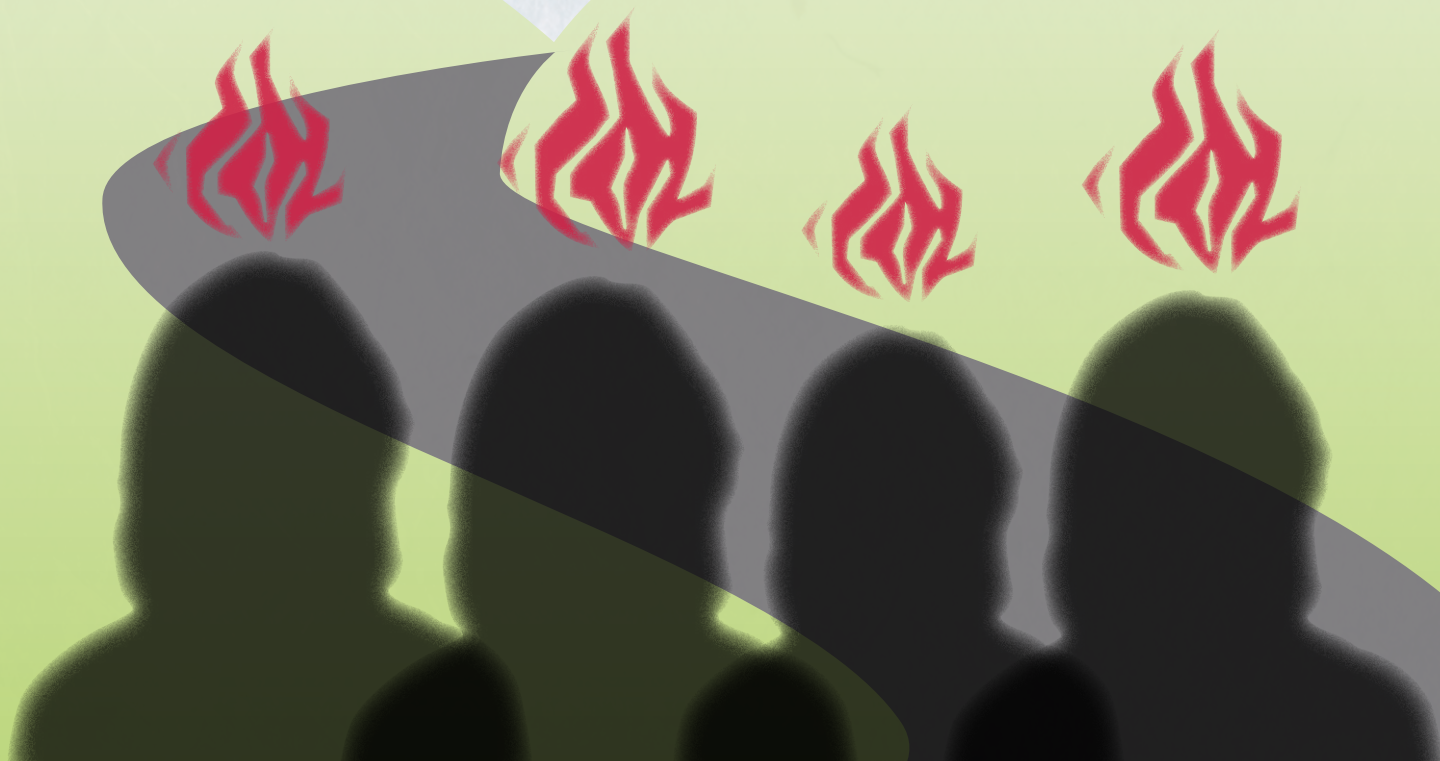


LIFE CHANGING STORIES

scripture from the margins



**Bible studies on the Acts of the Apostles
from 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 in new ways at scripture. Focusing on the book of Acts, we look at it afresh, as a story of people on the margins of society who were empowered to go out and change the world. We remind ourselves that the original audiences for the Apostles' teaching, and for the Gospels, were often people who were themselves marginalised by poverty, even living under military occupation.

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.

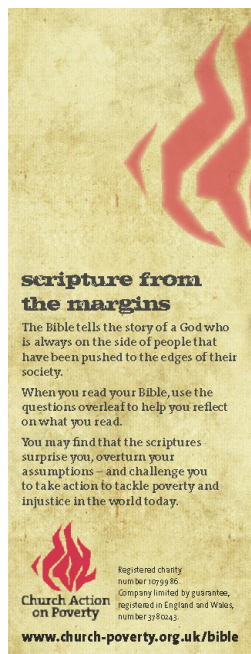
Using the studies in a group

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 2021, alongside a church service on Church Action on Poverty Sunday (28 February, the first Sunday of 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 A4 paper – so every member of your group can have their own copy.
- 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 book of Acts, but the same approach can uncover fresh ideas elsewhere in scripture too.

If you enjoy *Life-Changing Stories*, you might also like *Dangerous Stories* and *Untold Stories*, our previous publications in the series. 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

Peter and John before the Council: ordinary people speaking out for change

A Bible study by Jan Sutch Pickard

Read: Acts 4:1–20 (New Revised Standard Version)

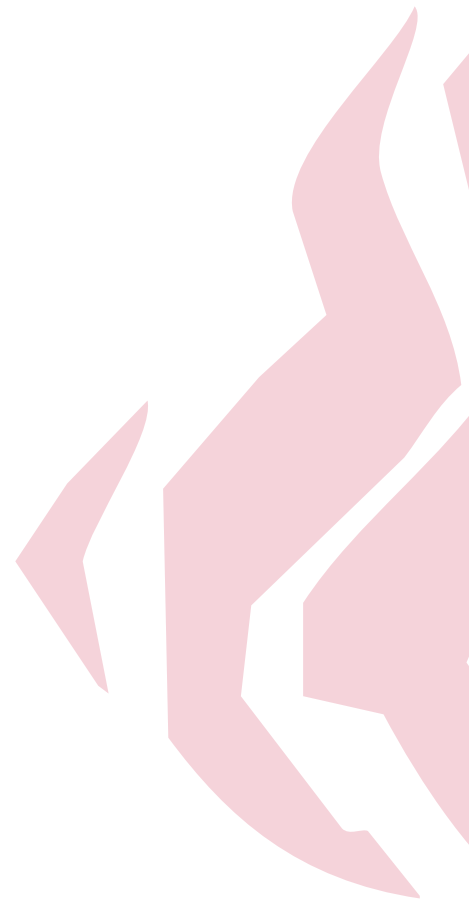
⁴ While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, ² much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. ³ So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴ But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

⁵ The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷ When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹ This Jesus is

‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
it has become the cornerstone.’

¹² There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realised that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. ¹⁴ When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵ So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. ¹⁶ They said, “What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” ¹⁸ So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; ²⁰ for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”



Reflect

- What's the back-story? To put this incident and the words spoken here into perspective, read chapter 3. It describes an incident in the Temple, and a first version of Peter's testimony that's repeated in the passage above. (It was important enough for the storyteller – Luke – to repeat it).
- Have you ever found yourself telling and retelling a story? Why?
- What makes us believe the stories or ideas or statements of other people? What gives their words authority?
- Who are the 'authority figures' in our own society? Would you trust their word and follow their instructions equally?
- Have we become more concerned with health – or the lack of it – in the last year? Think of one story you have heard about illness and/or recovery. What does it mean to you?
- What story from your own experience could you tell about healing – wholeness – to encourage others?

Think

The setting of most of this story is the Temple in Jerusalem, which was also the setting for much of Jesus' teaching and other actions. His teaching drew crowds, challenged many people and led to changed hearts. It was often controversial. So were the healings he enabled.

Peter and John are therefore following closely in Jesus' footsteps. A man is healed; the crowds are amazed; Peter speaks about the healing power of God, embodied in Jesus; many people believe his words – and all this is controversial. But there is an extra challenge: Jesus in the temple spoke with the authority of a rabbinical training in the Nazareth synagogue. But these two disciples were not only from the provinces, strange to the city, but uneducated laymen. So the first question was, "By what power, by what name – by what authority – do you (dare to) do this?"

Those asking the question are men of unquestioned authority. First on the scene are priests, law-enforcement officers, and Sadducees whose creed denied the possibility of resurrection, which was central to Peter's message. After a night in prison the disciples are confronted by a whole hierarchy: rulers, elders and scribes (teachers of the law), assembled in Council. They have law and cultural tradition on their side. They are confronted by two 'outsiders' who have neither. Plus one more – a man who for years had to sit begging at the Temple gate because his disability made him unclean, so he could never go through the gate. Finding himself healed, he had gone leaping and singing into the Temple. He didn't wait to show himself to a priest to be certified 'whole'. What for us seems a natural and joyful human reaction must have seemed one more transgressive action.

But the Council members saw that this man was living proof that something life-changing had happened – something that had power to move and convert the crowd. The power was greater because of the way that Peter and John insisted on telling the story. The disciples respond very simply and directly. Verse 20 sums up the commitment underlying much of the New Testament.

Listen

Numerous accounts of people speaking out for justice, sharing their experiences and their beliefs can be found in the Church Action on Poverty 'Voices from the Margins' blog at www.voicesfromthemargins.org.uk

Or consider the story of Paulette Wilson, which appeared in the *Guardian* in July 2020 (www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/24/without-paulette-wilson-windrush-may-have-remained-hidden).

She was brought over to Britain from Jamaica as a child, by her mother who had come in response to the British government's call for workers. The presence of both mother and child, members of the Windrush Generation, was lawful. As an adult, Paulette was a law-abiding and hard-working member of society.

Yet in 2015 she received a letter telling her that she faced deportation as an illegal immigrant – an example of the government's 'hostile environment' policy. Paulette tried hard to convince the Home Office there was an error, but she was arrested twice, nearly deported, and pushed into destitution. She lost her state benefits and was no longer allowed to work.

For two years Paulette had to travel from her home in Wolverhampton to a Home Office reporting office 24 miles away, facing a £5,000 fine if she missed an appointment. Along with many others she experienced confusion, uncaring officials and routine humiliations.

But Paulette should not be seen as a victim. She played a decisive role in exposing the government's mistakes. Nervous about speaking out, she nevertheless agreed to be interviewed about her experience; prompting hundreds of other people to come forward and tell their stories. She spoke calmly to a room packed with MPs in Westminster in April 2018, and later gave clear evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights.

Her sudden death at the age of 64 in July 2020 came soon after she and others delivered a petition to Downing Street, calling for compensation and reform. Suddenly Priti Patel, Home Office Minister, responded, saying that her department must become a "fair, humane, compassionate" institution – and beginning to put into place the changes to make that happen.

What would have happened if Paulette and other women and men, previously overlooked, had let themselves be silenced?

Act: Leaping and singing – a dialogue

Use the following dialogue based on Acts 3: 1-10 – the two voices being a disciple and the man who was healed – in an act of worship or in a workshop as a stimulus to questions (maybe the same questions that appear opposite).

Leaping and singing he was,
laughing and praising God!
He was dancing – in the Temple –
and everyone was amazed.
But it was no more amazing
than what had happened a few moments before:
what we had done – dared to do – in Jesus' name.

**At a precise time – three o'clock in the afternoon –
in a precise place, at the gate called Beautiful,
I was waiting – as I had been waiting all my life –
for passers-by to throw me a coin,
or, more likely, to step over me.
That was the only place I expected to be –
on the cadge, on the dole, on the receiving end.
'Look,' said a voice, and I looked
and I saw two ordinary men.**

Ordinary uneducated men – myself and John –
just two companions of Jesus. Without Jesus.
The lame beggar looked at us,
looked for a hand-out,
and we had nothing to give. No money,
not even good advice, Just...

**And he said, “I have no silver or gold,
but what I have I give you.”**

I took this huge risk.
I said, “In the name of Jesus of Nazareth
stand up and walk.”

I had so much to lose.

I had so much to lose.
What if I was wrong? Was it possible?
There was no way I had the power or piety
to make this man walk.

What if he was wrong?

If I believed – and nothing happened?

I took this huge risk.

And he took me by the hand and raised me up.

My feet were strong... my ankles were strong...

my knees were strong... my feet began to dance.

I was praising God with my whole body.

We walked into the Temple – outsiders going in.

I danced into the Temple – my world turned upside down.

Ordinary people
in whom something amazing was happening –
through taking risks
in Jesus’ name. Amen

Jan Sutch Pickard, from Out of Iona (Wild Goose Publications)

Pray

God-with-us, present though unseen, we give thanks
that you hear us when we cry out for change.
You hear us even when others don’t want to listen,
or doubt the authority of our lived experience;
you go on listening, even when we struggle
to put our beliefs into words.

And, when people in power reject our protests,
you affirm our right to speak:
you call us to come forward and state our case.

For you, our Maker, who breathed life into us,
understand our heart’s desires.

In Jesus, you came to share our human lives,
and know the down-to-earth needs
of our neighbours and ourselves.

Your transforming Spirit can empower us
to help make the world a better place.

Give us the humility to call for your help;
give us the ability to speak the truth out loud,
in words all can understand;
give us the grace to see clearly
where you are, who we are and what needs to be done.

Help us to stand up for what we believe, to speak out,
and to follow you. **Amen**

Ananias and Sapphira: wealth and poverty

A Bible study by Nick Jowett

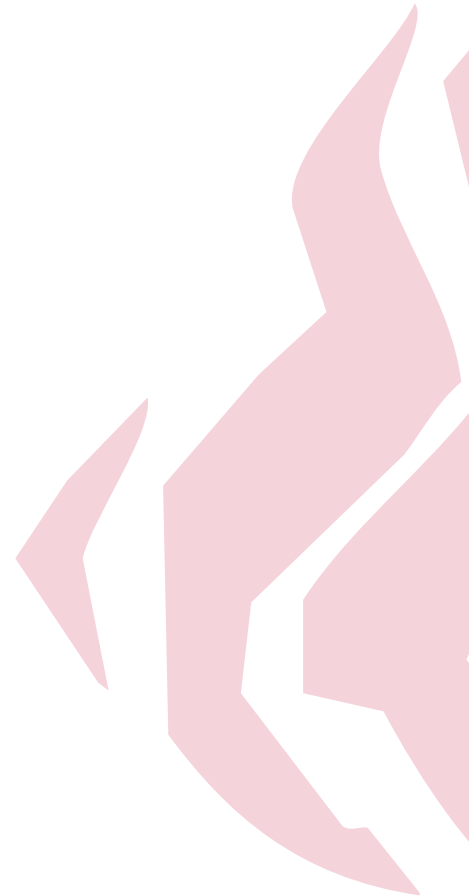
Read: Acts 5.1-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ² with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" ⁵ Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." ⁹ Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Reflect

- How do you feel when talking about your own income, or other people's?
- Are there people who have too much money?
- Ananias and Sapphira apparently suffered an extraordinarily heavy punishment for their deceit. Is it too easy in the UK to hide wealth, e.g. through tax evasion?
- If an ideal society means sharing everything much more equally, how is this best achieved?



Think

The author of Luke's Gospel is writing his second volume, about the growth of the church from small beginnings in Jerusalem, some 50 years after the start of it all. Scholars have questioned the historical accuracy of his accounts, but he will have depended on the memories of those who lived through the events, even though it's clear he also wanted to create an edifying and encouraging narrative for his Christian readers. But it is not a whitewash. Luke was willing to record many incidents which do not show the early church in a good light: there were fall-outs and failures as well as fortitude and faithfulness in the Christian Way, and that speaks of reality.

There is no way of checking what exactly happened to cause the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, but the context is one of a small, threatened community of Christians, made up of poor and better-off people, holding all things in common and using resources donated by the richer members to meet the needs of all. We've just heard about this ideal community at the end of chapter four in Acts, but now we meet a couple who want to claim the kudos of being benefactors without the pain of giving up the full proceeds of the land they've sold. They're mean; they're hypocrites; and they are liars. Peter accuses them of lying to the Holy Spirit of God. What he means is that this is a new Spirit-driven community, fulfilling the vision of God's kingdom as Jesus had embodied it in the equal sharing of everything by rich and poor – and Ananias and Sapphira's actions threaten to undermine it.

There may also be a subtext of social suspicion, because Peter, the leader in this community, is also an ex-fisherman; as someone who will have known poverty or the threat of it in his earlier life, he may have in-built negative feelings towards people who can afford to be ostentatiously generous.

Listen

Luke's picture of the first Christians is really a parable of community life. When he uses the word 'church' for the first time, as he does at the end of this passage, it's the Greek word '*ekklesia*', a gathering of the people. That 'church', in which the 'law of the Spirit' was that everything was shared, is a miniature image of a society in which, through good employments, taxation and national insurance, free charitable generosity, welfare provision or even a citizens' basic income, every member has a decent living.

(Listen to the episode of Church Action on Poverty's 'Podcast to End Poverty' about mutuality to hear more reflections on the values that would underpin such a society: anchor.fm/casttoendpoverty/episodes/A-fantastic-outpouring-of-goodwill-efasi5)

But our current UK society is not so arranged: the tax system does not guarantee fairness and it does not yet give adequate welfare provision for every citizen. The rich can hide away their wealth through tax avoidance or evasion. Even the moderately well-off will not vote for political parties proposing fairer, more adequate taxation. Charities, contributed to by rich and poor, are assumed to plug the gaps in public provision, but, in spite of their many achievements, often fail to do so. The unwillingness of Ananias and Sapphira to throw themselves fully into the new Christian society can be compared with the reluctance of the better-off in our society to 'dig deep enough' to ensure a decent life for all. We are mostly willing to pay a certain level of tax and we are happy to support favourite charities, and we like to think of ourselves as generous, but are we any better than Ananias and Sapphira, who deserved Peter's condemnation?

In November 2019, before the last General Election, the *Guardian* reported this: "The super-rich are preparing to immediately leave the UK

if Jeremy Corbyn becomes prime minister, fearing they will lose billions of pounds if the Labour leader does ‘go after’ the wealthy elite with new taxes, possible capital controls and a clampdown on private schools. Lawyers and accountants for the UK’s richest families said they had been deluged with calls from millionaire and billionaire clients asking for help and advice on moving countries, shifting their fortunes offshore and making early gifts to their children to avoid the Labour leader’s threat to tax all inheritances above £125,000.”

That looks bad, but looking at this the other way round, isn’t it possible that some of us are also guilty of the kind of angry enviousness – perhaps a bit like Peter – towards the apparent sins of ‘the rich’, many of whom create wealth and contribute substantially in our economy?

Act

Find out about and consider joining the ‘Build Back Better’ campaign which, after the coronavirus pandemic, seeks a new deal that prioritises people, invests in the NHS and creates a robust, shockproof economy that is capable of tackling the climate crisis.

www.buildbackbetteruk.org

Pray

O God of justice, your kingdom is brought to reality in decisions of fairness and actions of love. It is a community in which we place our money and possessions, as far as we can, in the service of all. As a nation, we have used the ways of taxation, universal provision and charity, but still fall short, leaving some with too much and many with too little. Help us by your Spirit to engage with the issues of wealth and poverty without rancour or prejudice, and to press those in power to be bold and visionary in creating the conditions for a fairer society. Jesus, we remember, asked the rich man to give up his wealth and follow him, and so we ask this prayer in Jesus’ name.

Take it further

- ‘Ananias and Sapphira: a Case of Malicious Identity’
www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/acts/a-clash-of-kingdoms-community-and-power-acts-5-7/an-anias-and-sapphira-a-case-of-malicious-identity-acts-51-11
- ‘As the rich get richer, why don’t British people care about inequality?’
www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/18/rich-britons-inequality-poverty-social-wealth
- ‘What is Universal Basic Income?’
citizensincome.org/citizens-income/what-is-it
www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-48185806

Simon the magician: Gifts and power

A Bible study by Sue Richardson

Read: Acts 8:9–24 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁹ Now a certain man named Simon had previously practised magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. ¹⁰ All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” ¹¹ And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. ¹² But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed. After being baptised, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.

¹⁴ Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵ The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit ¹⁶ (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus). ¹⁷ Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, “Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” ²⁰ But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God’s gift with money! ²¹ You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. ²² Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness.” ²⁴ Simon answered, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me.”

Reflect

- How do we feel about magic in the 21st century?
- Have we ever sought to acquire or buy something because of its ‘magical’ properties? (Things that promise to revolutionise our life or appearance!)
- Has someone lost status or respect in our eyes because of the way they have sought power or influence?
- How does a gift to us compare with a purchase we make ourselves? What are our feelings in response to a gift made to us?
- How does ‘gifting’ work, or could it work, in our economy?

Think

This passage has given us a word in English: ‘simony’, the payment of money for spiritual wellbeing. Occasionally, commentators have described Simon as a pagan, without faith and offering money for it. Perhaps we should approach the story more subtly, paying attention to its setting and the understandings of the times.

Philip is preaching in Samaria, a land with negative connotations for Jews, although the faith of both peoples was very similar. So, Simon was most probably a believer in Yahweh. His practice of 'magic' does not automatically make him suspect. In pre-scientific times, 'magic' was a way in which ordinary people could make sense of the world around them which they often struggled to understand. Magic was ritual, helping to mediate the everyday with the supernatural, and would also include acts that, in difficult circumstances, produced relief or resolution. We are not talking about witchcraft as Simon's practice.

He was probably a healer of ailments of mind and body, a finder of lost things, and through attentive listening, an adviser to people about their lives. He must have been skilled, people are amazed. He has earned the appellation 'great'. When Philip comes preaching Jesus, Simon does not oppose him; indeed, he gets baptised like many others. We may envisage this adding another string to his bow, another line to his CV. However, just as he has gained status through his work, he assumes that Jesus' message comes with an equivalence: the extra benefit of membership, something more than baptism, the exercise of power, and he expects to pay for it. Does he think that this will increase the value of healing amongst those who need it? Does he imagine he can create a monopoly of power? He really doesn't understand the nature of gift. Do we?

Listen

We are often told that if you receive without making any contribution or any obvious effort, you will not value that which is given. This is offered as a criticism of aid, or of our welfare support system and its benefits. We are encouraged to believe that there is a virtue in being able or willing to pay for something, and that this is evidence of character.

We are also a society that understands marketing. Every day we are offered miracles large and small that, if we purchase, will smooth our difficulties, aid our daily tasks, solve problems we weren't even aware of and, perhaps most ambiguously, ensure physical beauty, calmness of mind, greater status or influence, if we purchase.

We are torn between gift and product. Simon sees the miracles of healing as the product in this story; they bring public acclaim and notice, but they are rooted in a gift, which is the Holy Spirit. Simon wanted the product but he could not understand it within a gift freely given, because it also had to be freely accepted and this was not a framework within which he lived.

Yet gifting is not a simple act. It occurs within and creates relationship, and not one that is only one-way, for gifting brings with it an expectation of reciprocity. "What goes around, comes around" we say. Indigenous people see a gift as something to be passed on and eventually returned to the giver, albeit in a different form. Gift actually creates more obligation than transaction, the paying of a price, after which the product is yours and you are free to do what you like with it.

"Some things cannot be bought and sold and retain their essence", like dignity, respect, inclusion, participation, security, love. (*Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, page 27). In creating systems of welfare that seek these things for all, we are building a social system and an economy that binds people together in mutual expectation. We want support for people at specific times of hardship in life, but as a society we are locked into a way of thinking that expects some contribution or the gift element must be minimal. As we face, post Covid-19, unprecedented challenges to people's livelihoods, we must explore better ways to create an economy that binds people into systems of mutual care. A Citizen's Income is proposed, giving

an income at a certain level to everyone, regardless of status or contribution, but because all can receive it, critics see it as getting something for nothing.

The Holy Spirit looked like this to Simon. How could it have value without a market price? Buying and selling turns people into winners and losers; the magic of gift is that everyone wins.

(See an example of how community spirit and reciprocity have helped people pull through the pandemic at www.church-poverty.org.uk/how-one-estate-pulled-together-and-how-covid-could-change-it-forever)

Act

- Join a Basic Income Group in your area or through your trade union. Details from www.citizensincome.org
- Campaign for more generous benefit support for people with disabilities, people without jobs, people seeking sanctuary, and all struggling with our welfare system.

Pray

Generous Lord,
Your earth speaks of abundance, but we speak only of scarcity.
Your mercy knows no boundaries, but we create distinctions, entitlements and rationing.
You took a gift and fed 5,000, but we echo your disciple Philip in costing the whole exercise.
You forgive our desire to have more, our clutching at possessions, our withdrawal of grace and invite us to consider the paradox of giving.
Show us abundance, break down the barriers we build, encourage us to dare to give more and to let more go. May your Spirit be the limitless gift we need of life and hope in our measured world. Amen

The Ethiopian eunuch: 'identity politics' and liberation

A Bible study by Ruth Wilde

Reads: Acts 8:26–40 (New Revised Standard Version)

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹ He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

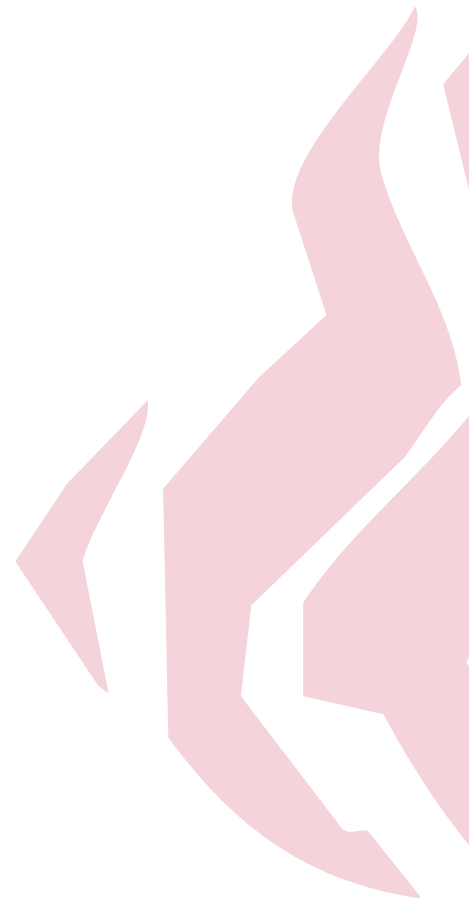
Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptised?” ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptised him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Reflect

- Do you think this man – the Ethiopian eunuch – is a person with privilege? Why?
- How has this story been interpreted by religious leaders in churches you’ve been to?
- Do you think it’s important that this man was Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official and a religious person? Which of these do you think is the most important?
- How does this passage speak to your own experiences?
- Which parts of the eunuch’s complex identity do you identify with?



Think

We are not really familiar with eunuchs these days, but they were a common fixture of the ancient world. They were isolated by mainstream society and stood out with their high voices and unusual height, but they also often had high-powered jobs, like this one in Acts. This eunuch would not have been poor economically, and he was well-educated. He was evidently able to read, which most people would not have been. He would have had a roof over his head, and access to healthcare, such as it was in the 1st century.

However, in other ways, he would have been 'poor'. He did not have the freedom that others had – he was entirely dependent on Queen Candace. He was unable to have children and would most likely have remained single all his life, in a world where the family unit was important socially.

He had no place in a world which was divided strictly between women and men either – in this way, he was what we might term 'queer' in today's vocabulary. As a religious person and a Jew, he would have had the experience of not knowing where to worship at the temple, as the temple had a section for women and children, and a separate section for men. He was most probably forcibly castrated as a child, and he would not have felt entirely comfortable or accepted in all-male spaces and society; however, he also would not have been welcome in female spaces.

Listen

Privileged people often attempt to reduce the important work of justice and liberation for marginalised people to the term 'identity politics'. However, only those people who do not experience prejudice against their identity can afford to say identity doesn't matter. Some people are excluded from jobs because of the colour of their skin, treated differently because of their sexuality, and patronised or worse because of their working-class background or because they're disabled. For these people, identity matters. Identities must be named in order for prejudice against them to be shamed and then dismantled.

Often, in church services, we have heard this passage explained as a story about mission – the mission of the apostles to convert people to Christianity. We are then told that we too must go and convert people so that they can be baptised. As Marianne Kartzow and Halvor Moxnes explain, however, this is a very Western interpretation – it has become the hegemonic interpretation, excluding all others. It is time to re-read the story through the eyes of marginalised and poor people – this is liberation theology. If the writer of Acts did not think the eunuch's identity was significant in this story, why was he described in such great detail?

People being treated differently because of their identity or background is not a new phenomenon. The eunuch in Acts was excluded from 'normal' society in many ways – he was excluded from family life; he was disabled – with a scar, missing genitalia, an unusual voice and height, and the inability to procreate; he was a Black, African Jew; he was queer or gender divergent; he was foreign; and he was a servant – yes, a wealthy one, but one who was still dependent on his employer.

The people who have risen up and said that 'Black Lives Matter' this year have not done that because they sat down and thought about how they might get 'identity politics' on the agenda. They have done it out of anger, desperation and pain, because Black people are being treated differently and unfairly. In some cases, Black people are even in danger for their lives. The death that sparked a worldwide outpouring of anger and protest this year – that of George Floyd – was watched by millions around the world on a nine-minute video. According to the Black theologian Dwight Hopkins, it

is likely the fact that so many saw it happen on camera which really moved people to action.

The eunuch in this story came from Ethiopia, and in this era of renewed struggle for Black freedom and justice, that is particularly meaningful. Ethiopia has a long and proud history and is often seen as a symbol of Africa as a whole. It is where some Black people decided to move to in the 20th Century to escape injustice and 'exile' in the West. That project of returning from exile to Africa may not necessarily be a long-term solution to the racism people face, but it gave hope and a focus to many who have been treated so unjustly for so long.

The Bible scholar Peterson Toscano says that the eunuch could have been moved by the passage he was reading, as it related to some of his own experiences of forced castration and exclusion: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted... he was led as a lamb to the slaughter." Toscano wonders whether he perhaps read on to Isaiah 56, where he would have read about God's promise to foreigners and eunuchs: "Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from His people.' Nor let the eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree' ... To them I will give in my house and within my walls a memorial, and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off" (Isaiah 56:3-5).

The promise in Isaiah is not only God's promise to a eunuch in the 1st century; it is God's promise to all who have been excluded, marginalised, mistreated and abused. You will have a name better than that of sons and daughters, says God. You are my children.

Act

Create a study group at your church to look at identity and inclusion. Use the Inclusive Church set of books, especially the personal stories in them. You can also use the stories on the Church Action on Poverty website here: <https://www.church-poverty.org.uk/stories/>

Pray

Dear God, in our efforts to dismantle racism, we understand that we struggle not merely against flesh and blood but against powers and principalities -- those institutions and systems that keep racism alive by perpetuating the lie that some members of the family are inferior and others superior.

Create in us a new mind and heart that will enable us to see brothers and sisters in the faces of those divided by racial categories.

Give us the grace and strength to rid ourselves of racial stereotypes that oppress some of us while providing entitlements to others.

Heal your family God, and make us one with you, in union with our brother Jesus, and empowered by your Holy Spirit. Amen

(adapted from Pax Christi USA's 'Prayer for Dismantling Racism')

Take it further

Analysis quoted in the study comes from these sources:

- 'Complex Identities: Ethnicity, Gender and Religion in the Story of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40)' by Marianne B Kartzow and Halvor Moxnes in *Religion and Theology* 17 (2010)

- 'No Nuts? No Problem! Disability, Stigma, and the Baptised Eunuch in Acts 8:26–40' by Anna Rebecca Solevåg in *Biblical Interpretation* volume 24: issue 1 (2016)
- Inclusive Church video on Black theology at www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FNRTQyQgY
- *African Renaissance: When Art Meets Power* at www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0oolwf2/african-renaissance-when-art-meets-power-series-1-1-ethiopia
- 'Intersecting Identities – Queer Theology and the Ethiopian Eunuch' by Peterson Toscano at petersontoscano.com/ethiopianeunuch

You could also look at:

- The Inclusive Church book series: *Ethnicity, Poverty, Sexuality, Gender, Disability, Mental Health*
- *Brit(ish)* by Afua Hirsch
- *Is God Colour-blind?* by Anthony Reddie
- *The Talk* on All 4

Paul and the Roman tribune: citizenship and the broken body of Christ

A Bible study by Revd Dr Raj Bharat Patta

Read: Acts 22:22–29 (New Revised Standard Version)

²² Up to this point they listened to him, but then they shouted, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.”

²³ And while they were shouting, throwing off their cloaks, and tossing dust into the air, ²⁴ the tribune directed that he was to be brought into the barracks, and ordered him to be examined by flogging, to find out the reason for this outcry against him. ²⁵ But when they had tied him up with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?” ²⁶ When the centurion heard that, he went to the tribune and said to him, “What are you about to do? This man is a Roman citizen.” ²⁷ The tribune came and asked Paul, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” And he said, “Yes.” ²⁸ The tribune answered, “It cost me a large sum of money to get my citizenship.” Paul said, “But I was born a citizen.” ²⁹ Immediately those who were about to examine him drew back from him; and the tribune also was afraid, for he realised that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

Reflect

- Have you ever spoken about citizenship to a person who has crossed oceans fleeing violence and war in their country of origin? How do they understand citizenship? Where is their citizenship?
- What is Christian about citizenship? What is political about Christian discipleship today?
- How can our Christian faith strengthen our understanding of citizenship? How can our citizenship strengthen our Christian faith?
- How do we understand citizenship in the light of undocumented people living as refugees or seeking sanctuary, who are denied citizenship?
- What is your take on Paul’s saying to the early Christians at the brand-new church at Philippi in Philippians 3:20, “But our citizenship is in heaven”?

Think

Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem brings in some interesting discussion on citizenship, legal rights, and privilege in the context of sharing his Christian testimony in the public sphere. Earlier in Acts 21:39, we read Paul claiming that he was a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city. Paul shared that God told him, “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles,” then there was an uproar against him shouting that he not be allowed to live. The public sphere at Jerusalem was dominated by religious groups who

could not think of God beyond their own tradition, beyond their temple, or beyond their tribe. Therefore, they were furious when Paul shared that God was sending him away to the Gentiles, or in other words they were threatened by the inclusion of Gentiles into the fold of God's love. That fear of the stranger provoked them to shout for Paul to be killed, for he was attempting to open the love of God to the strangers.

So the tribune of the Roman empire ordered that Paul be brought into the barracks to be further examined by flogging. As they tied Paul with thongs, Paul disclosed his Roman citizenship and questioned back: how lawful it is to punish a Roman citizen? The tribune and Paul had back-and-forth conversations about his Roman citizenship. This text illustrates the importance of Roman citizenship, the citizenship of the empire, and the value and respect that it carried in the first century, for it gave strength and ability to protect its holder from floggings and bodily violence.

It is important to note that Paul carried multiple citizenships, as a Tarsian and as a Roman, though they worked on different levels, unlike the multiple citizenships of today. The Tarsian citizenship was granted to Paul from his birth to a family residing there, and imbued Paul with certain rights and responsibilities to his town and to its members. Besides this, Paul also gained Roman citizenship by birth as his father would have been a Roman citizen, which gave him additional rights and privileges while he travelled within the Roman empire, which the Tarsian ID could not provide. The ID of a Roman citizenship in the ancient world was one of the most treasured possessions, giving privileges and numerous other rights which were unattainable for a typical provincial person.

In order to gain access to the multi-ethnic public sphere of Jerusalem, Paul had to introduce his Jewish religious ID, his Tarsian city citizenship ID and also his Roman citizenship empire ID, and share it in his public testimony.

Listen

Thinking about this text in the context of our times today, we notice the importance of citizenship, which has been a matter of privilege for some, a matter of struggle for some and a matter of denial for others. Citizenship has been understood as that which is given to people who qualify to live in a given territory, who are born in that province, speak like the majority, and look like the majority. The denial of documents to people who come to our country seeking sanctuary has been increasing, for they look different to the rest of the locals. Since these people do not have the right papers, they are denied the right to work and to earn their bread, rice and curry. Poverty among these people has been on the rise as they don't qualify for food banks, nor are they able to work to earn their living. In this context, this text calls our attention to two major things: the issue of xenophobia and the issue of undocumented people, who do not have citizenship anywhere in the world.

I would want to propose 'global citizenry' as the 'broken body of Christ,' which is not determined by territorial nation states, but which is bound by life-concerns, seeking solidarity with all suffering people and offering hope to all people and of all nations. From the perspective of Christian discipleship, citizenship is based on love, dignity and respect for one another. In this 'broken body of Christ,' we are all different members, called to care for the least parts of the body. Christian faith offers hope to those people who are struggling to cope with documentation and the right to live. Our faith in Jesus Christ is trans-territorial, and so should our love be.

This text is inviting us to overcome the fear of the stranger with love and hospitality towards them. It is challenging us to strengthen our citizenship in advocating for the right to live to those people to whom it is denied.

Church Action on Poverty's 'Your Local Pantry' scheme (www.church-poverty.org.uk/pantry) is a great initiative that affirms the dignity of all people irrespective of their identity and addresses hunger in their respective localities. We as local churches are working with a local charity in providing food for children and their parents, addressing holiday hunger as our action in showing love towards the stranger, no matter their ethnicity and identity.

Act

Could you discuss community sponsorship for refugees with your local churches? Could you register your churches as spaces of hospitality for people struggling in filling their documents for the right to live? Could local churches work with local charities to address holiday hunger for school children who do not qualify for food banks?

Pray

God of justice, help us to work as the 'broken body of Christ', recognising that it is the 'global citizenry'.

Help us to offer love and hospitality to the stranger by building friendship and feeding the hungry.

God of love, help to us recognise that you have not given up on us and are willing to collaborate with us in transforming this world and in renewing this creation, where peace and justice will ever flow to all the nooks and corners of this world.

Grant us your grace, courage and strength to make a difference in this world. In Jesus' name. Amen

Take it further

Find out more on these issues by looking at...

- *Bread of life in Broken Britain: Foodbanks, faith and neoliberalism* by Charles Roding Pemberton (SCM Press, 2020)
- Voices from the Margins: voicesfromthemargins.org.uk
- Your Local Pantry: www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk

About the authors



Jan Sutch Pickard is a poet, storyteller and liturgist, a member of the Iona Community. She learned to lead worship as a member of the multi-ethnic Lancaster Road Methodist Church in Notting Hill. Moving to New Mills in Greater Manchester, she served for one year as Vice President of the Methodist Conference. She spent six years living in community in Iona, latterly as the Warden of the Abbey, was Writer in Residence at Southlands College, Roehampton University for a semester, and has served twice as an Ecumenical Accompanier in the West Bank Palestinian Territories. Now she enjoys being part of a local community on the Isle of Mull, where there are similar challenges to some inner city areas, as well as creativity in working together for the common good.



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*.



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.



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 Dr Raj Bharat Patta is an ordained Minister of Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, India and currently serves as an Authorised Minister at Stockport Methodist Circuit with a pastoral charge of Heaton Moor, Heaton Mersey and St John's Churches. He has a PhD in subaltern public theology. He blogs at thepattas.blogspot.com. He is married to Shiny and has two sons, Jubi and Jai ho.

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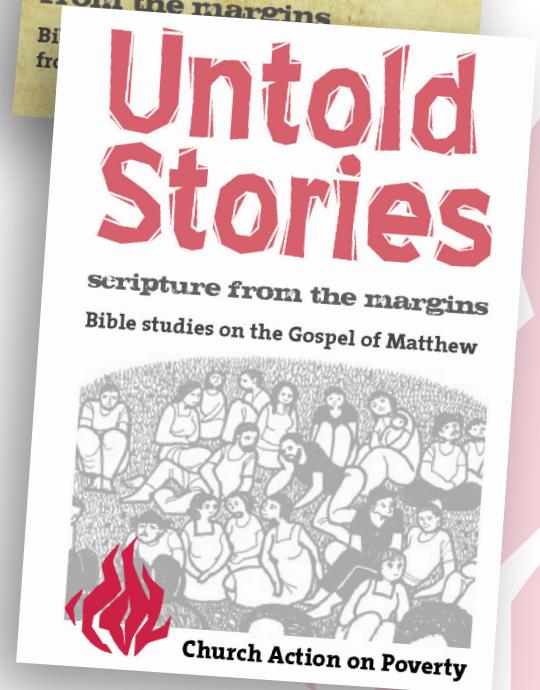
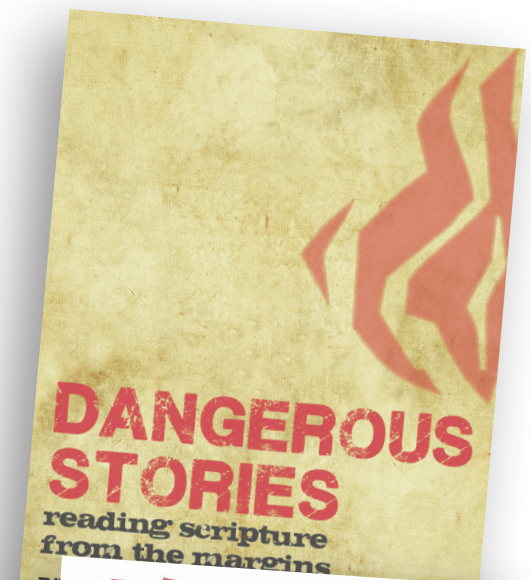
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