



# **INTERPRETING THE BIBLE IN A WORLD OF MANY VOICES**

A Six Session Module  
2010

*Draft*



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## Leaders Notes

Welcome to this course on Interpreting the Bible!

It is designed to help churchgoers baffled by some of the divisions in the world church and aware that people are asking tricky questions like:

- Doesn't scripture itself come out of traditions which connived at or upheld oppression and abuse?
- Isn't one person's interpretation as good as another's?
- We can all put our own spin on things can't we?

The course assumes that such churchgoers have already used the Bible in a variety of settings but not in great depth. It anticipates that they are willing to have their assumptions about 'how to read the Bible' challenged!

## Session 1

### Only One Way to Read the Bible?

#### Introduction and Welcome

Leaders introduce themselves. Each member of the group introduces themselves and may say something about why they have come onto the course.

Explain practicalities, e.g. refreshments, toilets. Planned finishing time. Note any special needs, e.g. hearing or sight-impaired people and helping them to participate.

Confidentiality on all matters discussed in the group except those that are in the public domain!

#### Introductory Activity

Post it notes. Complete the following: *my favourite part of, or story in the Bible is...* Post on board or wall up front... Leader draws out from the participants a variety of reasons as to why particular passages are helpful.

#### Learning Objectives

- To help participants to identify how they personally benefit from or struggle with reading scripture
- To help participants understand that there is more than one approach to scripture
- To help participants to understand some of the reasons for this variety of approach

#### Learning Input

Read together St Mark 7. 24-30

Ask two members of the group to record the variety of response there is to this passage from within the group. Emphasize that there is no right/wrong interpretation in the present situation. What we are seeking to explore is the actual variety of impressions this passage makes on us.

Ask group members how they might paint this scene if they had a chance. Record some of the colours and emotions that are mentioned.

Say that, after some other activities this week, next week we will use a pattern called 'Lectio Divina', (divine reading/godly reading) for exploring the same passage in a variety of ways.

## Activity

Together identify some of the varied occasions we use scripture at? Feedback together. How might the settings we use the Bible in affect our understanding of it?

For example:

- same verse read at a funeral or sung in a cheerful song, or formal cantata
- reading the bible for our personal encouragement, reading it before preparing a lesson with children
- telling a bible story through 'Godly play'
- on a 'Steps' course [www.steps-course.org.uk](http://www.steps-course.org.uk)

## Review

What have you learned so far in this opening session? About your own and others' approaches to scripture?

To how wide an extent can the same passage be differently understood?

Does the medium make any difference?

- Recited from memory?
- Read from a book?
- Interpreted in a picture?

**Break - tea, coffee**

(Part 2)

## Group Activity – A familiar passage, through a new medium

The aim is to see how using a medium other than reading brings out different features or emphases. If your forte is 'Godly play' or 'Steps' you might wish to use that medium rather than a painting. Consider most of all what is likely to help the group view a familiar passage from a new perspective. Do whatever will most help the group take a new perspective. Sheer virtuoso skill on the part of the person who presents this bit is not necessary. If it's too well done, it could *distract* participants from the simple difference of approach we are trying to outline.

### Discuss

*Can members of the group remember any famous pictures of Bible scenes?*

Have with you an enlarged print of a famous painting along with you, or enough small copies for each to have one.

An easily accessible one is Titian's 'Noli me tangere' based on Jesus and Mary Magdalene in St John chapter 20 see

[http://www.artchive.com/artchive/T/titian/noli\\_me\\_tangere.jpg.html](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/T/titian/noli_me_tangere.jpg.html)

If you do this, read the Bible passage **without** the picture first. See what members find in the passage, then show them the picture and ask people to describe their feelings and thoughts (that is, feelings BEFORE thoughts). This can help people be in touch with their inner response to the scene.

### Connect the Learning

**Feedback in pairs or fours or whole group depending on the group.**

What different ways have we identified today of approaching a passage of scripture?

Have we noticed any way in which other members of our group come to the passages we have considered from a different perspective?

### This Session's Learning Outcomes: checking we are 'on target'

How do our different personality traits and learning styles extend our variety of approach to the Bible?

To what extent has this first session helped us see that there might be more than one approach to reading the scriptures?

Is there any problem with our talking so much about '**reading**' the scriptures? What other ways are there of 'hearing' it and taking it to heart?

### For Next Week

Ask members to apply 'Lectio Divina' to St Mark 7. 24-30.

(Leaders' give out Handout 1, 'Lectio Divina'. Participants should spend no less than half an hour in total with the passage, and no more than one hour! No need to take notes, unless folk wish to!)

Next week there will be a chance to discuss our further impressions of the St Mark passage, using this method.

## Session 2

### Becoming More Aware of Our Own Perspectives

#### Introductory Activity

Discuss how it felt to try the 'Lectio Divina' approach to scripture. (You might if appropriate mention how Corinne Ware has made links to her four spiritual types<sup>1</sup> (Heart, Head, Mystic, Kingdom). 'Spiritual type' is fully explored in the Faith and Life Course Unit 2.)

Ask group members if any of them preferred a particular approach among the four in Lectio Divina.<sup>2</sup>

Which approach did they find more difficult?

#### Learning Objectives

- To continue to deepen members' awareness of their own perspectives
- To show the value and the limitations of knowledge of the historical and geographical context of a given passage

#### Group Learning Activity – 'Lectio Divina' unpacked!

Look again at St Mark 7. 24-30

Ask group members to identify what they remember from their meditation according to **Read, Receive, Respond, Rest.**

Record striking features on a flipchart, if this is likely to help.

Again, emphasize the variety of meanings which come out of the passage.

Ask participants to note if and how the contributions of others in the group resonate with their own experience. Allow space for participants to share this if they wish.

#### New Information: the relevance of history and geography for St Mark 7, 24-30

(Some of these issues may have arisen already in discussion, in which case, there might be no need to repeat!)

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<sup>1</sup> *Discover Your Spiritual Type: A Guide to Individual and Congregational Growth* by Corinne Ware, p 107 (published by The Alban Institute, 1995)

<sup>2</sup> (Our preferred approaches to scripture may well reflect our spiritual type.)

- Tyre lay outside the borders of Galilee
- The issue of clean/unclean . (Tom Wright says of earlier in the chapter: ‘We’ve just heard Jesus say something, which, when decoded, undermines the protective fence that first-century Jews maintained around their identity’<sup>3</sup>)
- *Dogs* regularly used by Jews for all Gentiles, at that stage
- *Sir or Lord* was a ‘normal form of polite Gentile address’<sup>4</sup>
- Grain grown by the poverty-stricken Jewish peasants of Northern Israel was being sold on and exported eastwards to the Syro-Phoenicians. These people, unclean in Jewish eyes were wittingly or unwittingly, depriving the peasant farmers of Israel of food they needed themselves. If this is true, then Jesus finds himself being approached not only by a woman and a Gentile but by a representative of a nation who were importing food which Israelites could have benefitted from.<sup>5</sup>

Ask if participants have become aware of other historical or cultural issues around this passage.

Underline that, many years later, it is difficult to know how much importance to give to particular factors, e.g. *are we so sure that Jewish Grain was being sold on? How much should we be building our understanding of the story on Jew/Gentile, clean/unclean issues?*

Some interpreters think that history and the then context give us so little to be sure of that we are best to start with how the reader ‘hears’ it or ‘understands’ it today. This would be called a ‘reader’ centred approach.

## Discuss

How important do you think the history and the then culture should be in our understanding of the Bible today? (If any of the group have been to the Holy Land, would they like to say how experience of the places, culture, atmosphere, geography has affected their understanding of the Bible?)

Tom Wright detects ‘feminist agendas’ (in relation to the St Mark 7 passage which show the woman ‘correcting and indeed rebuking Jesus’ restricted viewpoint’.<sup>6</sup>

To what extent might such a feminist approach be fair to the passage?

## Review

Are we beginning in any way to be bewildered at the range of possible approaches?

What questions does this variety raise for us?

<sup>3</sup> Wright T. 2001 page 95 St Mark’s Gospel for everyone SPCK

<sup>4</sup> Hooker M. 1991 page 183 St Mark’s Gospel (A&C Black)

<sup>5</sup> Rajkumar Dalit Theology Past legacies, Present Predicaments and Future Possibilities. Unpublished thesis (2007)

<sup>6</sup> Wright T. 2001 p.95. ( St Mark for everyone SPCK)



## Break - tea, coffee

(Part 2)

(Group facilitators might prefer to leave the second half for an extra session?)

### Apply the Learning

Apply the learning to two passages of scripture by considering:

- the variety of our different understandings of the readings. In what particular ways do our approaches differ?
- how comfortable do we feel with this variety of approach among us?
- how much or little difference is made by our knowledge or ignorance of prevailing conditions in those days?

We suggest looking at the scene where Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth in St Luke chapter one, and Mary's apparent prototype in Hannah (1 Samuel ch1 v.1 – ch 2 verse 8)

It will be best if the leader decides how much of these passages should be read out, and how. Perhaps Luke 1.39-56 could be played from one of the Bible Society's tapes and then parts of the 1 Samuel could be read together.

### Summarising the Learning

- a) Can we describe the range of our personal responses to the Mary/Hannah/Elizabeth stories? Where/how do our approaches contrast? If we are all 'of one mind', see question b. But leader please be aware that participants may have hidden differences of approach which are worth bringing to the surface.
- b) Are there communities or groups of people in the world who might hear these stories differently to ourselves? In what different ways might they hear them? In China, where its 'one child per family'?  
  
(Try showing cards 4, 5, 6 and 10 from The Methodist Church/USPGs 'Born among us' pack.)<sup>7</sup> What might these artists have brought out particularly in the story of Mary and Elizabeth had they been illustrating this scene?
- c) Even if we were completely ignorant of the history of first century Palestine, and of the time of Samuel, what spiritual meanings might we draw from these passages, just as readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

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<sup>7</sup> Born among us All age Christmas resource inspired by the world church USPG and Methodist Church 2002 Amos, Claire, and Jarvis Judy borrowable from NERLR centre at Carter House, Durham, another copy for viewing at Newcastle Percy Main.

## Activity

Stage a discussion in small groups, based again on Luke 1.39-56. Ask the group members each to try to take one particular viewpoint and pursue or even stick to it (if the whole group is more than 10 members it will be essential to do this in two groups so as to give everyone an experience of joining in this 'staged' discussion). Be aware that there might be members of the group who have suffered the loss of a baby (before or after birth). (Sometimes this has happened years ago, but still is a significant, but half-forgotten issue)

Some possible viewpoints for group members to adopt:

- passionate about social justice and angry at the way the story is domesticated in nativity plays!
- a feminist point-of-view
- a group campaigning for the rights of the unborn child
- someone from a 'one child' family in China, or from a land where the infant mortality rate is very high
- someone with a strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary because of her readiness to respond with faith

Allow this to run for a maximum of 20 minutes.

## Reflection

After the exercise, ask the group members to feed back as to what the discussion felt like, as some members (or even they themselves) adopted positions they were unaccustomed to.

Thinking outside the box is difficult to do, because we all need a 'box' to start from! Hearing very different points of view (if we are willing to give them a hearing) may help us think 'outside the box' a little more.

We have spent a good deal of time in these first two sessions exploring our own starting-points. Our starting-point will of course be affected by the sort of church we have come from and are used to. (Different churches emphasise the Bible in different ways, e.g. at Anglo-Catholic churches the gospel-book is often raised in the air and kissed after the gospel reading. This is not done in some other churches, which take the scriptures very literally, without kissing them!)

Can we think of any other contrasts between ways different churches or traditions use the Bible?

Which churches give the pulpit prime place?

What about the place of the lectern?

How literal in their understanding of scripture are different churches/groups within churches?

How do churches committed to social justice use the Bible?

What about churches which emphasize the salvation of the individual?

Or churches which emphasize God's reign in the secular sphere?

## **Review**

In pairs explain in a minute what you have learned from this session and are confident in explaining to someone else.

End with the Grace

A Volunteer to do short opening and closing prayer for next session?

## Session 3

### Our Own Perspectives, and How We Might Broaden Them

#### Introductory Activity

Recall the passages considered last time from St Luke chapter 1 and the First book of Samuel chapter 1.

- a) Can we remember something of what we gained from our understanding of the stories?
- b) Can we remember a new insight on these stories from another culture?
- c) What limits our understanding of particular passages? (Include the obvious things e.g. our different culture, not understanding the then temple customs, re. the 1 Samuel.)
- d) Without trying to do the impossible, how could we at least broaden the perspective of our reading?

#### Learning Objective

- To help members evaluate their own approach with relation to accessible Bible passages

#### Learning Input

We seek to broaden our perspective on a now- familiar reading, with reference to feminist and dalit approaches to St Mark 7.24-30. Though the text is now very familiar, it will be good if all participants have it to hand.

- a) Can we recall our reactions to the suggestion that the Syrophoenician woman's assertiveness is significant in feminist terms? Whether we agree or not with a feminist approach, what might it add to the breadth of our understanding?
- b) It is Peniel Rajkumar, an Indian Dalit theologian who tells us how grain grown by the poverty-stricken Jewish peasants of Northern Israel was being sold on and exported eastwards to the Syro-Phoenicians. Dalit is a name for the 'untouchable' or Harijan class in India. Dahl is a substance 'ground down' from lentils. The Dalits are 'ground down' people. They have no place in the caste system. They are regarded as 'unclean' by the rest of Indian society. Many of them have to do the dirtiest and most menial of tasks, for a pittance so as to survive. Rajkumar makes much of the parallels between Jewish and Hindu-caste purity requirements. He points out that just as the Syrophoenician woman was impure and unclean in Jewish eyes, so are all Dalits in relation to those in the caste system. This woman lived on the borders of Israel. She was off the frontier for Jews, beyond the pale. 'Untouchables' identify with this experience. This story shows Jesus not only (after apparently major hesitation) having an exchange with this woman, but also being willing to learn from her!

## Review

In what ways does Rajkumar's approach extend for us new possibilities for understanding the passage?

## Break – tea, coffee

(Part 2)

## Connect the Learning

If we follow Rajkumar's Dalit interpretation of the passage:

- Who/what is clean/unclean in our society?
- What barriers do we impose towards those we or other parts of our society consider to be 'unclean'?
- Who, if anyone, is 'ground-down' today?
- Jesus remarked at the faith of this 'outsider'. Are there any ways in which we could better take note of the faith of people 'outside' church?
- What aspects of this story might be overlooked or skated over when it is preached on in the average church in the UK?
- In the parable of the Good Samaritan what is the significance of a Samaritan doing a 'Good' thing?
- Or the significance of the Samaritan leper being the only one to come back and say 'thank you' Luke 17. 11-19.?

## Decide on some action so as to hear of the faith of non-churchgoers or rare attenders

- Ask non-churchgoing friends a few questions from the attached questionnaire (record answers and discuss them together next week)
- Raise the subject with work colleagues: say that at this point you are not trying to evangelize them but you just want to know for the purposes of this little course, how much they do/don't believe in God. Try going somewhere which is off your normal territory, and ask a few people the same questions (a pub, club or coffee morning not on church premises).

(Questions are on Handout 2)

## Closing Prayer

## For Next Week

Read St John 1. 1-18.

After reading the passage carefully consider the difference between these two positions:

- people who emphasize the **personal** decision to receive Jesus and personal experience of him
- those who would emphasize the **corporate** nature of humanity and of Jesus' coming to earth to raise us *together* into God's presence

Some Christians give these equal emphasis, others veer in one direction or the other. Does the whole reading itself sit more comfortably with the personal salvation emphasis, or that of Jesus taking on and raising our humanity to God? Or does it give both equal weight?

## Session 4

### Various Church Traditions Differently Interpreting Scripture

#### Introductory Activity

##### Faith – off limits

Compare notes on the questionnaires you took out. Is there anything striking and refreshing in the replies you collected? What can we learn from people outside the church? Are there any circumstances in which they will demonstrate to use important spiritual things (as the Syrophenician Woman did)?

#### Learning Objectives

- To consider the variety of interpretation in the churches
- To find ways of benefiting from that diversity

#### Learning Input

##### Different church traditions on the same text

##### Traditions and their heroes

Introduce the idea of saints as heroes of Christian Faith. Has anyone ever noticed that churches and church traditions have their favourite saints? (You may want to bring contrasting pictures of particular saints.)

Or have on pieces of card the names of the following. Ask group members to discuss which churches would tend to venerate which ones.

John and Charles Wesley / John Knox / St Theresa of Avila / St Bernadette of Lourdes / St Vincent de Paul / English Martyrs / Nicholas Ridley / Thomas Cranmer / Josephine Butler / St Cuthbert of Lindisfarne / St Paulinus / Martin Luther / The Blessed Virgin Mary ( her Birth / The Immaculate Conception / The Annunciation / The Assumption)

Saints and heroes venerated give us a clue to a church's particular interests and ways of interpreting scripture. Saints who lived before particular church divisions occurred (e.g. Bede, Cuthbert) are claimed by almost everyone!

Why do we revere such radically different heroes? Including heroes who were on opposite sides, if not even enemies, at some stages in history?

Just as we choose different heroes, (often unconsciously) we or our church traditions have different priorities when we read scripture.

Show two pictures:

The Nativity at Night (Geertgen tot Sint Jans (about 1455/65; died about 1485/95) National Gallery NG 4081

and

The Light of the World (about 1900-04 William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) (London, the Dean and Chapter of St Pauls Cathedral.)

(Both can be found on the world wide web; search on name of painting and artist. These are also both to be found together in 'the Image of Christ', the catalogue of the exhibition 'Seeing Salvation' National Gallery 2000 pages 30-33.)

Read St John 1. 1-14

Consider how in the Sint Jans picture (and in many other nativity scenes) the glory shines, not on, but *out from* the Christchild. Note too the light on Mary's face!

Notice in the Holman Hunt picture how the Light of the World knocks at a door. This picture is based on Revelation 3.20 (have this verse read out).

St John chapter 1 verses 11 and 12 are often heard in a similar way: that is in the sense of receiving or allowing the Light of the world entry to our lives.

But how much is St John chapter one about individuals 'receiving Jesus' and how much is it about the word being made flesh for all to see? Or about our shared humanity being taken up into the divine?

Which churches or traditions might emphasize which aspects of the reading?

### A Note of Caution!

We need to avoid assuming that particular churches or people in them will always interpret the Bible in a particular way. Andrew Village's research emphasizes what he calls 'the amount of variability in interpretation, both within and between congregations'<sup>8</sup>;

*The Church of England is generally renowned for being a 'broad church', but even so it is remarkable just how much diversity there is in interpretative practice within a single denomination...*

*Even though some... (Anglican) churches have distinctive beliefs and practices, they still attract a range of people with different backgrounds, personalities and beliefs. This variability in people produces diversity in interpretative practice within the same congregation. This, it seems to me can only be a healthy sign because it points to an inclusivity and diversity that is at the heart of the foundational metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ. The dangers of a narrow, sectarian use of scripture are all too apparent through history, and diversity of approach represents one way in which common sacred texts can speak to different sorts of believers within a united church.*

Discuss – to what extent are we aware of variety or variability in interpretation of scripture within:

- a) the Anglican Communion/world-wide Methodist Churches/Reformed Churches in general?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Bible and Lay People Ashgate 2007 p.159-160

<sup>9</sup> Maybe it is best to omit to mention denominations not represented in the group



b) our own local church?

### **Break – tea, coffee**

(Part 2)

#### **Exploring the variety!**

Look again at St Luke chapter 1 verses 39-56.

We outline, a little crudely here, three different ways of reading this passage, each with its proponents in the Anglican Communion. Please consider what each 'approach' might hope to find in the passage.

1. What would those who consider Mary to be highly important find in the passage?
2. What would those who emphasize the importance of personal faith in response to God find?
3. What would those who emphasize social justice and the coming of God's kingdom on earth find in the passage?

#### **Summarise the Learning**

What different emphases do we notice in our local church or the wider church?

Can we examine carefully *our own thought-processes* regarding these issues?

What do we feel (emotionally) about those emphases?

What do we think (on a rational level) about those emphases?

What are we cautious about?

What do we see as offering new possibilities?

And finally –

What has particularly intrigued people today?

Are there any lingering questions?

Arrange for someone to lead an opening or closing prayer next week

For next week please read Genesis chapters 16 and 21. 1-21.

## Session 5

### Variety Applied – To a Less Familiar Old Testament Story

#### Introductory Activity

Ask the group among themselves to piece together what they remember of Abraham (you may like to use the story board material from Appendix 1 to help remind people of some of the story).

What is Abraham's importance for Israel, and indeed Christianity too?

Where does Hagar fit into the picture?

#### Learning Objectives

- That participants begin for themselves to read scripture from a number of perspectives, that we put into practice what we have learned so far

**Reading from a personal point of view as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Western Europeans (unless of course we also have other cultures represented in the group, in which case we benefit from their perspectives as well)**

Read together Genesis chapter 16.

- a) From an ordinary human and from male/female points of view, what are the various passions and feelings underlying the story?
- b) Could some imagine they are Abraham, others Sarah or Hagar? Once they have imagined themselves as part of the story, can they talk about how they might have felt? Look at Chapter 21.1-21 (as well as chapter 16) to help with this. Allow group members some space to think about how they might feel as one of these characters.
- c) What in particular strikes us most about the passage?

#### Reading With Some Knowledge of the Geography and Culture

- a) What does the story itself say about the geography of the setting?
- b) How does the geography affect the story?
- c) What is good about the desert? What is bad about it? Where else does 'desert' crop up in the scriptures? How did 'desert' affect local culture?
- d) What might the word 'desert/wilderness' evoke in Middle Eastern minds?

## Reading From Our Various Church Traditions

- a) Is the Old Testament considered to be important in our church/our part of the church? How much is it read or preached on?
- b) Read Galatians 4.v 21-- ch. 5. v 1. Which church traditions would be most comfortable with St Paul's use of this story? (Everyone will need at this point to give a little time to understanding Paul's slightly challenging allegorization of the Hagar story.) If we think this is far-fetched note how important St Matthew considered it to show that Jesus was descended from Abraham (via Isaac, not Ishmael!). (St Matthew 1.1.)
- c) Some church traditions would treat the Abraham stories as myth, that is stories with an important theological meaning. Others would regard them as fact, others again as somewhere in between. What difference does this make for our understanding of God and the world?

### Break – tea, coffee (here or later)

(Part 2)

## Reading From a Dalit Perspective <sup>10</sup>

These are notes on the Hagar and Ishmael story in a book of daily reading readings from Gurukul (= 'house of God') Lutheran College, Chennai, India. (The Dalit approach has much in common with Liberation approaches from South America in which the poor are encouraged to bring their experience alongside parallels in scripture.) The Indian English here will sound strange, but it is exactly as printed and circulated in the source quoted!

### *The Cry of the Dispossessed'*

*Denied of the right over ancestral property and inheritance, Hagar and Ishmael are wandering in the wilderness crying for water. Water is a basic human right, and its denial is a sin against humanity... When water becomes a commodity with a price tag, Hagar and Ishmaels are destined to die in the wilderness without access to drinking water.*

*The crisis of water is not a natural calamity. Rather it is a consequence of our projects of accumulation by dispossession. The story of Hagar and Ishmael provides us a lens to understand the contemporary crisis of water. The intimate violence of a slave woman's body for surrogacy and the subsequent disinheritance of her and her son from the ancestral property are integrally related with their desert experience and their cry for water. Accumulation is possible only through dispossession, and the dispossessed are the ones who groan for water in our world today. We meet them in a host of places where people are uprooted and dispossessed from their livelihood and lifeworld.*

*For Hagar it was the climax of a series of violence and rejection. Out of her despair, Hagar cried to the Lord. Ishmael and Hagar experienced God in the wilderness as a well of water. As we read in Chapter 16, Hagar named God El-roi, which means 'God-who-sees'. So, for the dispossessed who go through desert experiences God is ever present as wells of water in their struggles for survival. In the era of globalization with growing desertification and dispossession, let us nurture*

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<sup>10</sup> (see also Session 3)

*the springs of life.*

Prayer for the day (June 6<sup>th</sup> 07)

*God, the living water, enables us to become springs of water so that nobody will go thirsty. Amen.*

Thought for the day.

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*(Gurukul Daily Devotion 2007)*

**Do you think the Gurukul commentator in this passage above is fair to the Genesis text itself?**

Christopher Rowland (a Liberation Theologian) writes: *'the concerns you bring to the text may be as important as the biblical text itself'*.<sup>11</sup> What sort of concerns do we bring to the Bible usually? What sort of concerns might the poor bring? Could their immediate concerns (or ours, even) be as important as the text itself?

**Finally – as we balance this range of different readings, and remain the people we are in the place we are, can we summarise what is important in this reading:**

- a) for ourselves and Christians in general in Britain?
- b) for the world-wide church?

**For Next Week**

Read Luke 16. 19-31 and Acts 8. 26-40.

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<sup>11</sup> Revelation Epworth Commentaries 1993 pp. 6,7.

## Session 6

### Multi-faceted Bible DIY

#### Introduction

The Protestant Reformers tended to emphasise the importance of the individual's reading scripture. Since then, there have sometimes been problems when individuals have interpreted the Bible in inappropriate if not 'wacky' ways! Most have realised that interpreting the Bible needs to be a corporate exercise, that the individual's reading needs to be checked and balanced by that of the wider church.

Participants in this short course, realising that there are a great number of 'approaches', have opened the way for themselves and their sisters and brothers to a more balanced 'corporate' reading.

#### Learning Outcomes

- That group members personally try out the use of a number of interpretative approaches to the same passage
- That by doing this they begin to establish a habit of shared interpretation which includes being aware of a range of approaches

#### Preparation for Bible Study (in the goldfish bowl)

One group takes Luke 16, 19-31 and the other Acts 8, 26-40.

Please note that in this study nobody is expected to go beyond the knowledge they already have. On the other hand an imaginative guess at the then conditions, or as to how people in poorer countries might hear the story, might be very useful to get the group started. 'Correctness' is not what we are seeking, but instead an experience of looking at the same reading from a wider range of points-of-view.

Each group reads their passage, and prepares for the main discussion.

In the main discussion anyone can raise any point (that is anyone in the group 'in the goldfish bowl'). Someone however will need to chair each group, and to help the group stick to the passage, and to using a good variety of interpretative approaches.

Although members will not necessarily feel well qualified, please allocate some roles. (Inevitably people will stray into each other's roles once the discussion starts: this won't matter, as long as the variety of approach keeps on extending!)

- One person who will especially raise issues arising from the passage that might affect us in our personal lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- One person who will pose cultural or historical or geographical questions. (Not all these

necessarily apply very well to both passages; concentrate instead on what does apply, e.g. 'in what sort of culture do these stories/event arise?')

- One person will consider how they think people in their church might 'normally' hear the passage, and what questions they would ask of it.
- One person will read the passage from the point of view of poor, suffering and underprivileged people either in the UK or overseas.
- One person will chair the discussion.

(If there are still people to offer roles to, another could look at the passage as a 'story' or a literary piece, considering its literary value, being aware also of possible 'allegory' or hidden meaning.)

### **Bible Study – in the gold fish bowl**

Decide which group is to have its discussion first. Arrange the other group in a loose circle around the outside, so that they can all hear the discussion of the first group, and consider what is being said, **without joining in the discussion.**

The leader of the first group opens the discussion in that group (other group eavesdropping), encouraging the members of her/his small group to ask questions according to the points of view allocated to them earlier. Members may of course make statements, too, but the forming of questions should open up the discussion on a deeper level.

Allow 15 / 20 minutes for each group, with the other group listening in.

Before moving on to the second passage with the second group, allow ample time (flip chart handy to record things of general interest) for section 5:

### **Debrief on Multi-faceted Bible Study**

- a) Make sure that the group who have just participated get a chance to say what it felt like, what occurred to them in the process, and what important things were left unsaid.
- b) Only after a, ask the second group to express appreciatively what struck them about the discussion they witnessed. In particular: what did they notice about the groups' use of different interpretative stances? To what extent was the group genuinely trying out different interpretative starting points?
- c) Repeat the process the other way round after the second group have done their study and been observed by the first group.
- d) Encourage discussion of any questions or key points which have been recorded on the flip chart, or any other hidden questions which may be around, arising from either bible study, or from the whole process.

**Break – tea, coffee**

### **Appreciation forms – distribution and a chance to complete**

These allow members to evaluate the course against its learning objectives as well as their own expectations of the course. The forms also flag up the question of ‘where next?’ Allow 15 minutes for this.

### **Where next in Biblical Studies?**

10 minutes

- Opportunities for further study/support/mentoring
- Opportunities for ministry

### **Closing Act of Worship**

Along this or another pattern:

*Thank you* – for what went well in the course

*Sorry* – for what went less well, or for areas in which we need actively to change

*Please* – guide us as regards applying what we have learned and in further learning.

## Handout 1 (Session 1)

### Reading and Praying The Bible A Short Guide to “*Lectio Divina*”

**Select a scripture passage, e.g. St Mark ch 7 verses 24-30.**

**Read** ...using your senses to imagine the atmosphere of the story

Read the passage carefully, getting the sequence and detail without thinking too much about the *meaning*. Imagine the time of day, season of the year, smells of the land, sounds of the countryside, the human touches - all the elements that would make this scene real to you. Transport yourself into the setting using your imagination

**Receive** ...thinking and asking questions, to understand and reflect on the meaning of the passage

Read the scripture again. Why is there a record of this particular event or saying? What is the significance of this passage in the larger scheme of things? What does this piece mean? How does that affect your understanding of God? Of conduct? Do you see yourself in any of the characters in the passage?

**Respond** ...using feelings to hear the passage speak without ideas

Allow your feelings to surface as you read the passage again. Do you feel happy, sad, angry, or guilty? Silently or verbally talk this through with God; tell God what you feel about what you have read. Comment in your prayer on anything in the passage to which you respond.

**Rest** ... allowing the passage to make a deep impression

Sit quietly, breathe deeply and regularly, and let your mind go blank. As you quiet your inner self, simply listen in your heart. If you receive some impression or thought, quietly notice it; then focus your attention on remaining open. If you have no thoughts or impressions, return your mind to the scripture passage. After a while, open your eyes, rested and refreshed, expressing gratitude for your experience.

Adapted from *Discover Your Spiritual Type: A Guide to Individual and Congregational Growth* by Corinne Ware, p 107 (published by The Alban Institute, 1995) and *Open to God*, by Joyce Huggett, pp. 44 - 48 (published by Hodder & Stoughton, 1989).



## Handout 2 (Session 3)

It is easy to make wrong assumptions about what other people's views will be, without much evidence to go on. It is easy to dismiss people without really knowing what their beliefs and values are. Assumptions need checking.

*Why not try with some of your friends or contacts the questions on the grid below: If each of the group talks to a few people, it will be interesting for the group to compare 'returns' to see how near some values expressed came to Christian faith. Use the grid below to record people's answers.*

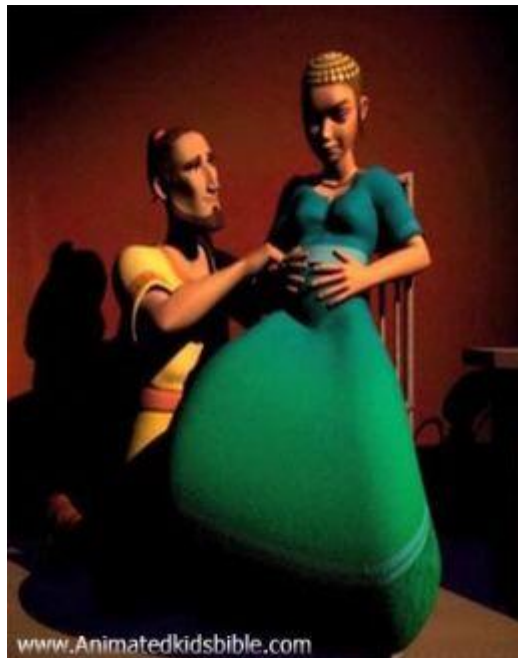
	<b>The things people value</b>	<b>Very important</b>	<b>Quite important</b>	<b>Not important</b>
1	Friends?			
2	Having enough money/other things to get by in life?			
3	Career or other personal opportunities?			
4	Spiritual meaning?			
5	Peace of mind?			
6	Good family relationships?			
7	A clear sense of who I am?			
8	More confidence of what is right/wrong?			
9	To be loved and to love?			
10	To make a difference in the world?			

## Appendix 1

### Abraham-Hagar-Ishmael



Here a picture of Abraham about to Sacrifice his son Isaac for God but it's only a test



This is Sarah sitting with Abraham. Sarah is pregnant with Jacob and Esau.



This is Abraham saying good bye to Hagar and her son Ishmael. Hagar upset Sarah so Sarah told Abraham her and her son must leave!

# God Builds His People

## The Story of Abraham



Abraham and his wife Sarah lived in Ur in the land of the Chaldeans. Abraham was a faithful man of God. One day God told Abraham to take all his family and belongings and leave Ur.



So Abraham and Sarah travelled many months, till they came to the land of Canaan which God had promised them. When Abraham first saw the new land, he built an altar to glorify God.



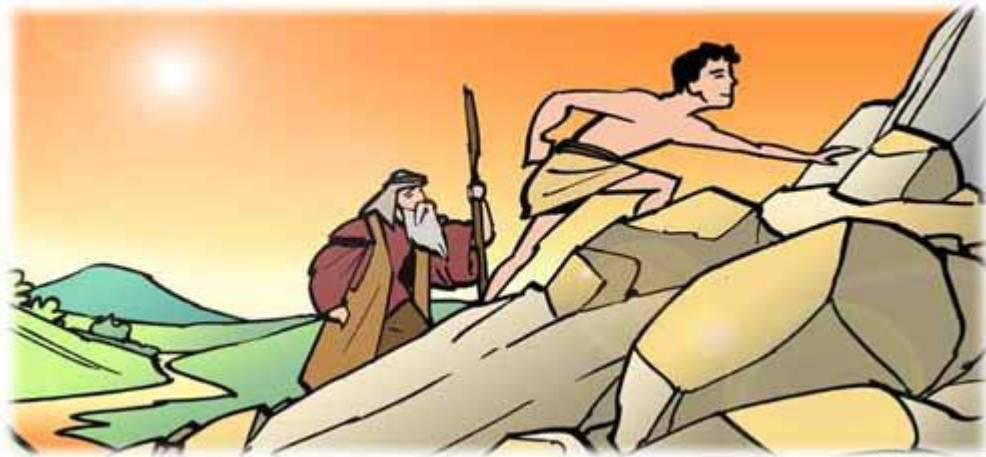
Abraham and Sarah lived many years in the Promised Land but had no children, even though God had told them they would have many heirs. But they began to not trust God, and Sarah gave her maid Hagar to Abraham to be his wife.



Abraham and Hagar had a child named Ishmael.



Finally the Lord blessed Abraham and Sarah with a child, even though they were very old. They named him Isaac. God told them that He would build His people through the descendants of Isaac.



One day God tested Abraham's faith. He told Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. Abraham took Isaac to a mountain and built an altar.



Isaac said, "Father, here is the fire and wood for the offering but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" Abraham said, "God will provide the lamb Himself."



And Abraham laid Isaac on the altar. But then an angel stopped Abraham. "Do not sacrifice your son," said God. "You have shown your devotion to Me by not withholding your only son from Me."



And just then Abraham saw a ram caught in the thicket. He took the ram and offered it in sacrifice in place of his son.



God said to Abraham, "Because you obeyed My voice and have not withheld your only son from me, I will greatly bless you, and your descendants will be as many as there are stars in the heavens!"

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