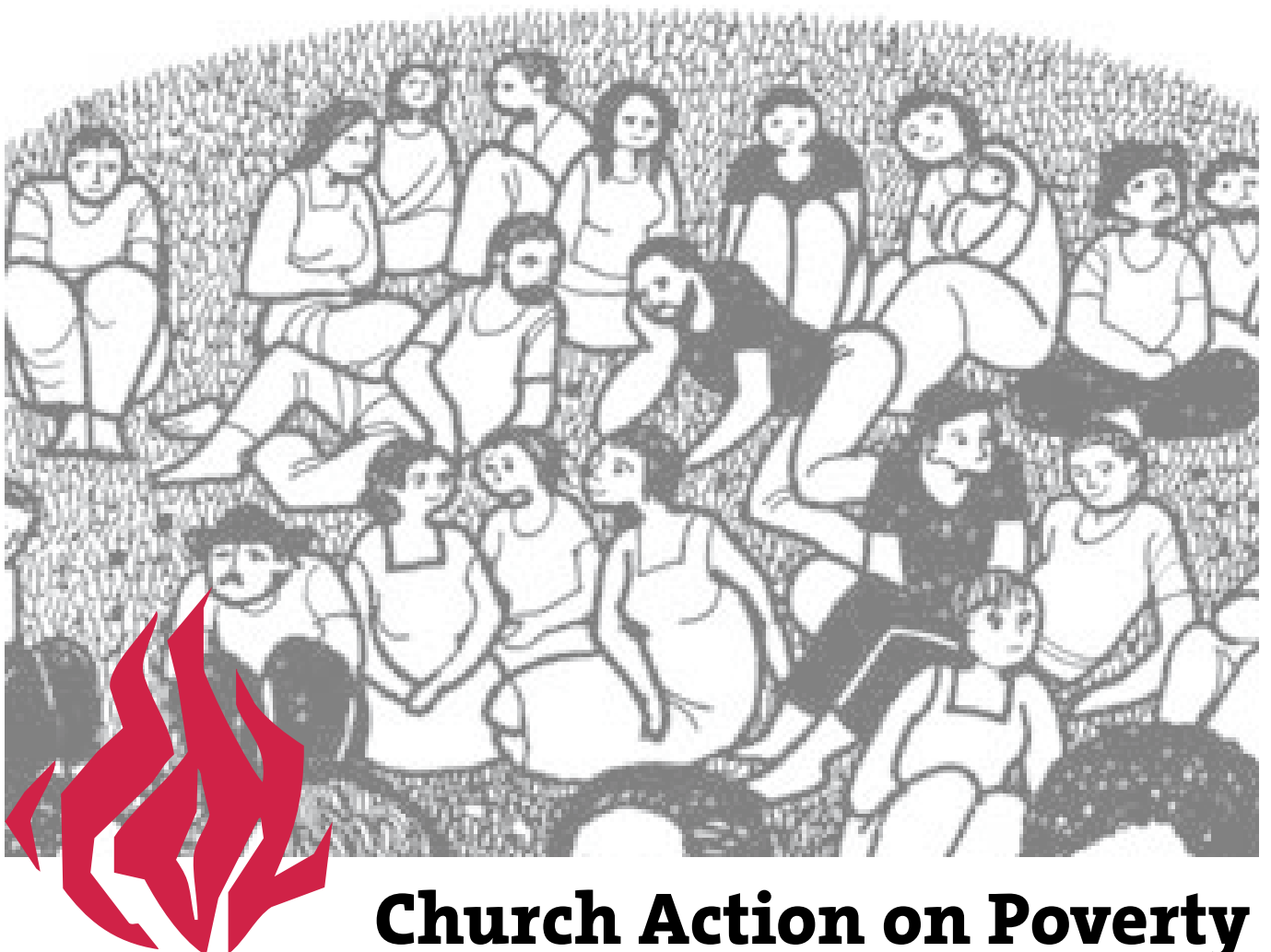


Untold Stories

scripture from the margins

Bible studies on the Gospel of Matthew



Church Action on Poverty

Church Action on Poverty is a national ecumenical Christian social justice charity, committed to tackling poverty in the UK. We work in partnership with churches and with people in poverty themselves to find solutions to poverty, locally, nationally and globally. Further information can be found at www.church-poverty.org.uk.

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Introduction

Scripture from the margins

The Bible shows us again and again that God is on the side of the people on the edges. In a thread that runs through all of scripture, God is concerned first and foremost with people who have been excluded from society by poverty, oppression and injustice. Laws like Jubilee in the Old Testament are designed to ensure that no one is left behind and exploited... The prophets stand up constantly against the rich and powerful who would oppress people in poverty... Mary sings of a God who has “brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly”... Jesus says “Blessed are you who are poor ... But woe to you who are rich.”

But too often, when we read scripture in our churches, we forget that perspective. We focus on other aspects of the story, or we become so familiar with the text that we don't notice the challenging things it has to say to us.

Church Action on Poverty's *Scripture from the Margins* is a series of Bible studies designed to help us look afresh at scripture. Focusing on the Gospel of Matthew, we have highlighted different perspectives. We look at Jesus' teachings and miracles through the eyes of characters in the margins of the story. We remind ourselves that the original audiences for Jesus' teaching, and for the Gospels, were primarily people who were themselves marginalised by poverty, living under military occupation.

The five studies in this book look at different passages. Most of them also include an 'unheard voice' – a piece of creative writing, imagining the perspective of a marginalised character in the story.

We hope that these Bible studies will help you find fresh perspectives on scripture, and challenge you to put your faith into action in the world today.

About the Bible studies

Each of the studies is split into six sections:

- **Read** – the Bible passage, taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. This is usually followed by 'An unheard voice' – a piece of creative writing, imagining the perspective of a minor or marginalised character in the story.
- **Reflect** – some questions to help you think more deeply, and relate the passage to your own experience.
- **Think** – information about the world of Jesus' original audience, and how their experiences would have affected their understanding of the passage.
- **Listen** – some suggestions of issues affecting people in the world today which relate to the theme of the passage.
- **Act** – ideas for how you can apply the message of the passage in our world today, especially by working with Church Action on Poverty.
- **Pray** – a short prayer for you to use.

Using the studies in a group

The studies are designed so that they can be used in a house group or Bible study group, if you wish.

- Each study has enough material for a single 60–90-minute session. We suggest that you also have an initial session to discuss the background in this introduction, and agree what you all hope to get from the studies.
- You could use them at any time of year, but they make a good Lent course. Church Action on Poverty is encouraging churches to use the studies

during Lent 2020, following on from church services on Church Action on Poverty Sunday (23 February, the last Sunday before Lent).

- It will be easiest if one person acts as facilitator for the group, reading through the studies and then drawing on the notes to prompt questions and steer the discussion.
- Each study is designed so that it can easily be printed or copied onto two double-sided sheets of A4 – so every member of your group can have their own copy.
- In a group, the ‘unheard voice’ passages can be read aloud before or after the Bible passage. Ask people what they noticed: Is this different to how they imagined the story? How else could the story have been witnessed? Who else was there? What thoughts might they have had?
- The questions in the ‘Reflect’ section are a good way to help people engage actively with the passage, and discuss its meanings with one another.

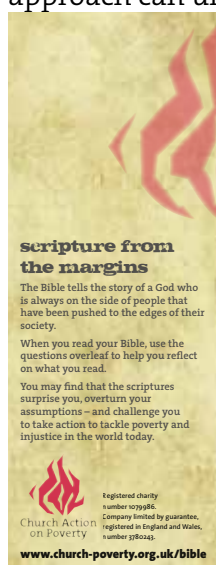
Reading the rest of the Bible from the margins

At Church Action on Poverty, we want churches to think actively about the priority God places on poor and marginalised people – whenever they read the Bible. These studies are about the Gospel of Matthew, but the same approach can uncover fresh ideas elsewhere in scripture too.

If you enjoy *Untold Stories*, you might also like *Dangerous Stories*, our 2018 series of studies on the parables. You can download them at www.church-poverty.org.uk/bible.

We have also produced a bookmark for you to keep in your Bible, which includes 12 questions to ask about any passage of scripture. Use it help you consider what the message might have been for the original audience – and how it reflects God’s call to be on the side of marginalised people.

Download or order a ‘Scripture from the margins’ Bible bookmark at www.church-poverty.org.uk/bible



The healing of the two blind men

A Bible study by Sue Richardson

Read: Matthew 9:27–30 and 20:29–34 (New Revised Standard Version)

^{9:27} As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” ²⁸ When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said to him, “Yes, Lord.” ²⁹ Then he touched their eyes and said, “According to your faith let it be done to you.” ³⁰ And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, “See that no one knows of this.” ³¹ But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district.

^{20:29} As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. ³⁰ There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” ³¹ The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, “Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!” ³² Jesus stood still and called them, saying, “What do you want me to do for you?” ³³ They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.” ³⁴ Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.

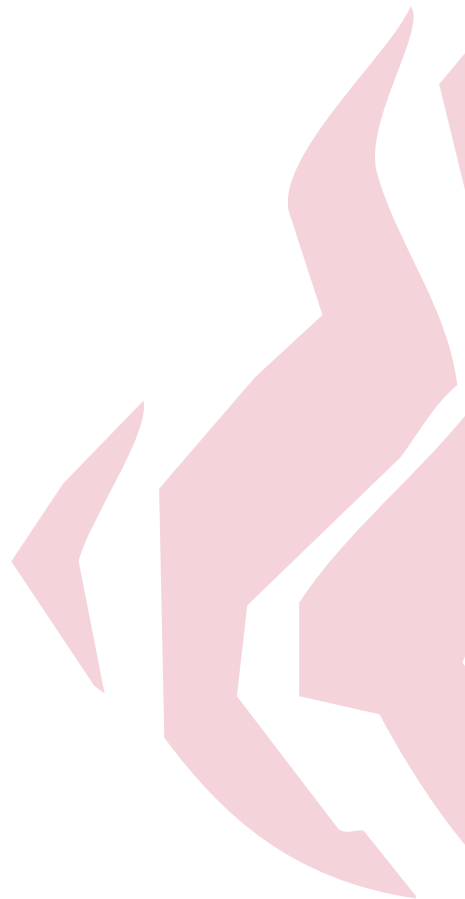
Read: an unheard voice

The day Ezra lost his sight was the worst day of my life. I will tell you about the best, the day Jesus brought him healing and we followed him. But let me begin at the beginning...

I had married Ezra with the confidence of youth, very much in love. I loved the way his face creased when he laughed. He was young and strong and handsome and he told me I was beautiful every single day.

When he was in the grip of fever I sat by his side, mopping his face with a cloth and praying that he would not be taken from me. When the fever left and took his sight, I wept. I wept with relief that he was spared, with grief for all that was lost to us. How could I be a mother now when he could not work to support us?

So we moved to Jericho. We turned our backs on those who wondered what sin of his had taken his sight and went to the city. I could find work there. It was a bustling place, heady with the scent of perfume and spices, dusty with the building of winter houses - homes for those who already had homes. Those people had coins in their pockets and should have been glad to give to a beggar and show their kindness as the law commands. But Ezra became invisible, neither seen nor able to see. It



made me so angry, but he would hold me in my rage and comfort me. He did not want to beg but when he met Dan, who had been blind from birth, he knew that he could offer him friendship. The two sat on the roadside, exhorting each other to more and more poetic shouts to stir the compassion of the rich.

That day I was hurrying. I was taking food to them both. People asked why, said that I should leave, forget I had a husband and start again in another town. Find someone to care for me as a pretty young widow. But every night the man I married put his hands on my face and told me I was still beautiful. So I kept the vows I made before God and my family. I took food to him and Dan in the heat of the day while the city slept.

Someone told me a healer was coming, a rabbi who had made his name in the north country by Galilee, a true healer. So I ran, eager to find Ezra and Dan and see if this Jesus would heal them. But Jesus had found them. At first I was afraid that Jesus would not hear them over the din of the crowd but here was a man who paid attention. It was the first thing I knew about him. They were yelling their over blown compliments “Son of David” like a humble travelling preacher cared that he was from a royal house. But “have mercy”, you could see that moved him. He had mercy to spare, this man. He stood still and waited for them to come to him. I was rooted to the spot, my heart pounding in my mouth.

“What do want me to do for you?” he said. I gasped. He left them with the decision. His healing wasn’t to prove anything about his own power, it was about those in front of him. Ezra could go back to the land but Dan had never learned a trade, without his blindness he could not beg. “What do you want?” he said and I heard myself utter like a prayer, ‘a child’, for Ezra and I to have a family.

“Lord, let our eyes be opened” they said together, stepping out into the unknown with faith.

And it was done.

Ezra saw me there and his face lit with joy. He came to me and stroked my hair from my face, more lined than when he had last seen it. “Still beautiful!” he said. We didn’t even talk about it, we followed him; into friendship, community, family.

Marie Pattison, Katherine House (www.katherinehousefcj.org)

Reflect

- Would we have been with the crowd around Jesus who tried to ‘shush’ these men?
- Do we ever feel threatened by those we encounter on our streets who seem to need something from us?
- What would help us ‘see’ them as Jesus does?
- What do we ‘see’ about their situation that affronts us?
- How do we ‘see’ a world that still judges a disability punitively?

Think

As Matthew tells it, from its beginning the ministry of Jesus had three characteristics: calling – the invitation to enter the Kingdom of Heaven; teaching – in synagogues, houses and mountain tops; and healing – lepers, sick servants, the demon-possessed, the paralysed, and the blind. These two passages from different ends of Jesus’ story are so alike, however, that it is tempting to wonder if Matthew had just transposed a diary entry. But in a

world of suffering and in a society troubled by mental and physical disease of many kinds, Matthew has highlighted blindness and placed the physical 'opening of eyes' in a larger narrative about how and what we see.

Whether these men were born blind or lost their sight the disability they shared was more than physical. They would struggle to share family life, they could not work or take responsibility for others. And who took responsibility for them? Perhaps the compassion of relatives or neighbours might mean they were fed, but to be blind in these times was to be judged, as somehow sinful, carrying a punishment for deeds of the past or poor character, so there was also a stigma which would limit the interaction they could have with others.

They are on the road, sitting together, perhaps to beg, but also because in finding each other they have discovered another who shares their experience, feels what they feel and in their joint suffering, provides the companionship their exclusion from society denies them.

They are probably seen as a nuisance; to survive they must make themselves heard as they cannot reciprocate a look. They are blind and must suffer the wilful blindness of others as they turn away from their plight. So they shout out and, where they can, they pursue a source of help.

They cry for 'mercy'. They must have known much unkindness and neglect. They must sense the buzz around Jesus; they cannot recognise him but, perhaps from the comments of the crowd that surrounds him they understand who is near and what might be hoped for as he passes. They choose a form of address for him that is distinctive. This appeal to the descendant of Israel's royal house carries both memory of good times and the promise of better times to come. They locate themselves in the historical suffering of the people around them who are blind to the promise of God and his covenantal faithfulness.

And Jesus hears, responds, touches and heals. Two of these newly seeing men go off into a world full of surprises: the face of a loved one, the sight of an olive grove, the beauty of the sun's rise and setting. Their physical world is renewed and their community life. Two others see this and more. They 'see' in Jesus' healing of their physical disability a new way of life and a new purpose for themselves. They join him to look for the Kingdom. The others may speak about their cure, but these last two are the living signs that in the kingdom of God there is recognition and welcome for all.

Listen

The experience of being judged for being unfortunate or unlucky has persisted over the millennia since these men asked for release. As I walk through our towns and cities, I am conscious of figures sheltering on out of the way doorsteps or tucked into corners. They are curled up, facing away from me. Asleep, I think. Well I won't have to engage with them today. But others are more forthright. They sit on the pavement and call to me for change, they get on my tube train and ask me to help them. They are not blind. But I am or wish I was; because what would mercy look like to them? How can I show mercy when I do not have Jesus' capacity for healing?

Rough sleeping, homelessness is on the increase in our society. It is often rooted in disability of one kind or another; sometimes even just an inability to cope in our very complex and demanding world. But what is also on the increase is a hostility to those whose disability is more obvious and who need positive help to live a life that includes participation, relationship, leisure and learning. We assess, we judge, we deny, and avoid seeing the results: increased isolation, poverty, hunger and even death amongst those most vulnerable to a world that will not 'see' with Kingdom eyes.

Act

Every day in the UK, people in poverty are stigmatised and excluded by negative, inaccurate media coverage. Can you take some time to listen to the real stories and experiences of people on the margins?

Visit Church Action on Poverty's 'Voices from the Margins' blog at www.voicesfromthemargins.org.uk. Read and listen to some of the stories there. Share them with your friends on social media if you can.

Pray

"Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus"

We know that he is among us, we trust in his mercy and love.

Surely if we could just see him we would repent and be healed.

But Jesus says: Recognise me and then you will see.

I am with those you ignore and despise;

I, who was always on the road, am with the uprooted and the migrant.

I, who was hosted by friends and the generosity of others, find my place with the homeless and needy.

I, who was abused and reviled, am waiting with the lonely and the despairing.

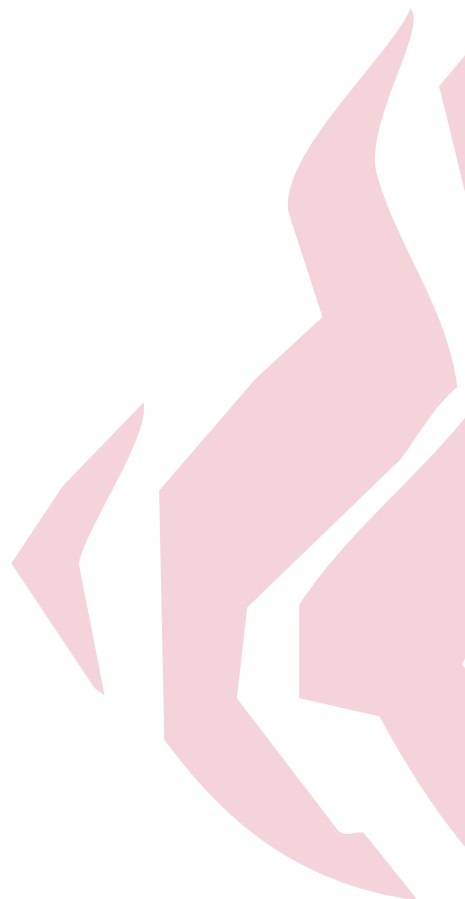
"Open your eyes and find me, waiting to show you a world made new."

The rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

A Bible study by David Rhodes



CEREZO BARREDO 99



Read: Matthew 13:54–57 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁵⁴ He came to his home town and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? ⁵⁵ Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶ And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?” ⁵⁷ And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house.”

Read: an unheard voice

It was a small synagogue, but then Nazareth was not an important town. I loved it in the synagogue, loved the way the light came in at certain times of day, made me feel peaceful. I liked to listen to the poetry of the scriptures, the rhythms of the chants.

People never ask me about the day young Jesus came back to town, after all, what miracles can I tell them about? I was old then, I had seen his mother born. I was old and he was young and strong and filled with certain fire. Wherever he had been, he was filled with a new understanding of the scriptures he’d learnt at his mother’s hearth. Although he spoke them like they were fresh teachings, he was attuned to the ancients, soaked in the teachings of the prophets.

Some of us were impressed, you know; genuinely wanted to know how a journeyman carpenter acquires such knowledge. Others less so – old Amos, named for a prophet of justice yet if he could find a way to cheat the poor he would. He was a small-minded man, grown fat on land taken from those who could not afford to pay their debts. His heart was closed to the prophets, didn’t want to hear Isaiah, didn’t want a new kingdom. You could tell young Jesus could see straight through him. So Amos starts repeating all those old ugly rumours about his mother, that Joseph had married her out of pity to save her life and her honour; when a sweeter girl than Mary had never lived.

“Who was he to be special?” people asked spitefully. Generations of his family had worshipped with us. Joseph’s nieces were there that day; girls Jesus had toddled beside as children. But who are any of us not to be special? Who are you not to be special? God can work through the words of an old woman like me if the spirit chooses.

I think they had been hoping to see the deeds of power we had heard about. They say he had made the lame walk, the blind see, picked up beggars from the side of the road and made them walk tall alongside him. Not that we had many in Nazareth in need of healing, like I said, small town, people look after their own here. And old Tabitha – would have been too proud to ask the carpenter’s son to open her eyes.

They turned on him with spite and the threat of violence, I saw the look on his face, a look of love for us all. I saw his gaze take in those familiar faces and he must have known it was for the last time. And then he walked away. I wondered if he prayed for me as he washed the last of our dust from his feet that night. I prayed for him, for the new kingdom he spoke of. May it come soon, to Nazareth and to your home town, to every town hungry for justice and new hope.

Marie Pattison, Katherine House (www.katherinehousefcj.org)

Reflect

You may not be familiar with Huddersfield railway station but it is worth a look. Its vast frontage looks like something from ancient Greece. The poet John Betjeman called it the most magnificent in England.

Outside the station, in pride of place, is a sculpture. You might expect it to celebrate one of the great things about Huddersfield: its world-famous choral society, its fine worsted cloth, or its wonderful fish and chips. Instead it's a statue of a small man.

Harold Wilson was born in a terraced house in one of the town's back streets. His mum and dad, Ethel and Herbert, were ordinary Yorkshire folk and Harold went to an ordinary local school. Some people thought he was bright. Others, perhaps enviously, said he was a bit too clever.

Somehow the boy from the back streets ended up as Prime Minister and, despite the fact that a lot of people disliked both him and his politics, the town put up a statue to him. Why? Because, like it or not, the lad had done well.

So why didn't the people of Nazareth put up a statue to Jesus? If he showed such astounding wisdom and performed such deeds of power, what did it matter that his parents were Joseph and Mary – or Ethel and Herbert?

Think

Why did the villagers take offence at Jesus? According to St Luke's Gospel (4:16–30), they even attempted to kill him. What was going on? And, more importantly, what's it got to do with us?

Were the crowd jealous of his fame, his remarkable wisdom and his power? Were they simply being vindictive? Perhaps Jesus gives us the answer with his very first word: prophets.

Prophets were not honoured in their own community because they were dangerous troublemakers. They challenged injustice and opposed the vested interests of the powerful. Often they ended up dead, and their families and friends could easily find themselves accused of guilt by association. Jesus also challenged the powerful, and so the Roman occupying forces who ruled first century Palestine simply executed him.

It's no wonder the villagers wanted Jesus to get out of town. In a land of widespread poverty and political oppression, the rebellious Jesus was far too close for comfort. For them he represented danger. Just as he does for today's Church.

Listen

So what about our own situation? How are people experiencing poverty being treated by the rich and powerful here in Britain? What is happening in their lives as a result of social injustice?

And what about the Church? Many churches run food banks to meet immediate need, but is that the long-term answer to poverty? Are food banks really what Jesus meant when he spoke about good news for those suffering poverty?

Meanwhile there is the fast approaching crisis of climate change. The whole human race is threatened by ecological disaster. Last September Hurricane Dorian smashed into the Bahamas. Entire communities were destroyed. Islands were left completely uninhabitable. Among the victims the poor were hardest hit.

In the not too distant future we too will feel the impact of climate disaster and, again, it will not be the rich but the poor and vulnerable who suffer most. Especially those with the least power: the women.

Act

What can the Church do about the threat of climate change? There are a billion and a half Christians across the world. Are they incapable of exerting the political and economic leverage necessary to challenge the vested interests of the polluters? So far the Church of England has agonised over whether to reduce its large investment in the oil companies – and postponed its decision. Is that a timely or appropriate response?

What are our church leaders doing to help avert disaster? Or is political action too controversial? Too unsettling? Is it better to run evangelism programmes to encourage more people to come to church? Better to ignore the prophets of our own age like 16-year-old Greta Thunberg? Or is she actually doing what Jesus demands we Christians do: urgently work for the well being of our neighbours?

St Matthew tells us that the people of Nazareth rejected Jesus with his controversial and uncomfortable message of good news for the poor. Is the Church doing exactly the same thing today by not taking Jesus seriously?

The people of Nazareth got away with rejecting Jesus, but our children and grandchildren will have to live with the decisions we make: either to listen to the voices of the poor or to ignore their cries and condemn them to a disaster such as humanity has never seen before.

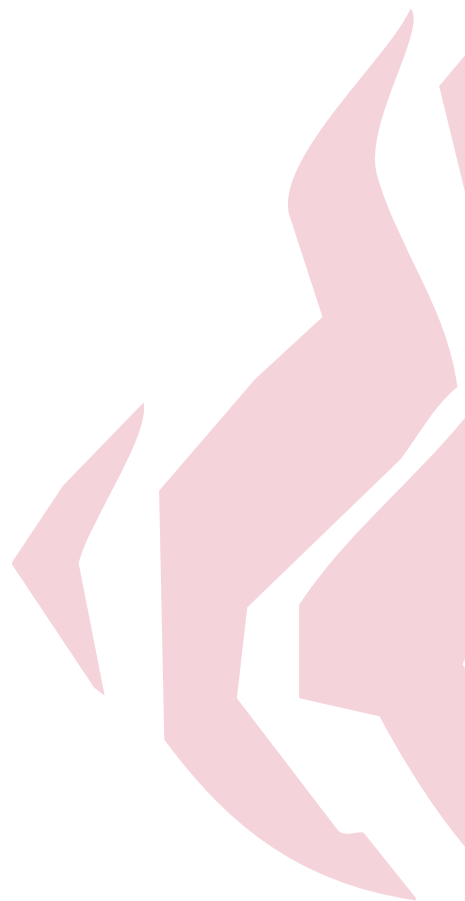
Pray

We are told that Jesus prayed: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

Perhaps our prayer should be: “Father give us the courage to answer the call of Jesus, for we are now full well what to do.”

The feeding of the 5,000

A Bible study by Ruth Wilde



Read: Matthew 14:13–21 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷ They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” ¹⁸ And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, 12 baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about 5,000 men, besides women and children.

Read: an unheard voice

People always want to know about the big stories, the miracle making, the healings. When we came to write the stories down, those were the ones the educated men were interested in. What is vivid to me is the memory of all those ordinary times he broke bread and we sat in candlelight sharing laughter and friendship; the way he would listen so completely when you spoke. In the two years I’d followed him on the road, many of those meals had been bought from my purse, and I could think of no better use for my late husband’s money.

I remember the day well, that sharing with so many. He had been trying to find time alone, for prayer, to get in touch with whatever it was that gave him his calm loving wisdom, grounded him in his mission. But there was a crowd, like there always was a crowd in those days, and his empathy for them was a constant feature of our life on the road. I’ve often seen him touch his own stomach like another person’s pain or hunger was pain to him – so he healed them, drawing on the reserves of his energy to clasp withered hands with love, cuddle children to him and make their crippled legs strong. He never ran out of compassion.

And then the disciples, I rolled my eyes sometimes. Like there would be enough places to buy food for this multitude in this deserted place if we sent them away. Like buying enough for them all wouldn’t cost more money than some of them had ever seen in their whole lives.

“Send them away,” they said, like people who knew where their next meal was coming from. “These people should have brought enough provisions for their journey” said one, unable to imagine a poor woman carrying a sick child miles to a healer, giving their food to the boy and feeling the ache of hunger, the weakness of it in her body, and walking on anyway, fuelled by fierce love and desperate faith.

“You give them something to eat,” he said to the twelve. “You do it,” and I can’t be sure but I think he winked at me.

They brought him what they had, five loaves and two fish. They could have taken the boat out and brought more fish, that had been the plan for supper. But their faith was real too. They knew he could use what they had.

The sun was setting and the light had a strange otherworldly quality to it. He held up the bread and said the blessing he would have learned at his parent's table. Blessing God for gifts given, not hallowing the food but recognising that it had already come from God's good earth, warmed by the sun and watered by the rain. Wasn't that the miracle?

Each of the disciples took a basket to hand out food. I went to help John. We moved through the crowds. People had lit lamps and prepared to camp. The atmosphere was celebratory; some of the women began to sing; psalms of praise and thanksgiving floated on the air. Everyone knew there was enough, so when we passed it to one group they passed it on. I saw a toddler, half asleep against his father's chest tightly clutching at fat morsels of fish and bread in tiny hands. Enough. Was this what the Kingdom of God would be like? A place where everyone had enough to share?

And next week we did it again: Jews, Gentiles, the sick, the pious, the traitor, the innocent children. Enough for us all.

Marie Pattison, Katherine House (www.katherinehousefcj.org)

Reflect

- Jesus wanted to be alone, but he ended up having to cater for 5,000 men, plus women and children! Can you think of a time when you wanted time to yourself, but duty called you to be with others? When and why?
- Some commentators think that the 'miracle' of this story is that people shared what they had and realised they had a lot more than they needed when their resources were pooled. Do you think that would be a miracle in itself? Have you ever experienced sharing which felt like a miracle?
- Jesus holds up bread, blesses it, and gives it to the disciples, as he does at the last supper and on the road to Emmaus. Whether your tradition celebrates the Eucharist or not, where do you experience true 'communion'?

Think

This story is one of the very few stories present in all four Gospels, and an alternative version of it – the feeding of the 4,000 – is also present in two Gospels, including in Matthew (15:32–39). This means that the story appears six times in four Gospels. There is something very important and significant about the story therefore, which we should pay attention to.

The numbers used in the story are symbolic: in Matthew chapter 14, there are 12 baskets left over (one for each of the disciples and tribes of Israel); and there are five loaves of bread (one for each book of the Torah). Matthew is not the only Gospel to use these numbers in the story, either. John's version, for example, has the exact same numbers. In Matthew's other similar story in chapter 15, the numbers change slightly: now there are seven loaves of bread and seven baskets left over (seven is also a symbolic number in the scriptures – the number denoting the completion of God's plans).

Apart from the interesting numbers, the detail is lacking in the Matthew versions. We can however visit the story in John's Gospel to find out more. In John chapter 6, it says that the sea from which Jesus came 'ashore' was the Sea of Galilee, alternatively called the Sea of Tiberias. This sea was next to an unclean city – Tiberias, a 'necropolis' or city of the dead. This, coupled with another interesting detail – that the Passover was happening, meant that these people making up the large crowd were probably 'unclean' and marginalised themselves. Respectable people would have ordinarily been

attending Passover in Jerusalem and would not have been anywhere near an unclean sea. Indeed, the story says that the people following Jesus were “sick”, which meant that they were likely outcast in the society of the day.

Just like poor people, sick and disabled people were on the margins of society. They often still are, even today. The readers in Jesus’ time would have understood this detail in the story, so we too must understand and read it in this light. The feeding of the multitude is a story of solidarity, healing and sharing among the most marginalised of people. Jesus chose to be with this particular group, rather than either on his own (as he had originally planned) or at the Passover with other respectable Jews. We too are called to be in solidarity with the marginalised, whether we are ourselves on the edges of society or not.

Listen

As of the beginning of 2019, 17,000 disabled people have died waiting for benefits payments since 2013, affected by cuts and changes to welfare and specifically personal independence payments (PIP).

Every single one of those 17,000 people had a story to tell, and the situation hasn’t really improved since January either. There is, for example, the harrowing story of the terminally ill PIP claimant James Oliver, who was refused benefits and ‘gave up’ on life (www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-49524259).

Act

Can you write to your MP to ask what is being done about the situation with PIP and Universal Credit? MPs are distracted by many other things at the minute, but this is about the life and death of some of the most vulnerable in our society. Remember: an individual letter written to your MP carries more weight than one hundred online petitions. You could even try to visit your MP on a surgery day or set up a meeting with them. They may be more sympathetic than you think.

Pray

God of the marginalised and oppressed, hear our prayer for all those who suffer due to callous decisions made by faceless government departments. We pray that all people may be seen as individuals not figures or statistics. Bring us closer together, that we might empathise and be in solidarity with one another and especially with those who are the poorest and most vulnerable. Amen.

Take it further

Check out the Inclusive Church books on ‘poverty’ and ‘disability’ as well as the small group studies that go with them, at www.inclusive-church.org.

A mother's request

A Bible study by Revd Nick Jowett

Read: Matthew 20:20–23 (New Revised Standard Version)

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. ²¹ And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." ²² But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." ²³ He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."

Read: an unheard voice

Let me tell you something about my friend Salome. We've known each other for ever – my children and hers grew up together on the shores of Galilee, learned to swim together.

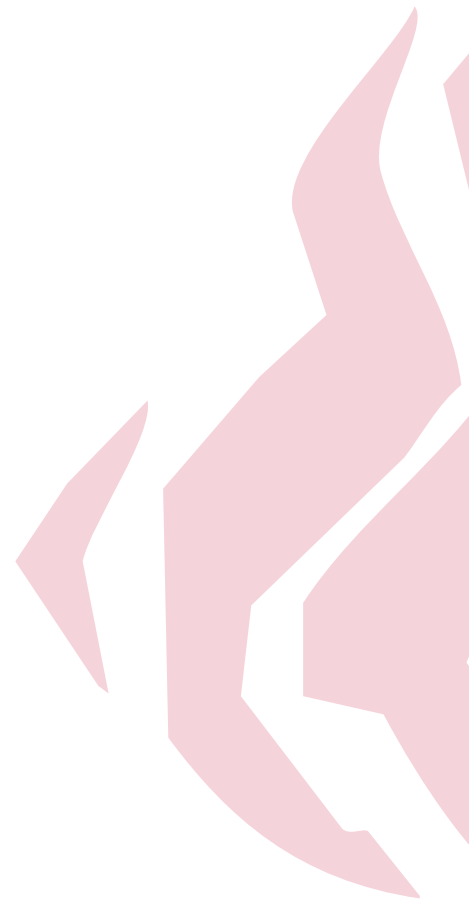
When she first met Jesus she was overawed, that a rabbi would come and eat at her humble table. But she grew to love him like she loved her own sons.

Salome was a hard-working woman, the daughter of hired labourers herself. She married Zebedee and she was determined that he should have a boat of his own. No matter what she herself would have to sacrifice. She would sit up all night weaving fishing baskets to sell to raise the money. She was determined that her sons would have a share in the business, wouldn't be at the mercy of someone else as to whether they worked or ate. And it was her proudest day when they launched that boat. She was a little vessel but it made her sons fishermen, not hired hands. I wove the sailcloth myself and I smiled when she set off into the setting sun, a pretty sight.

Now even as fishermen the Zebedees were answerable to everyone; to the tax collectors, to those they bribed for the fishing license, to the brokers who bought their fish for preserving, the leaders who oversaw the tithe. But she was always glad of that small security; that none of her sons would stand on the harbour wall, as her father had, to wait for work. That her grandchildren would not know the pain of empty belly that had been all too familiar to her.

When her strong handsome sons left their nets on the shore to follow a dream, what was she to do – stay and run the business herself? She walked away from that boat and all her pride to join their movement; to walk the roads to the foot of the cross and to the empty tomb.

But I get ahead of myself – what she is most remembered for is what happened the day she made everyone furious. She wanted security, not for her but for her boys, men full of thunder who would call down fire on



a village filled with women and children to answer for an insult. If such a thing were even possible. Jesus didn't have to teach them to be brave or strong, just more loving.

So she went to Jesus and she fell at his feet because he had made them walk tall; because of him they were welcomed into strangers' houses. They were seen as important. They had dignity. She knew that Jesus stood for a new kingdom, that if Jesus was to be Lord then no one else had a hold on you.

"Let them sit at your right hand and your left," she asked. She asked, after all, for the thing he had brought them: freedom.

"Let no one but you be above them," she begged. He had such pity. We did not know then: his kingdom would not be like the others, he wasn't just overturning the order of things, he was doing away with the order of things. His kingdom was brought into being through incredible loving suffering. His freedom was differently wrought. We did not see it then, the day we were angry; we thought one person's power always had to be at another's expense.

We only realised later, after the empty tomb. Freedom had been given to James and John, and to all of us. Death itself could not hold us. We build his kingdom here now, no matter the cost, no matter the suffering. We offer his freedom, his dignity, to others. And in the end we will rejoice with one another on another shore, in the new kingdom where the powers and dominions of this world cannot hold us.

Marie Pattison, Katherine House (www.katherinehousefcj.org)

Reflect

- How do you see this mother's request? Is she downtrodden and pathetic, or bold and forthright?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you had to beg for a favour? How did it feel?
- What does this story say about the role of women?
- What will the other 10 disciples of Jesus think of this?
- "Be careful what you wish for." Does this apply here?

Think

It's possible that Salome, the wife of Zebedee and mother of James and John, doesn't even belong in this story. Matthew has copied it from Mark and, in the process, added in the mother; in Mark the brothers themselves make the request to receive places of honour and power in Jesus' coming kingdom. It seems that Matthew was anxious about two leading disciples appearing to be jockeying for position in an imagined future hierarchy, so he transferred the request to their mother.

It's historically likely that Jewish former fishermen, and indeed their mother, could have imagined that Jesus was leading a movement of national renewal which would end in political or even apocalyptic glory. Their life until Jesus appeared at Capernaum on Lake Galilee was in a kind of fishing collective, working with Peter and Andrew's family and a number of other hired workers. If they owned their own boats and got a good return on their catches, they might have had a better life than many peasants at this period, but it's also likely that they were dependent on brokers and contractors, who would have owned their equipment and controlled the fish market. The archaeologist, Jonathan Reed, writes: "From what we can tell from the boat (the 'Jesus Boat' discovered in 1986) and the houses excavated along the lake,

that enterprise did not guarantee a life of affluence. Galilean villagers eked out a living that was modest at best.” If your whole life is fishing and selling fish at prices not under your control, you may well long for the power and glory that Jesus’ talk of a kingdom seems to promise.

It’s arguable that Salome’s (the brothers’) request to Jesus shows a confident and laudable trust in what Jesus could do for them; it’s equally possible that it reveals a slightly sneaky graspingness. It’s very believable coming from people whose lives have been nothing but hard fishing for daily survival. But there is often a disproportionate suspicion against the poorer members of society when they seem to be gaining some kind of unfair advantage. It’s seen as a zero-sum game: if they have more, we’ll get less. Matthew and Mark report that the other disciples were angry with James and John when they heard that they’d tried to get the places of honour. But Matthew perhaps reveals his own prejudices when he tries to deflect the brothers’ ‘bad behaviour’ on to their mother. But this is at least realistic, in that a woman largely had to rely on the male members of her family for her livelihood.

Listen

“My mum recently had a major operation and has been told not to walk around or stand for long for a few months, so my sister has been around more often – although not stayed overnight. Some busybody neighbour has told, presumably the benefit fraud website, that she is living there ... My sister has just bought a new house and sold her old one, so is obviously not living there. So the people complaining are obviously doing so just to cause hassle and aggravation. Yet the DWP seem to have taken this seriously and sent out a letter and nice long form assuming this is correct. The form asks how long she has been living there and all the things she has been doing since school, etc. This seems like presumed guilt and I think it is disgusting that anyone can make an anonymous complaint and cause so much hassle.”

From the ‘Money Saving Expert’ website

“More than 85% of fraud allegations made by the public over the last five years were false, according to figures obtained by the *Observer*. An Ipsos Mori survey in 2013 found the public believed 24% of benefits were fraudulently claimed – 34 times greater than the level seen in official statistics.”

The Observer, 27 February 2016

Act

Seek to understand and combat the many prejudices and clichés against poor people. Download and study Church Action on Poverty’s *Guide to Reporting Poverty*, developed jointly with the National Union of Journalists (www.church-poverty.org.uk/reportingpoverty).

Pray

Lord Jesus, unfair societies create many victims, and it is those with the smallest share of material things who so often attract the largest share of prejudice and blame. You offer a kingdom in which no-one needs to beg for their rights but where service is the only path to glory. Hold us to this vision, empower us to speak out against the making of scapegoats amongst the poor, and help us to claim and create a new world through the power of your love. We ask this in your name.

Take it further

- For more on the archaeology of Capernaum, see *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* by John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L Reed.
- For fishing as a business, see 'The Galilean Fishing Economy and the Jesus Tradition' by K. C. Hanson (www.kchanson.com/ARTICLES/fishing.html).



The parable of the talents

A Bible study by Revd Chris Howson



Read: Matthew 25:14–30 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹⁴ 'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." ²¹ His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." ²³ His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." ²⁶ But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave!

You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

(Compare this version with the one in Luke 19:11–27)

Read: an unheard voice

I loved to listen to him tell stories. When I look back on those years that’s what I remember; he would be sat on the ground, in a boat, on a rock. A group around him, hanging on his next word. I liked to watch the faces in the crowd react. The stories would become familiar to me, they were familiar to us all, that’s how we came to tell them to the learned men who would later write them down. But the crowd’s reactions, I never got bored of watching him entertain and provoke them, making people think. He’d throw down a story alongside a situation and delight in not explaining it. He loved to hear us try to work it for ourselves – all those years he was teaching us to think.

We sat up on the Mount of Olives getting some air, the city spread beneath us. Tensions were high in the city and I was already worried that this would be what got him killed. His storytelling, his revolutionary teaching. There were soldiers on every street corner and the city teemed with pilgrims. Pilate had entered by the West Gate with all the strength of mighty Rome, as we entered in the East to the shouts and praise of children. The city was ripe for riot. But just for that moment I was content to listen. His northern accent reminding me of the hills around Galilee, the water. The peace of it all that I missed.

The story was about a man who went away, leaving his slaves with what was years’ worth of money for common people. People were listening. This happened – moral upstanding members of society would go off to nicer places, less dusty places, less politically fraught places, and not to be seen grasping for money and profit, would leave it in the hands of those who have no choice but to obey them. Have no choice but to take the tools of oppression and use them to oppress others, to take more than their fair share of wealth, but for someone else. Two people multiplied the master’s wealth and having proved themselves, made slaves to more money. Listen to the stories of Jesus: if two people take an action, the third is nearly always the hero of the tale, the one you want to be. Although Jesus wasn’t above playing with your expectations, I wish you’d seen the faces of the first folks to hear about the Samaritan Hero. The third buries his money, more effort than taking it to a banker, but keeps it from thieves. In the end, the slave-owner comes back and our hero is thrown out for daring to speak the truth, for returning to an earthly power only that which was theirs and no more.

I fear this story will be one of the misunderstood ones. That we won’t get the time to tease out its meaning with him. It is clear the slave-owner is not God, who would never recommend the loaning of money for interest as forbidden in the Torah. The slave-owner stands for the powers of this world somehow. I was tired, it is hard to sleep at Passover, so many people. As I dozed he spoke of the kingdom, of those who serve others serving him, that to give to those who thirst, to clothe the naked,

is what it is to love him. I found myself thinking about choice. About the hero of the tale, only a slave who should have no choice but to serve his master, but who somehow made a choice. Was Jesus trying to tell us: no matter the systems we think we can't escape, the systems that enslave us all, we have always got a choice? Jesus was the freest person I ever knew, and when we thought him defeated, thrown out and killed by the systems of this world, in the end he was gloriously free.

Reflect

- How have you been encouraged to understand this passage before? How did the version you were encouraged to use shape how you saw the nature of God?
- If you were the third slave, would you have been prepared to speak out to the rich landlord?
- Have you ever had to speak out against powerful people before? How did that feel?
- Have you ever been punished for speaking out?

Think

This is possibly one of the most misunderstood stories in the Gospels, and leads to a lot of confusion as to the nature of God, sometimes mistaken for the absentee landlord in the story. In school assemblies and during sermons, preachers often explain the term 'Talents' (a unit of money) as actual talents or gifts, with the implication that they are given by God, and your discipleship journey is to make the most of them. The 'bad' person is the one who has buried or squandered their 'gift'. Some readings see the story as an endorsement of capitalism. Margaret Thatcher used the parable as a justification that God loves the money-makers, and will reward entrepreneurialism.

These misguided interpretations ignore vital elements in the story that would have been more evident to Jesus' audience in a pre-capitalist, Roman-occupied agrarian society.

The story begins with a member of the wealthy elite leaving his property, or, in the Lukan version, heading off in an attempt to gain more power by being made king. For the sake of clarity, we will perhaps give this character a name, let's say, 'Trump'. Absentee landlordism was a regular experience for people in Palestine at the time, and they would have been used to the expectation that the indentured servants/slaves would be held accountable for the land and money upon their master's return.

Matthew's version shows how the indentured servant/slave with the most power is quickly able to make money with the money he has, five talents making five talents more. The second slave also gains more money for his initial two-talent investment. With a capitalist worldview, this seems like the right thing to do.

Trump has given money to those he trusted to make him more money, and they have done so. They are faithful minions who know where the power and wealth lie.

However, in Jesus' time, capital is extremely limited. To gain more, i.e. an 'extra piece of the pie', would mean that someone else had their piece of the pie taken away from them. This was seen as a bad thing.

The servant then who morally refuses to take part in this exploitative exchange, but prudently buries the money, would have been seen as the hero of this story. His deed is more obviously heroic when the slave stands up to the wealthy absentee landowner: "Trump, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed."

The slave bravely points out the exploitation on the elite land-owner, and whilst being frightened of the repercussions, is prepared to 'stick it to the man'.

Trump then lays into him, demonising him with some devastating tweets sent off in the heat of the moment. Opponents of the wealthy are 'lazy' and 'wicked'. "You should have at least put the money in the bank and I would have at least gained interest," says the rich land-owner. This would have been a clear sign to the listeners that Jesus did not intend Trump to be mistaken for God, as interest (usury) was highly sinful to the Jewish community.

Trump then displays that he is in fact a cruel tyrant who will bully and destroy his opponents. He does what those with power always have done: he takes everything from the poor and gives it to the already wealthy, declaring the doctrine of the greedy elites: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

From a peasant perspective, the hero in this scenario is not Trump, but the one who refuses to take a part in the system, speaks truth to power, even if it means that the powerful elite may destroy him. What is most important is speaking out and exposing the truth, whatever the cost. Even if it means ending up on the cross.

Listen

Universal Credit has had a devastating impact on many communities, with already impoverished people being driven even deeper into debt. Even the little amount that people have had has been taken away from them for periods, and this has forced them into the hands of loan sharks, who charge extortionate amounts of interest on their loans. When people on benefits complain about the injustice of the system, they are often labelled as scroungers, lazy and wicked. If our churches are to be 'good news to the poor', we must take action to expose and prevent suffering due to government policy or unscrupulous private sector practices.

Act

Do you have a local landlord who is notorious for making a fortune from the private rented sector? What is the condition of their properties? Do you have local companies near you doing doorstep lending, making those on low incomes even poorer?

Are you prepared to organise a protest outside the offices of companies and landlords who exploit the poorest people in your community? Perhaps your church can work with Church Action on Poverty to expose injustices, and regularly share and support the work of Church Action on Poverty.

Pray

Lord, help me to speak out. When I see injustice, when I see suffering, when I see cruelty. Help me not to turn away and walk on the other side. Help me face my fears of feeling inadequate or unable to say or do anything.

Lord, for the sake of your people, help me to speak out.

Take it further

- *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* by William R Herzog (W/JKP, 1994)
- *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospels* by Malina and Rohrbaugh (Fortress Press, 1992)
- *A Just Church: 21st Century Liberation Theology in Action* by Chris Howson (Bloomsbury, 2010)

About the authors



Sue Richardson has worked for Christian Aid for more than three decades as a Regional Staff member in the East Midlands and latterly as Christian Aid's Theological Education Adviser. This role brings Sue into contact with those who are charged with the formation of church leaders, both ordained and lay, and has led her into many encounters where her interest in linking spirituality to action has been tested and enriched. She is Roman Catholic with a particular experience of the church in Brazil and a commitment to a theology of liberation.



David Rhodes, a former Anglican priest, has worked alongside vulnerable and homeless people for many years. His best-selling books on faith and justice were inspired by those treasured encounters and led to the creation of an innovative Retreat on the Streets. His theologically explosive new book, *The Fourth Denial: How a Broken Church Could Save the Planet*, will be published early in 2020.



Ruth Wilde is National Coordinator of the charity Inclusive Church (IC). IC works across the spectrum on all areas of inclusion. The six main areas are represented in the titles of the IC books published by DLT: Ethnicity, Poverty, Sexuality, Gender, Disability and Mental Health. Ruth is also an Associate Tutor at the Quaker study centre, Woodbrooke, and is studying for an MA in Contemporary Christian Theology at Newman University in Birmingham, where she lives with her wife and baby.



Revd Nick Jowett retired in 2012 after serving as a parish priest in the Diocese of Sheffield, and chair of Church Action on Poverty in Sheffield. He has written for the *Guardian*, *Times* and *Church Times*, and published a book on 'alternative saints', *Wisdom's Children*.



Revd Chris Howson is the Chaplain to the University of Sunderland, and an associate priest for Sunderland Minster. He works closely with sanctuary-seekers and those pushed to the edge by austerity politics. He is the author of *A Just Church: 21st Century Liberation Theology in Action*. He runs the 'Victor Jara Liberation Library' and helps organise the annual UK Liberation Theology Gathering.



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DANGEROUS STORIES

scripture from the margins



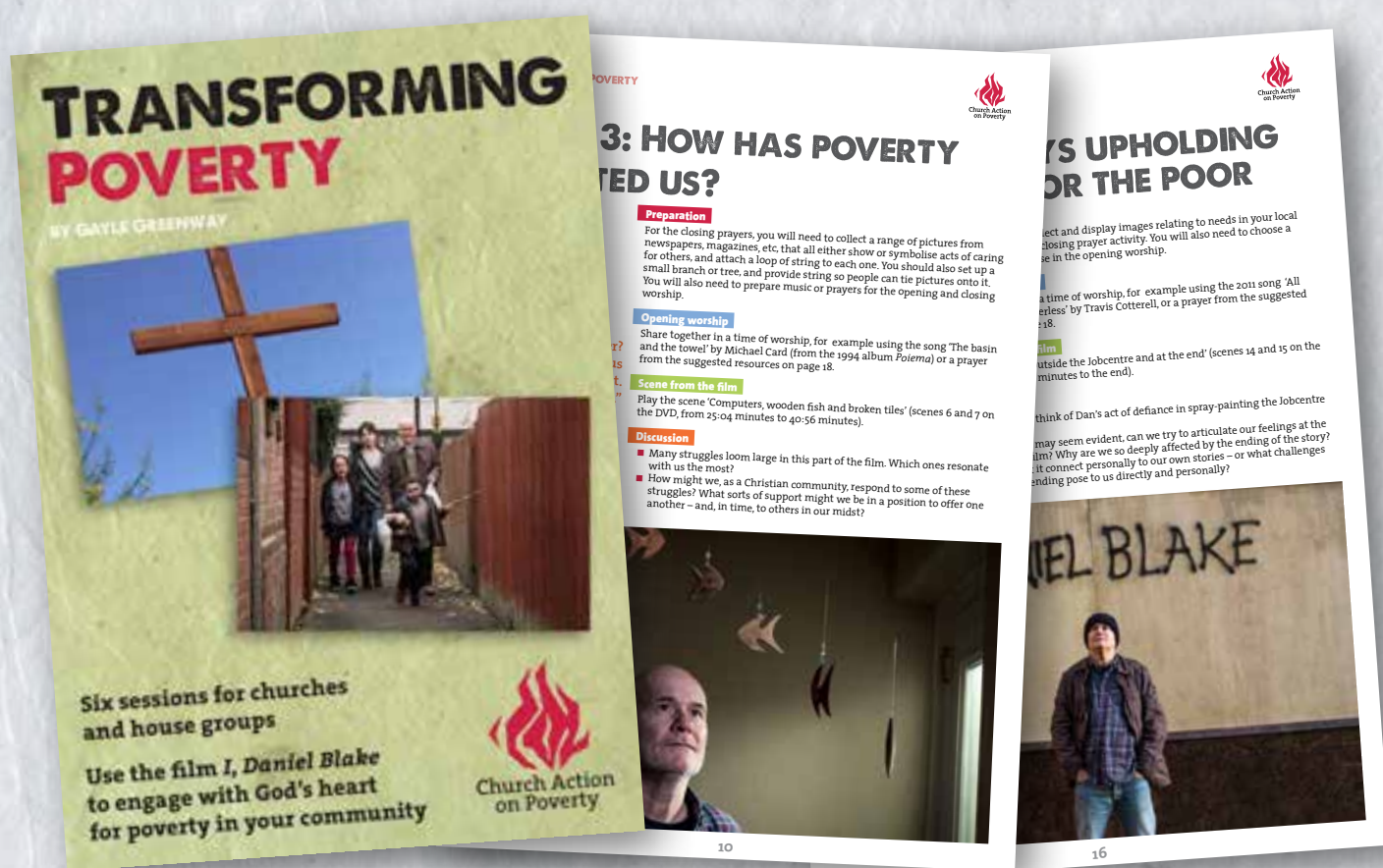
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Untold Stories

The Bible shows us again and again that God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed. People on the margins.

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(Revd Richard Lamey, Rector of St Paul at Wokingham, on our previous publication *Dangerous Stories*)

