and the embrace of Ananias)
- Matthew 26:20–26 (Jesus and Judas)
- Luke 19 (Jesus and Zacchaeus)
- Genesis 4: 8–16 (God embraces Cain, after the murder of Abel)

The Passion narratives that we find in the gospels give us an account of this kind of metaphor when Jesus utters the words, 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do'.

Method of reading the text

Luke 19

I recommend a narrative reading of this story [see *methodology*]. Take some time to explore the context of the Roman Empire and the role of tax collectors in society. Zacchaeus is a corrupt tax collector which makes him a rich thief. He hears about Jesus. What does he think or expect or imagine will happen? Why does a rich man not get pride of place when people gather to see Jesus arriving in town? Why is he doing the undignified thing of climbing in a tree? What do you think happens in neighbourhoods when he is seen out and about?

Characters: Zacchaeus, Jesus, disciples and crowds.

In the crowd are people Zacchaeus has 'bought' as part of his corrupt schemes, people he has robbed, people who admire him and people who hate him.

THEME 8: POWER

Introduction

'Nearly everyone can stand adversity, but if you want to test a someone's character, give them power.' Abraham Lincoln.

'Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anaemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.' Martin Luther King Jr.

God is introduced in the story of Genesis as a God of power. Power to speak, create, love, forgive, protect, covenant, inspire, transform, assist... We are the crown of creation. We are created by God, but also created in God's image. As people who bear God's image, we have been given the capacity to become like God. But this has limits. We can become like God in God's goodness; we cannot become like God in God's greatness. Every attempt in history to imitate God's greatness has resulted in the abuse of power, the creation of injustice and the marring of the image of God in others.

There are many different kinds of power. Power can subjugate, power can recreate, power can affirm, power can intimidate. In Exodus 33:18 we see a demonstration of godly power. In this account, Moses asks to see God. God responds to Moses' request by revealing the power of God's goodness. Another example of godly power is found in Philippians 2: 1–8. A demonstration of God's power in the incarnation of Jesus reminds us that power is to be used for the benefit of all. Jesus emptied himself of power. Notice the movement of power in this account. Jesus doesn't only empty himself of power, Jesus takes on the role of servant. Jesus, being equal to God, does not use this possession of power to his own advantage or for his own benefit, but makes himself nothing, taking on the nature of a slave. Slaves have no rights and no leverage. They are subject to those who wield power over them.

All of us have access to some kind of power; from babies who learn to cry for attention, to friends retelling stories that centre themselves as heroes of those stories, to recognised leaders of diplomacy and generosity, and to you and me when we read the Bible together. We must decide what we will do with our power. We must ask ourselves what our power will be used for. The economic power of the taxes we pay, or the commercial power of where we choose to shop, or the relational power of who we choose to love, all give opportunities for how we will follow Jesus and what we will do with our power. All the choices we make regarding the use of our power (political, religious, social and economic) should benefit 'the least of these'. As we examine this topic of power, scripture invites us to become imitators of God and imitators of Jesus in the way we use power.

Framing the historical context

There are many undocumented accounts of Nelson Mandela, while President of South Africa, demonstrating his power. One such account was of an old white lady whose car had broken down on the side of the road in the rain. Mandela was on his way to an important engagement. He saw the lady and asked his driver to stop. He got out of his car, walked over to her and stood by her. He then said to her that he would wait with her until her car was fixed. His bodyguards soon realised that he was not going anywhere until the lady had been helped. This required them to use their power to help her so that they could continue to go about their important business. She was soon on her way and so were they.

Another account tells of Mandela inviting a wealthy and important white businessman to his home for breakfast. He noticed two people in the car and quickly arranged for an additional setting at the table. When the businessman saw three place settings at the table, he assumed the President had invited another guest. Mandela asked him about the other man in the car. The businessman explained that it was his driver. Mandela insisted that the driver, a black man, be welcomed in his home and join them at the table for breakfast. Mandela went on to conduct this important meeting with this very important businessman while his driver sat at the table with them, listening to every word that was being discussed.

In both of these accounts, Mandela used his power for the benefit and blessing of another person.

Mandela also visited the homes and families of the very men who had kept him in prison. During his presidency, he demonstrated the power he had to forgive and invited them to join him in building a new South Africa.

At the centre of Mark's gospel is the question, 'Who do you say I am?' Every story in Mark attempts to reveal the identity of Jesus and expose the nature of God. In Mark 5 we see three times three different people fall down before Jesus (Mark 5:6, 22, 33). As you read the passage, pay particular attention to Jesus' use of power and the movement of power within the story. In Mark 5:8, Jesus uses his power to heal and deliver Legion, a demon-possessed man. Jesus uses his power to drive pigs, which were considered offensive and unclean, out of the area. In Jesus' encounter with Jairus, the powerful religious leader of the day, Jesus uses his power to heal a bleeding woman first. This powerful religious leader has to wait while Jesus, the powerful healer, pays attention to this bent-down woman. Jesus not only heals her and talks to her in public; he transfers power to her – power for her physical healing and social power, as she engages his attention above the request of the powerful religious leader Jairus. There is one more movement of power worth noticing. When Jesus asks the question, 'Who touched me?', the only beneficiary of the answer is this bleeding woman. Jesus admits to being touched, and therefore being made unclean, by this woman. This means that the law now prohibits him from entering the home of the leader of the synagogue. This however does not stop Jesus. The power of his love compels him to break this law and go to Jairus' home, and to raise his daughter from the dead. He further demonstrates that the power of love – moving from him to the woman, and from him to Jairus, and from him to Jairus' daughter – is always more powerful than the law. The law to love governs our use of power.

If you need help in this section in your own context, try starting with the **sacred text** or **contemporary context** and then ask:

- What are the historical parallels for this issue?
- What did this issue look like 20, 50 or 100 years ago?
- How can we understand God's response to this issue in history?
- And consequently, how God worked and spoke in the past?
- What are the contemporary parallels?
- What does this issue look like today?
- How can we hear and see what God is doing today?
- How can we live more faithfully in the Sacred Story that God is telling about ourselves and our neighbours?



Photo: Warren Wong/Unsplash

Identifying the contemporary context

You may have a group that has a keen interest in your **historical context**. In this case, they may be asking how they can link their faith to their **historical context** in order to better understand how to faithfully live in the present.

- What are the contemporary parallels of this event?
- What does this issue look like today?
- What does our Sacred Story teach us about this issue?
- How can we understand it more biblically?

Think about a place in your context where power is needed, or where power is being abused, or where power is being misunderstood. Think of a place where the power of Jesus can help transform injustice, or a place where service is needed and the law of love must govern the use of power.

Some questions for discussion:

- On a sheet of paper, draw a symbol of power.
- Share your symbol with one other person.
- Reflect on the two quotes from Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. What do these say to you about power? What do you think power is for?
- Share a story with one other participant about when you made a good choice about how you could use your power.
- Think of a time when you did not make a good choice about the use of power available to you. If you need to, take some time to ask God for forgiveness. Take some time to pray for anyone you may have hurt as a result of your choices. Ask God if there is anything else you may need to do to make that right.

Choosing the text

- Philippians 2:1–8 (NIV)

'Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mind-set as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!

This poem/hymn of the early church, which Paul records for us in the book of Philippians, is a beautiful record of how God views power.

Method of reading the text

I would use the method of rewriting the text and get people to share that with one another. As you rewrite the text, try writing it to yourself, giving yourself some advice about how to use power.

Return to the sacred text

Rewrite it a second time. This time, write it to a leader in government, or church or business in your **contemporary context**, telling them what you think about how power could be used for transformation and to bring justice and reconciling love.

THEME 9: RESTITUTION

Introduction

There are many ideas and metaphors used to explain restitution, sometimes by the use of the term 'equity' when compared to 'equality'. The Restitution Foundation in South Africa uses the illustration of a soccer field that is not on level ground and there is no changing of sides. Historically in South Africa, white people would be the ones playing downhill and black people would be the ones playing uphill. Equality, which came with democracy and a new constitution, is levelling the playing field. Restitution is addressing the inequality of the score.

Rev Dr Timothy Tee Boddie says this about restitution: 'If you take my car today and return it next week, you would not be giving me a handout, you would be doing the right thing.' I would add that if you return to people what has been taken from them, you not only do what is the right thing, but what is just – and you humanise yourself in the process.

Framing the historical context

In 1913 in South Africa the Land Act was passed. In summary, the land in South Africa was to be divided up as follows: 80 per cent of the land was to be for the exclusive ownership of white people and 20 per cent of the land could be owned by the State and natives (anyone who wasn't white).

This began a series of papers and reservations about the Land Act. Many protested and tried to fight it. The Land Act was followed by the Group Areas Act, which further dispossessed black people of land in South Africa. By 2017, black people still owned less than 30 per cent of the country's land.

The Land Act of 1913 was only one of hundreds of laws that were passed in order to create a wealthy white minority and an ever increasing economically impoverished black majority. More than 100 years later, more than 75 per cent of the land in South Africa is still owned by white people. Three generations of white heirs to white-owned property in prime locations, with the best schools and public transport systems, have created two metropolises with the largest disparity between rich and poor in the world. The stark reality of this economic divide is racial.

During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa, many stories were heard and documented about the systemic and intentional machinery of the Apartheid systems. Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, in his recommendations to the State under the leadership of President Nelson Mandela, suggested that a 'wealth tax' be imposed on all people or families with a net worth of a certain amount. He suggested that this could then serve as a 'Restitution Fund' of sorts, to help build schools, improve education, provide housing and much needed healthcare facilities in a country with an HIV infection rate of 800 people per day. However, in a country where more than 70 per cent of the population are self-professed Christians, there was huge resistance and the tax was never imposed. There are many reasons given to justify this: none satisfy people any longer.

If you need help in this section in your own context, try starting with the **sacred text** or **contemporary context** and then ask:

- What are the historical parallels for this issue?
- What did this issue look like 20, 50 or 100 years ago?
- How can we understand God's response to this issue in history?
- And consequently, how God worked and spoke in the past?
- What are the contemporary parallels?
- What does this issue look like today?
- How can we hear and see what God is doing today?
- How can we live more faithfully in the Sacred Story that God is telling about ourselves and our neighbours?

Identifying the contemporary context

Young black South Africans have been involved in a series of prolonged protests rejecting the status quo and insisting that something be done to bring about restitution. Many young white South Africans have responded by saying that they never benefited from Apartheid, nor did they participate in it. Their parents worked hard and they deserve the economic privilege that they now enjoy.

You may have a group that has a keen interest in your **historical context**. In this case, they may be asking how they can link their faith to their **historical context** in order to better understand how to faithfully live in the present.

- What are the contemporary parallels of this event?
- What does this issue look like today?
- What does our Sacred Story teach us about this issue?
- How can we understand it more biblically?

Choosing the text

- Leviticus 25
- Luke 19:1–10

Method of reading the text

I suggest a narrative method of reading Leviticus 25 [see *methodology*].

When this text was actually written does not affect the message it communicates, but where you date the text will affect the opinions and ideas you bring to it, and your understanding of the exile. Whatever your belief of the date and authorship, don't let that get in the way of the message.

This passage comes to us as part of the extension of the Law. God has a dream. God's dream is for the people of God to be good signposts to what God is like. This Law of the Sabbath, like the whole law, teaches us what God is like, what God dreams about, and what kind of people we should seek to be. It gives quite a lot more detail of how the people of God should live.

In groups of four, each person takes on one of the following characters:

- Imagine you have been chosen to be a Priest from the house of Levi: hearing this law means you need to teach it to the people of God.
- Imagine you have great debt: enslaved by Egypt, you also owe many other Hebrews money and things you've needed to borrow over the years.
- Imagine you are a business professional: always seeing the gaps and the need, you know you can make a little extra on the side. As a result, you have great wealth and you own livestock. You have people working for you. They have managed your small gardens since you arrived in Egypt.
- Imagine you are a day labourer who works for farmers at harvest times: it's seasonal work, but provides a steady income for you and your family. You also help out as a gardener for those who work every day. You are not able to work for Pharaoh.

Take some time to get into character in your imagination. What kind of day is it? What are you wearing? What did you eat? Imagine the food. Who is your family? Do you have children? How old are they? Picture your house and sit in your favourite chair at your house.

Now, in your group of four, sit so that you can hear one another and share your responses to the questions you choose to discuss out loud from the narrative reading.

Moses has called you together. You have left Egypt, but you are not yet in the Promised Land. You are listening to all that God said through Moses. You hear the text being read.

- What is the first thing you want to question?
- What becomes of concern to you?
- What do you want to celebrate in this passage?
- You are still an oppressed people. Who do you think this text should be for?
- What value does this passage add to your life, where you are right now? [In character]
- What does this mean in a **contemporary context** today?
- Does this passage still apply today?
- What about this passage and Isaiah 61?
- What about this passage and Luke 4?
- As obedient disciples, what do you think we should do about this?

THEME 10: IDENTITY

Introduction

In 1995 in South Africa, a group of people got together and established a foundation called The Nelson Mandela Children's Fund. They wrote to the then President, Mr Mandela, asking him for a donation towards the establishment of this foundation. A few weeks later, they received a package from the President's office. It was a shoebox. Inside was a dusty pair of worn, size 8, black shoes. They were puzzled. 'What do we do with a second hand pair of shoes?' they wondered. On further inspection they found a note which read, 'In response to your request, please find inside the box the shoes I wore the day I was released from prison. Sincerely, Nelson Mandela.' The shoes went from being a second hand pair of dusty shoes to a national treasure. They auctioned the shoes and raised enough money to establish their organisation.

**OUR IDENTITY COMES FROM WHO
GOD IS, NOT WHO WE ARE,
NOR WHAT WE'VE DONE**

When we think of ideas of identity, scripture makes it clear: our value is not derived from who we are or what we have produced or have failed to produce. Like the pair of shoes, our value comes from whose we are. God made us and declared us worthy to be image-bearers of God's identity in the world.

Genesis 1:27 is a primary text when we talk about identity. We are created by God and in God's image. Our inherent value comes from this truth. There are many systems, structures, ideologies and ideas that compete with this truth by distracting us from remembering our true identity. Our identity as image bearers of the living God makes us all equal and gives us all authority, regardless of race, social standing, education, nationality, education, bloodline, religion or caste.

Within our baptism we are given a brand new identity: 'I am the beloved. All are the beloved. I am not God. No one is God.' (Unknown)

Our identity comes from who God is, not who we are, nor what we've done. When we relate to anyone in a way that disagrees with what God says about them and their identity, we sin. To disagree with God is not neutral. To disagree with God is to call God a liar.

Many stories in scripture very often include a reminder of who we are and a re-creation of our identity. For example:

- Abram becomes Abraham
- Sarai becomes Sarah
- Simon becomes Peter
- Saul becomes Paul



God is always doing the work of upgrading our identity. In Judges 6 we are told that out of fear Gideon was threshing wheat in a wine press. When the angel visits him, he is called 'Mighty Warrior'. His identity goes from fearful wheat-thresher to Mighty Warrior. Mary, Palestinian-born, poor girl betrothed to Joseph, is called 'blessed among all people'.

When Jesus was baptised, he heard the words of his own identity: 'You are my beloved.'

Framing the historical context

In many countries in the world, people with power commodified other people who had less power, human beings were regarded as cargo and traded for profit; the slave trade that thrived during the 15th to 19th centuries only happened because there was a contesting of human identity. From the cotton fields of the Bible Belt, to the cane fields of Haiti, to the gold mines in the Congo and Ghana, the failure to recognise the identity of human beings allowed world industries in the trade of cheap or enslaved human labour to grow and thrive.

In the days of Pharaoh, your value was measured by how many bricks you (as an enslaved Israelite) could make in a day; in the cotton fields of the Bible Belt, your value was measured by how many bags of cotton you could pick; in the gold mines of Congo and South Africa, your value was measured by how many shiny pieces of precious metal you could harvest from the belly of the earth.

If you need help in this section, try starting with the **sacred text** or **contemporary context** and then ask:

- What are the historical parallels for this issue?
- What did this issue look like 20, 50 or 100 years ago?
- How can we understand God's response to this issue in history?
- And consequently, how God worked and spoke in the past?
- What are the contemporary parallels?
- What does this issue look like today?
- How can we hear and see what God is doing today?
- How can we live more faithfully in the Sacred Story that God is telling about ourselves and our neighbours?

Identifying the contemporary context

Today the geography of the slave trade has changed. From human trafficking to child labour to the exploitation of unskilled labour, we have created new instruments to measure the value of a human being. God is not neutral on the topic of slavery. God has not simply placed a very high value on human life – no, instead God has placed an absolute, infinite value on every human life.

Where in our neighbourhood do we see people's value being determined by what they can produce? Today, the sales agent, the marketing executive and the farm labourer in the coffee plantations in Latin America, or in the beautiful wine estates of South Africa, have been re-ascribed differing human values. The value of each is no longer absolute or infinite, but considered very high or very low. This is a direct contradiction to the truth of Genesis 1:27.

Wherever human value is measured by what a human has produced, or by what a human owns, we have created slavery. Enslaved to a new value chain, we become commodities and commodify others in our attempts to attain value.

You may have a group that has a keen interest in your **historical context**. In this case, they may be asking how they can link their faith to their **historical context** in order to better understand how to faithfully live in the present.

- What are the contemporary parallels of this event?
- What does this issue look like today?
- What does our Sacred Story teach us about this issue?
- How can we understand it more biblically?

Choosing the text

- Exodus 20:8–11
- Leviticus 25

God commands the emancipated Hebrew people to have a day of rest: one day a week for them to remember they are not equal to what they produce; a full day to remember and recall stories of God's provision and God's production of all that is good; a day to tell stories and to take time to notice one another. A day for affirmation, where each one gets to say, 'Yes, I agree with God. You are valuable and precious because of whose you are. Your value does not come from what you've done or produced, nor from what you've failed to do. Your value comes from God who created you.'

Method of reading the text

On your own, read through Exodus 20:8–11 and Leviticus 25. How could these laws shape your identity? What does God say about who you are and your value to him?

- Write down five value statements about yourself that God would be able to agree with. This might be difficult to do, but it is important to realign our ideas about our own identity with God's ideas.
- Think of someone you find difficult to love. Perhaps someone from a different race, gender, creed, nationality or political party. When you are ready, declare your value statements, but replace your name with their name.
- Consider the words: 'I am the beloved, all are the beloved. I am not God; no one is God.' What do these words mean to you? What do they say about your identity?
- In small groups of three or four, read to one another the value statements you have written about yourselves. As a small group, spend some time writing five collective value statements – statements that would agree with what God already says about your value.

**YOU ARE VALUABLE AND PRECIOUS
BECAUSE OF WHOSE YOU ARE. YOUR
VALUE DOES NOT COME FROM WHAT
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WHAT YOU'VE FAILED TO DO. YOUR VALUE
COMES FROM GOD WHO CREATED YOU.**

IN CLOSING

Thank you so much for taking the time to read and use this resource.

My deepest longing is that, as children of God, we read the word of God in the places where God has called us to be. I trust that you have been able to make better connections between the **sacred text** and your contexts, and developed some new friendship groups. I hope that you were able to gather people in your communities, hear stories, listen to people and explore the words of scripture together, so that you can find new ways of living out God's word and God's story in your neighbourhood a little better.

I welcome any feedback, ideas and suggestions you may have. I would love to hear from you and how you adapted the material, so that we can share your wisdom with others.

Your fellow pilgrim

YUS



Section 4

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

SECTION 4: BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Contextual Bible Study

There have been several references to Contextual Bible Study methods. This is a particular way of reading scripture that is ground-breaking and very helpful for unlocking the treasures of scripture. A Resource Manual is freely available online, with sample studies included. It is a 40-page document, but you will only need to read pages 8–12 to understand the concept of Contextual Bible Study.

You can find the Resource Manual for Contextual Bible Study at:

http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/Ujamaa_CBS_Bible_study_Manual_part_1_2.sflb.ashx

A Contextual Bible Study for the story of Esther can be found online at:

<http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/esther.sflb.ashx>

Appendix

The appendix below is part of a blog entry by Christena Cleveland called *How to be last: Towards a practical theology for privileged people*⁸.

Jesus isn't interested in equality

Jesus of Nazareth, the greatest revolutionary ever, often used stories to describe his vision of a just world. The story of the workers in Matthew 20:16 offers privileged people a challenging theology of justice and equity.

From The Inclusive Bible:

'The kingdom of heaven is like the owner of an estate who went out at dawn to hire workers for the vineyard. After reaching an agreement with them for the usual daily wage, the owner sent them out to the vineyard.

About mid-morning, the owner came out and saw others standing around the marketplace without work, and said to them, "You go along to my vineyard and I will pay you whatever is fair." At that they left.

Around noon and again in the mid-afternoon, the owner came out and did the same. Finally, going out late in the afternoon, the owner found still others standing around and said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day?"

"No one has hired us," they replied.

The owner said, "You go to my vineyard, too."

When evening came, the owner said to the overseer, "Call the workers and give them their pay, but begin with the last group and end with the first."

When those hired late in the afternoon came up, they received a full day's pay, and when the first group appeared they assumed they would get more. Yet they all received the same daily wage.

Thereupon they complained to the owner, "This last group did only an hour's work, but you've put them on the same basis as those who worked a full day in the scorching heat."

⁸<http://www.christenacleveland.com/blog/2016/12/new-series-how-to-be-last-a-practical-theology-for-privileged-people>

"My friends," said the owner to those who voiced this complaint, "I do you no injustice. You agreed on the usual wage, didn't you? Take your pay and go home. I intend to give this worker who was hired last the same pay as you. I'm free to do as I please with my money, aren't I? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

If we apply a critical lens to this story, we witness the social dynamics in Jesus' vision of a just world. Jesus begins by declaring that this story – the narrative, social and economic dynamics, emotions and result – is an accurate picture of a just world (ie, 'the kin-dom of heaven' in which all share in the kinship and mutuality of humanity). Then he takes his time describing the owner's laborious process of hiring workers at four different points in the day, each time trekking back and forth between the marketplace and vineyard. In doing so, Jesus, the consummate social scientist, describes the powerful social stratification in his society.

**JESUS ISN'T INTERESTED
IN EQUALITY**

Like our contemporary society, Jesus' society was rife with xenophobia, racism, sexism and other oppressive systems in which some people had access to employment based on their social memberships and others didn't. At the start of the day, the owner of the vineyard goes out and hires the first group of people. Given the inequality in Jesus' society, this group of 'first picks' is presumably full of the most privileged people in the labour force: in other words, the most 'qualified' according to the unjust social standards. In contemporary terms, these people would be the physically and mentally able, the people who speak the local language, the documented immigrants and/or national citizens, the white people, the formally educated, etc. The privileged people were hired at the start of the work day and earned the highest wages, commensurate with the hours they worked.

But the owner returns throughout the day, each time picking among the 'leftovers,' (ie, the people with less and less privilege). His actions proclaim that there's a need for everyone in Jesus' vision of a just world, even the marginalised. This revelation alone is revolutionary. To create space for all people, regardless of social status and identity, goes against the social stratification in both Jesus' society and our contemporary society. However, Jesus goes even further – shocking everyone, especially the privileged workers – by paying each worker the same wage regardless of how many hours they worked.

**'THUS THE LAST WILL BE
FIRST AND THE FIRST
WILL BE LAST.'**

Then he punctuates the story with one of his most theologically challenging statements: 'Thus the last will be first and the first will be last.' And the privileged people who worked a full day are irate. They can't believe it! They were expecting equality. They were expecting to get paid more than the people who worked less than a full day. What they didn't know is that Jesus isn't interested in equality; Jesus is interested in equity. Jesus doesn't want everyone to be treated equally (ie, treated the same); Jesus wants everyone to be treated equitably (ie, each person is given what they uniquely need in order to fully participate in the kinship and mutuality of the kin-dom of heaven). In this story, equity meant that the privileged people, who had benefited from their privilege all day, received the same wage as the oppressed people who were not given the opportunity of full-day employment that the privileged people automatically received. It meant that in an equitable world, the first became last and the last became first.



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