

The Bible in the Life of the Church



Case Study 2– Biblical Engagement with the Fourth Mark of Mission:

To seek to transform unjust structures of society:

- [a] unjust gender structures**
- [b] unjust economic structures**

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Case Study 2 – What light does the Bible shed on the Fourth Mark of Mission¹ – To seek to transform unjust structures of society?

Leader's Introduction

This Bible study is part of a wider initiative that is taking place throughout the Anglican Communion - *The Bible in the Life of the Church*. The purpose of the initiative is to explore how, as Anglicans, we actually use the Bible in our everyday lives as churches and individual Christians. As this is the second Case Study in the project we wish to build on what emerged from the first one in the process we are suggesting.

We are, therefore, asking various groups to undertake this Bible study using a number of specific texts from the Bible and seeking to answer a number of questions about these texts. At the same time we are asking these groups to reflect on both what emerged from the previous study and how they actually used the Bible in undertaking this study. The study is in three parts:

- Part 1 is reflecting on what emerged from Case Study 1 in relation to how we handle the Bible;
- Part 2 is the Biblical engagement – there is the option of two paths to follow in this part;
- Part 3 is reflecting on how the Bible was actually used in that engagement.

A decision will need to be made whether the group itself undertakes both all three parts or whether a couple of appropriate people be asked to observe the way the group undertakes Parts 1 & 2 and offers these observations as Part 3. We say more about this choice in Part 3 of these notes.

So that we can build up the picture that emerges from different parts of the Communion we are asking each group – should they wish to contribute in this way to the overall project – to write a short account of their experience in the following way:

- A report on how the biblical texts were actually handled in the different engagements [4-6 sides maximum];
- Examples of methodologies that might act as resources for others to engage with the Bible generally or with the 5th Mark in particular;
- Any comments on what emerged from the first Case Study.

¹ The Anglican Communion describes the Mission of God that the Church is called to be a part of in terms of 5 Marks – to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; to teach, baptise and nurture new believers; to respond to human need by loving service; to seek to transform unjust structures of society; and to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

Part 1 – Observations on our Biblical engagement from Case Study 1

As this project is being undertaken across the Communion we have reports on what is emerging from a number of different places. When we examined these reports on Case Study 1 a number of different examples emerged about how we *actually* handle the Bible. They were, however, examples that could be seen by some as different from the way we often say we *should* handle the Bible.

There were five examples that seem to apply to the way we as ‘readers’ of the Bible engage with the text. If your group is meeting on a number of occasions can you take one each time you meet and explore together the question posed or if you are only meeting once take a couple of the questions and explore them before going onto the Bible study itself in Part 2.

- We found the view expressed that once we have studied an issue or topic – from a Biblical standpoint – we have that issue or topic ‘sorted’ i.e. further study is unnecessary. Is this something you have experienced and does this contradict the view that the Church is a community of learners continually seeking to grow in our faith?
- We found observations in the reports that suggested that we all carry with us lenses through which we engage with Scripture that are no longer helpful to the present but which we do not always recognise. For example, we may draw on insights from previous engagement with a particular passage rather than listening to what that passage may be saying now. Are there lenses that you look at Scripture through that might be no longer helpful for you? What might these be? How do we ensure that we can be open to new understanding *and* draw on previous insights?
- At the more personal ‘Reader’ level there was also an observed gap between those issues/topics etc where we automatically use Scripture and those where we do not draw on its insights. Is this at odds with a view, often expressed, that the Bible is central to our life as Christians?
- If our engagement with Scripture is both a personal and communal activity then the nature of the community we do this with is significant. Does engaging with ‘like-minded’ people sometimes mean that we are not taken beyond our comfort zone into a place where we might need to go to experience new understandings?
- We found observations that suggest that we engage with *a* canon of Scripture within *the* canon of Scripture. Are there sections of the Bible we never or rarely encounter that limit our understanding of what Scripture might be saying to us?

Part 2 – Biblical engagement

The group is asked to explore how our engagement with the Bible sheds light on our understanding of the Fourth Mark of Mission. We are offering two possible areas of exploration but in order to ensure all groups undertaking this study explore similar texts we have identified two sets of core texts listed below. We ask that all groups explore these texts but that does not mean you are limited to only these.

The Bible and Unjust Gender Structures

Genesis 38, Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:1-12
Proverbs 31:10-31
2 Samuel 13
Nehemiah 13
Matthew 15:21-31
Luke 2
Acts 16:11-24
Galatians 3:23-29 and 1 Timothy 2:1-15

The Bible and Unjust Economic Structures

Deuteronomy 15
Ezekiel 27:1-36 and Revelation 18
Psalm 73 and Luke 1:39-58
Luke 6:17-38
Mark 10:17-34
Isaiah 58 and 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

You are invited to undertake this exploration using the following questions:

[1] UNJUST GENDER STRUCTURES

Genesis 38; Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:1-12

What is at stake, socially and economically, for Tamar and for the daughters of Zelophehad, as they challenge the *status quo*?
What analogues are there in contemporary society for the social and economic restrictions these women face?
Is the church concerned about these matters? Should it be?

Proverbs 31:10-31

Comment: Interestingly, this picture of “a valorous woman” or “a woman of substance” (the NRSV translation “a capable wife” is misleading) is the only extended description in the Bible of the daily work of an

ordinary person, specifically a householder and land manager. In the context of Proverbs, she seems to be the human counterpart of Wisdom, also portrayed as female. Note the many references to the woman's hands; these are her most prominent feature. The language of her "robed in strength and splendour" (v. 25) echoes descriptions of God in the Psalms [93:1] and of Zion in Isaiah [52:1].

What is the theological significance of this description of a woman's work?

Does kind of work, and its place in the life of a community, correspond to the work of women in y/our culture? (Urbanites and non-urbanites may have different answers to this question.)

2 Samuel 13

Why would the Bible record this tragic and shameful story of David's own (and only) daughter?

On whom does the shame fall in this story? How is the crime avenged?

What happens to women who are sexually abused in y/our culture?

Who stands up for them?

Nehemiah 13

Why is marrying "women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab" (v. 23) viewed as such a threat to the Jews?

Contrast this with the story of "Ruth the Moabite," the ancestor of King David.

What is the significance of the fact that the Old Testament includes both stories?

Matthew 15:21-31

Comment: This is in some ways the most outrageous and offensive of the 14 healing stories in Matthew's Gospel. Compare this with another story of Gentiles who believe in Jesus [14:34-36] and the stories of Israelites – the Pharisees and Jesus' own disciples [14:22-33, 15:1-9, 16:1-12].

In the context of those surrounding stories, what is important about this story in particular?

Luke 2

Comment: Notice how Mary becomes increasingly central to the action as the chapter goes on.

How does she respond to others' understanding of who Jesus is, and how does she mediate our own understanding of Jesus?

Is Anna the prophet an important figure in this story, or a marginal one?

Acts 16:11-24

Comment: The chapter juxtaposes snapshots of two women: the businesswoman Lydia, who takes Paul and his party into her home, and the slave girl with a spirit of divination.

How do these two stories illumine each other?
Do they say anything about how others benefit from the labour of women – justly or unjustly?

Galatians 3:23-29 and 1 Tim 2:1-15

(How) can we reconcile these two theological statements from Paul? If men and women “are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28), then how does/should that manifest itself in the church?

[2] UNJUST ECONOMIC STRUCTURES

Deuteronomy 15

Comment: All the legal codes of the Old Testament have lengthy sections setting limits on the ancient institution of debt slavery (cf. Ex. 21:1-11, Lev. 25).

Is this an important theological statement, as well as a social statement?

If so, what does it tell us about who God is?

Ezekiel 27:1-36 and Revelation 18

Comment: These two passages are prophetic and angelic (respectively) denunciations of two “global” economic powers of the biblical world: Tyre and Rome (called “Babylon” in Revelation 18).

How do they trace interconnections among vast economic power, militarism, and various kinds of injustice?

Psalms 73 and Luke 1:39-58

What do these two poems/songs have to say to the claims of the Prosperity Gospel?

Luke 6:17-38

How central is economics to Jesus' vision for this community?
How is economic generosity related to other forms of mercy?
How can the church encourage such practices of generosity?

Mark 10:17-34

What does this passage suggest about how the kingdom of God is experienced on *this* side of death?

Isaiah 58 and 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

How do Isaiah and Paul illumine the relationship between worship (Sabbath, Eucharist) and economics?

The methods each group uses to engage in this exploration is up to them. You may want to give people the texts and the questions before they come to the study (they are written out in the "Participants Notes" section at the end of this study); you may want to spend several sessions on the study working through different questions each time; or you may want to start in small groups of 2 or 3 before coming back as a whole to compare results.

Be free to approach this exploration in whatever way seems to fit your situation and your group. The reason we have asked groups to give examples of the methods they used is because others might be able to learn from you.

Part 3 – How the Bible was used

We suggest two possible models of observation of the processes:

Model 1 – by a neutral observer or observers sitting in on the group and recording ‘evidence’ of engagement.

Model 2 – by the group itself being helped to reflect on the processes they have used.

We think that the more ad hoc the group or the shorter the engagement process (a one-off gathering as opposed to the longer period over time) the more likely it would be that the first model would be appropriate. If this is used then the group would need to be told of the observer’s presence, what they are being asked to do, and that the group is content with this being done.

The second model might be helpfully used with more established groups working over a longer time span who can be asked to stand-back from their engagement to reflect on the processes used. A combination of the two models might also be used with these kind of groups but their permission would again need to be sought.

Model 1 – Questions that might help the observers of the group processes to focus on what they are seeing:

(a) Overview of the engagement process

- What Bible versions were used? Was the engagement with or without study notes? Did people bring Bibles?
- What were the methods of engagement – was it corporate engagement or was someone ‘telling’ others?
- How much use was made of the fruits of scholarship (genre of text, cultural context?)
- What was the effect of language on translation?

(b) Observations throughout the engagement

- Was there evidence of examples of behaviour relating to inter-scriptural awareness – the range of diversity of biblical material and relationship with other texts; interplay between scripture and personal experience; any overt disagreements with scripture? How did the group handle these?

Model 2 – Questions that some groups might use to reflect on their own process of engagement

- In what ways did you engage with the Bible?
- How far did the text act as transformative and how far as consolidatory?
- Thinking about what you have just done, what were you doing with the Bible, and why were you doing it?

Participant Notes – unjust gender structures

The group will be exploring how our engagement with the Bible sheds light on our understanding of the Fourth Mark of Mission: “To transform unjust structures of society.”

We will be looking at the following texts from the Bible and as you read these texts you may like to think about the following questions:

Genesis 38; Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:1-12

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