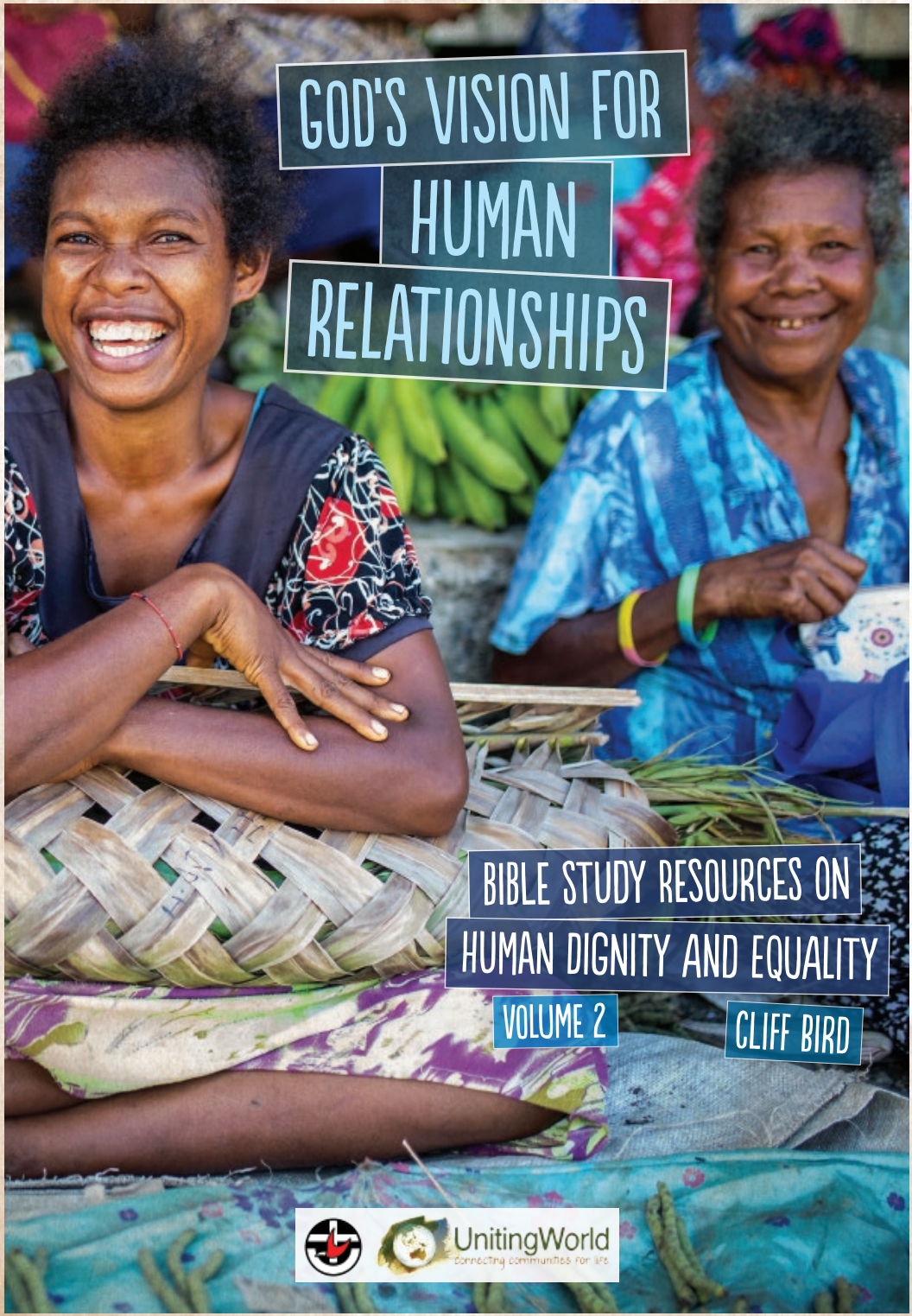

GOD'S VISION FOR HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS
BIBLE STUDY RESOURCES ON HUMAN DIGNITY AND EQUALITY
VOLUME 2
CLIFF BIRD
UnitingWorld
connecting communities for life



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Introduction to Volume Two

Welcome to volume two of "God's Vision for Human Relationships." While volume one consists of studies which are based on texts taken from the Old Testament, gospels and epistles, this current volume consists of five Bible studies that are based on text primarily taken from the gospels. The gospels stand at the heart of the Bible. While there are many relevant texts in the gospels that could just as well be selected, the five picked for this volume are a representative sample of the body of authoritative literature on God's vision for human relationships.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Equality between men and women begins with the very being and heart of God. This truth is seen and expressed through traditional Christian theologies. Take the following three, for example.

Firstly, in the theology of the Trinity the 'three persons' of the Trinity, namely the "Father" and the "Son" and the "Holy Spirit" are all equal and at the same time distinct. No one 'person' is inferior or superior to the other: equal and distinct in and of themselves; equal in status and equal in dignity. Each one relates to the other as 'persons' of equal standing, and each one engages with creation in ways that give and affirm life, and in the spirit of reciprocity. There are two important points to remember when speaking of the 'persons' of the Trinity:

- When talking about the Trinity as "Father" and "Son" and "Holy Spirit", there are important factors to bear in mind. The use of "Father" or "he" for God does not mean that one must, therefore, view God as biologically male. Several points underlie this observation. Israel reflected on the gender of God (Elohim) not in sexual-biological categories as we would normally do for a human father, but rather in the affirmation that God is complete and cannot be divided. God has no consort and does not biologically conceive Israelite sons and daughters, or 'children of God' in the Christian sense, but creates a people by adoption. In this sense we can understand that when the Old Testament refers to God as "Father", it is most often signifying redemption. God is, or even becomes, "father" of a people primarily as their rescuer or protector, not as their biological father.
- Traditional Christian theology and Christianity in general commonly refer to God in the masculine. The femininity or femaleness of the Holy Spirit is also expressed in some Christian traditions. The historical roots of this tradition are traced to the Syrian church fathers who were fond of referring to the ruach or Holy Spirit in the feminine as 'divine mother'.[1] Jürgen Moltmann writes about the notable feminine aspects of the Holy Spirit in Christian scriptures and points out, "Whereas the conception of God the Father is bound up with the creation and the distance of the Creator from his creatures, the maternal mystery of the Holy Spirit contains the more intimate relationships of outpouring, indwelling and mutual influence."[2]

Secondly, the message of equality of male and female is also at the heart of Christology. The life and teachings of Jesus Christ were a critique of the cultural-religious-economic values, practices, systems and structures of society which kept so many people from experiencing the abundant life that God intends for all. The core message of his public ministry was, and is, the reign of God (kingdom of God) and the offer of abundant life to all. Integral to the reign of God, as seen in Jesus' teachings and demonstrated in his life, is the dignity and God-given worth of every person. He stood up for justice for the poor, destitute, children, women, sick and disabled – the so-called sinners – and those who were treated as not belonging within society. The reign of God proclaimed and practiced by Jesus Christ is the greatest leveller of all time. In the reign of God everyone stands on level ground, male and female are equals.

Thirdly, in theologies of the Spirit, the Spirit is the source and giver of all life. There is neither discrimination nor gender preferences in the Spirit's bestowal of life on every human being. The Spirit who gives life to male human beings is the same Spirit who gives life to female human beings, and the life that the Spirit gives to female human beings is the same life given to male human beings.

The above brief summary goes to show the following: equality is part and parcel of the very being of God; equality is proclaimed by Jesus in his teachings of the reign of God, and embodied in the ways that he lived; and equality is in the very essence of life that is given by the Spirit to every human being. Equality between male and female, men and women and girls and boys is rooted in these core theologies. From this theological foundation, the call for equality between male and female is in simple terms a call to return to the place where God intended and intends for humanity. Equality and human dignity are not

1. In the gnostic Gospel of Thomas, Jesus called the Spirit his 'Mother'

2. See Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, (1991), God – His and Hers, chapter 3 section on "God as Mother" by Jürgen Moltmann, 33-38.

INTRODUCTION

the privileges of any culture or context. These are given by God only and not by any process or system of valuing human beings. As such human equality and dignity can neither be given nor taken away by any person, culture or religion.

The problem of glaring and chronic inequality between male and female, and all the consequent violence that have been and continue to be perpetrated against women and girls can be traced to three main sources: elements of Western philosophy; Christian theology and ideological interpretations of relevant Christian scriptures; and, elements of traditional cultures.

- There were strong elements of Western philosophy which portrayed 'woman' in rather negative ways: as an incomplete and damaged human being; as intellectually and morally deficient; and as ruled more by her emotions, appetites and bodily desires.[3] This was the view of women which underpinned Western civilisation for over two millennia. In contrast, 'man' was portrayed as a fully developed human with very high intellectual and moral capacity, ruled by the power of the mind and his sense of logic. These views of woman and man were so powerful and influential for such a very long time that they became accepted as the "natural" order of things, and the natural order of relationships between men and women.
- Also for two millennia Christian theology and most biblical interpretations were aligned with philosophical underpinnings which looked down on women. Because interpretations of Christian scriptures were carried out predominantly by men in male-centred and male-dominated contexts, such interpretations favoured men and worked against women. Situations of inferiority and violence committed against women and girls were – and still are – very often justified through such male-biased interpretations. This really only began to change for the good and benefit of women, and for the good of all God's people, in the latter half of the twentieth century.
- Cultures and cultural traditions, cultural beliefs and practices – as they are perceived, interpreted and enforced by men – have also been used to justify the ill-treatment of women and girls and their subordination to men in all places and walks of life. There is a tendency in many parts of the world, including the Pacific Islands, to describe cultures as originating from God and must therefore be respected and followed. In other words, it is believed that cultures embody the will of God. However, the truth is that cultures are human constructs. We humans create and make cultures and many of these do not embody the will of God. The roles and relations, responsibilities and attributes, and expectations assigned to boys, girls, women and men are constructed and created by, in, and through cultures. Because it is people who construct cultures, it is also people who can and must change cultures that dehumanise and deny certain groups of people their God-given humanity, dignity and equality.

Patriarchy, and the philosophical and cultural factors which underpinned and supported its outworking in societies, existed well before Christianity and as a result "Christianity was already taken over by men and made to serve patriarchy"[4] from its inception, and this persisted through much of the history of Christianity. This is evidenced in the letters attributed to Paul and in the thoughts and writings of many well-known early church fathers and theologians.[5]

Statistics on violence committed against women, girls and children are shocking to say the least. They show that something is terribly wrong with human societies and communities, particularly with prevailing and dominant views and understandings of masculinity. The most recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)[6] on violence against women in the South Pacific, found that ever-partnered women between the ages of 15-49 had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner at the following rates: Fiji 64 percent, Kiribati 68 percent, Samoa 46 percent, Tonga 40 percent, Solomon Islands 65 percent, and Vanuatu 60 percent.[7] The report analyses statistics that should, and indeed must, lead to actions that counter the evil head-on.

3. Early church fathers and later theologians, including both Catholic and Protestant, were greatly influenced by Platonic and Aristotelian views on male and female relationships. In Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas for instance, we find strong connections with the Aristotelian philosophical roots of male-female relations. Both men attempted to paint a positive view of women but in the end it was their negative views that were stronger and more influential for Western civilisation. See for instance Genevieve Lloyd, "Augustine and Aquinas" in Ann Loades (ed.) Feminist Theology: A Reader (London: SPCK, 1990), 90-98. Well known Protestant theologians, including Martin Luther and Karl Barth were not exempt from viewing women in not so positive terms as they did men. For instance, both theologians still see the subordination of wives to their husbands as the natural order of relations in families, and women to men in societies.

4. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, "Becoming Human in New Community," in Constance F. Parvey (ed.) The Community of Women and Men in the Church (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983), 31.

5. Following are some church fathers and theologians who, despite their great contributions to the development of Christian theology, also had rather negative and destructive views about women: Tertullian (155-245 CE; Saint Augustine (354-430 CE); Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE); Martin Luther (1483-1546 CE); Karl Barth (1886-1968 CE).

6. Harmful Connections: Examining the relationship between violence against women and violence against children in the South Pacific. (Suva: UNICEF Pacific, 2015).

7. Ibid., 12-21. The situation of denial by some governments, churches and leading figures in the region of the presence and extent of this evil does not and will not in any way help to eliminate such evil committed against fellow human beings.

Bible Study Method

Various methods of bible study have been developed, and one of these is in the area of contextual methods. The method which is followed in these studies is along the contextual methods and is adapted from two sources: Tamar Campaign: Contextual Bible Study Manual on Gender-Based Violence,[8] and Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual.[9] The method involves four steps of engaging the biblical text. These steps are outlined below.

Step 1: Reading in front of the text

This step provides the space for participants to share their thoughts freely. Each person (or as many people as possible) is encouraged to share what they think the text is about. It is an open kind of sharing. The focus is not whether an answer or opinion is right or wrong; rather it is to enable each person, male and female, to share their opinion on what the text is saying and telling them directly.

Step 2: Reading (inside) the text.

This step provides the space for participants to look into the text and to do some close analysis of it. This close focus on the text allows it to 'have its own voice' among the voices of the participants.[10] Questions will be provided to guide the group in looking into the text closely and also critically. Some explanations will also be provided alongside some of the questions.

Step 3: Reading behind the text.

This step provides the space to identify, highlight and discuss the background and context of the text. This is collated and provided in the study itself by the author of the Bible study. It is important that this contextual background is provided because it was the context in which the text was originally written or put together and, therefore, the context in which its meaning must be sought.

Step 4: Appropriating the text.

This step provides the space for participants to seek appropriate interpretation(s) and meaning of the text for today. It is a return to the in front of the text (Step 1) but with a difference: "to examine what the text now projects to us as participants, only to discover that this is deeper, fuller, more meaningful or even quite different to our first reading of the biblical text!"[11]

These steps could be illustrated as in **Figure 1**.

The fourth step is included under the "present" (in front of the text), which is adapted in these studies as appropriating the text within the present context of the readers.

8. Fred Nyabera and Taryn Montgomery, (eds), Tamar Campaign: Contextual Bible Study Manual on Gender-Based Violence (Nairobi: The Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in the Great Lakes and The Horn of Africa, 2007).

9. Gerald West and Ujamaa Centre Staff. Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual (Johannesburg: Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research, 2007).

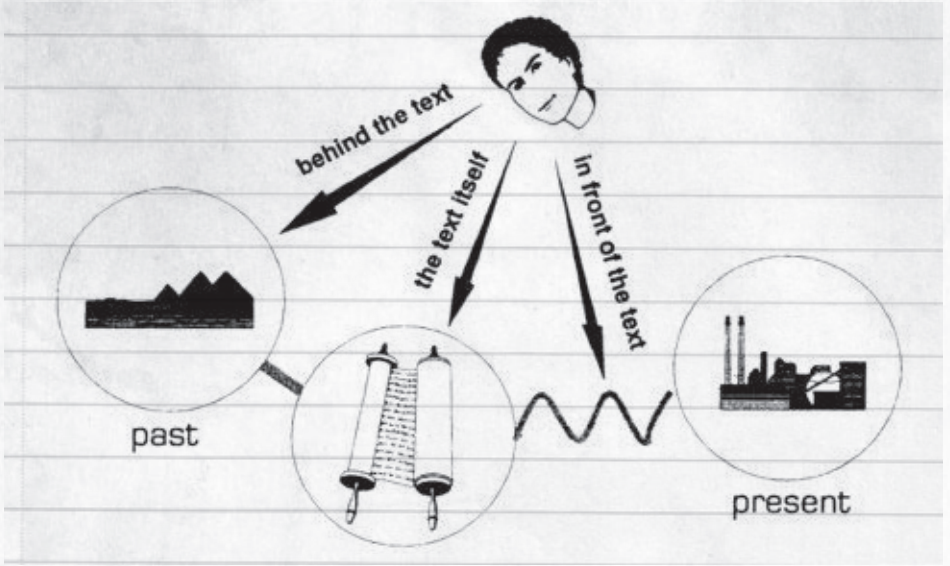


Figure 1: Contextual Bible Study Method by Gerald West and Ujamaa Centre Staff. (See West, 8)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev Dr Cliff Bird is an esteemed Pacific scholar, academic and theologian having spent several years as the Head of Theology and Ethics at the ecumenical Pacific Theological College in Fiji. Cliff currently works as the Pacific Regional Coordinator for UnitingWorld, sharing the freedom of God's vision for human relationships through guiding Pacific churches and communities' deep biblical theology and reflections, inviting God's transformation for abundant life. Cliff is a minister within the United Church in the Solomon Islands and a humble fisherman.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS BY THE AUTHOR

Much of what appears in these pages is the outcome of ongoing discussions and debates during "deep moments of faith" between Siera (my partner and wife) and I over a long period of time. I would like to register my sincere and heartfelt gratitude for her deep insights as well as her patience in helping to write some of the drafts. I also would like to thank my colleagues Bronwyn Fraser for her invaluable comments, and Rev Dr Seforosa Carroll and Naomi Navoce for reading through the draft and cheering me on to complete the task.

10. Ibid., 9.

11. West 2007: 9.

THE BIBLE STUDIES

STUDY 1

The Radical Nature of Jesus and the Counter-Cultural Challenge of the Good News of God's Kingdom (Matthew 4:1-11)

STUDY 2

Joseph and Mary: A Non-Violent and Transforming Relationship
(Luke 1:26-38; cf. Matthew 1:18-25)

STUDY 3

Fullness of Life for All of God's People
(John 10:1-10)

STUDY 4

Resisting Violence and Abuse of Power
(John 8:1-11)

STUDY 5

Martha and Mary: Combining and Transcending Traditional Gender Roles
(Luke 10:38-42)



STUDY 1

The Radical Nature of Jesus and the Counter-Cultural Challenge of the Good News of God's Kingdom

INTRODUCTION

Deeply held cultural and religious traditions and beliefs have often been used to justify and support the somewhat common but wrong perception that women are somehow less than equal to men – that men, as well as the cultural and social roles assigned to them, rank higher than women and the roles they are assigned. This is common in many cultures across the Pacific, and also in many cultures around the world. These cultural views and practices are so often also supported and justified by references to the Bible. Jesus Christ, and the "good news" of God's kingdom which he declared and practiced during his short life and ministry, challenges much of these views and beliefs about women. The good news of the reign of God is cultural and counter-cultural, and this counter-cultural nature of the kingdom of God is the focus of this first study. The aims of this study are as follows:

- Look closely into, and analyse, the story on the temptation of Jesus "by the devil" at the start of his ministry
- Look into alternative ways of interpreting the text which depart from traditional and popular interpretations
- Demonstrate that the story is about being countercultural; that the kingdom of God does not always go along with public cultural views, public consciousness and understandings
- Guide participants to see how and in what ways this good news of God's kingdom could be practiced

TEXT OF THE BIBLE

Matthew 4:1-11 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Temptation of Jesus

[1]Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. [2] He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. [3] The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." [4] But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

[5] Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, [6] saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up,so that you will not

dash your foot against a stone.'"

7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

STEP 1:

Reading in front of the text.

a. Read the text in Matthew 4:1-11 above. You can read it together as a group, or one person may read it, or the group divide according to how many speakers or voices are in the text. E.g. in this text there are 3 speakers, namely the devil, Jesus and the author (who would be the narrator when reading).

b. Invite open sharing on what participants think the text is about. Ask members of the group what the text is telling him/her directly. At this point there are no wrong or correct answers.

STEP 2:

Reading (inside) the text.

To help group members to "read inside the text" you are asked to discuss the questions that follow, and only then read the explanatory notes after.

a. What are the main themes in the story? (Related question to Step 1).

b. Identify the main character(s) in the story.

c. What do we know about these characters?

d. What do the characters do in the story?

e. What do the characters say in the story?

f. **Temptation 1: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."** Of which Old Testament (OT) character and story does this temptation (of miraculous provision of bread, food, mana) remind you? What do we know about this OT character? What was the expectation of the people in Jesus' day regarding this OT character? What association or connection would Matthew have in mind between this OT character had Jesus obeyed the tempter?

g. **Temptation 2: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down [from the pinnacle of the temple] ..."** What did the Temple symbolise or mean for the Jewish people? Or how important was it? Where was the Temple located? What was the significance of this particular location of the Temple for Jewish people? What would the people have thought or said had Jesus thrown himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple and was completely unhurt from the jump? Or how would this action by Jesus be seen by the people in terms of their expectations and hopes for the renewal of the Temple?

h. **Temptation 3: "All of these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."** From the mountaintop view what might "all of these" in this temptation have referred to? Given that the mountaintop was a vantage-point from which Jesus would have seen all and everything around him and beyond, what in fact did Satan tempt Jesus with? Whose kingdom was originated and traced to this place or geographic location? What was the expectation of the people in Jesus's day about this kingdom?

i. In all the three temptations how did Jesus respond?

STEP 3:

Reading behind the text and explanatory notes on the temptations.

Expectations for the restoration of the kingdom of David were high prior to and during the ministry of Jesus. The people looked forward to a political kingdom in which God would liberate the Jewish people from Roman rule and once again establish God's rule amongst and with the people. However, the narrative of the temptation of Jesus points to a fresh and new perspective of God's kingdom. The majority of Bible scholars and theologians are in agreement that central to the ministry of Jesus was, and is, the kingdom of God (or reign of God). Shortly after this temptation of Jesus, he commenced his ministry with the proclamation, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," (Matthew 4:17, NRSV).[12] By putting the temptation of Jesus and Jesus's declaration of the kingdom of God together, or side by side, Matthew wants to say that God's kingdom has come (near) in Jesus Christ, but not in the traditional ways in which people expected or wanted this kingdom to look like. In Matthew's gospel (see 6:10) this kingdom of God is for the Earth, of which Marcus Borg (2006: 186) says "there is widespread agreement among scholars …." Against this background, we make the following explanations of the three temptations.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

This text is usually read at the start of the season of Lent during which the focus is on the temptation of Jesus. Traditional interpretations of the three temptations say that the devil tempted Jesus with food and pleasure, power, glory, wealth and popularity. However, the devil's role in the temptations is far more subtle and points us to an understanding of our call to live the will of God today.

The story of the temptation of Jesus occurs immediately after his baptism by John at the Jordan river, during which the Spirit of God came down on him and a voice from heaven affirmed him as "my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." A big question for us is: what exactly is the role of the devil in the temptation of Jesus? A very brief look at each temptation will help us to address these questions.[13]

12. Matthew uses "kingdom of heaven" whereas both Mark and Luke use "kingdom of God".

13. Inspired by and adapted from Walter Wink (1992 Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination. Minneapolis: Fortress Press).

THE RADICAL NATURE OF JESUS

The first temptation was for Jesus to turn stones into bread to fill his stomach. It is common sense that when we are hungry we need food, so there is nothing wrong with such a request. Food is a basic human need! In fact in the OT Moses cried out to God in the wilderness and God sent down food for the hungry Israelites. Would God not do the same on behalf of "my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased?" So by performing such a miracle people would have recognised him as the 'new Moses', the prophet of the end time and the deliverer of Israel, and they would flock to his banner. After all, this was what the people had hoped and longed for. This was what the people were looking forward to – it was the collective consciousness of the whole people of Israel. Surely Jesus would have been aware of all this! Or was it the pinch of doubt that he was indeed the Son of God? Jesus turned the temptation aside by responding that he will not live by bread alone but by "every word that proceeds from the mouth of God," and God had just spoken and affirmed him as the beloved Son.

The second temptation was for Jesus to prove himself a 'superhuman' being who was immune to death by throwing himself from the Temple pinnacle. Surely, the courtyard would be filled with people! They would immediately recognise him as the Chosen One of God to rescue Israel. After all, Malachi had prophesied that the Lord would suddenly appear to cleanse the temple of pollution and to purify the priesthood and restore true worship in Israel. People would surely see him as the long-expected priestly Messiah! Once again the devil played into the collective expectations of the people. Jesus refused for the second time with the words: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

The third temptation was for Jesus to worship the devil in exchange for glory and authority. Exactly what did the devil show Jesus? It was the kingdom of David, which had grown to become a world empire. Expectations were exceedingly high amongst the Jewish people for the restoration of David's kingdom from the oppression of the Roman rulers. Restoration of Israel would be a vindication of the honour of God. So this temptation again reflected the collective consciousness and hope of Israel, and the perceived will of God for God's chosen people. Surely Jesus must have been aware of this collective hope and consciousness! Surely he would have discerned that restoration of David's kingdom was the will of God! However, Jesus again brushed aside the temptation with the words, "It is written, 'worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

The devil's role in these temptations is very subtle indeed! The devil tempted Jesus with what everyone knew to be the will of God: the Mosaic Prophet (Prophet like Moses) in the first temptation; Priestly Messiah (Messiah who would restore the royal priesthood and true worship) in the second temptation; and Davidic King (King in the line of David) in the third temptation. There was nothing wrong with all of these temptations as far as the people of Israel were concerned. In fact, what the devil offered to Jesus were not outright evils, but the highest good known to Israel. These were the very images of redemption which every Israelite believed God had given them through the prophets and scriptures. However, when tested against his own sense of calling, Jesus saw these as second-best to that which God intended for them. This vision and intention of God is what Jesus proclaimed as the reign of God. From the three temptations we can say that the kingdom of God departs from the common expectations, consciousness and hopes of the people of Israel and opens up new ways of living and relating to God and to one another, and new ways of seeing and responding to the issues and situations which affect people.

Amongst others, two important insights need to be highlighted:

a. The good news of the Kingdom of God is both radical and countercultural. It is radical in the sense that it had unprecedented effects on human and socio-economic relations between people, and on the ways Judaic religion was taught, observed and practiced. The good news of the Kingdom of God is counter-cultural in that it counters much of the prevailing cultural and religious practices and belief systems with his 'transforming initiatives'.[14] It counters much of the public and common consciousness, expectations and hopes of the people.[15]

b. The challenge of the good news of the kingdom of God is how prepared and willing we are to let go of our old or prevailing beliefs and expectations about the will of God, to repent from these misplaced beliefs and expectations, and allow the novelty and power of this good news to transform us and how we relate to the 'other'. As Stanley Hauerwas was points out, "Jesus now proclaims the advent of the kingdom in Galilee to the Gentiles … It is a kingdom that requires repentance … for the kingdom born in this man [Jesus] … requires a transformation that all his disciples must undergo."[16] Cultures are dynamic and always changing, and yet we insist on holding onto many of these in their supposedly "original" form, believing that these represent the entirety of God's will for us; however these cultural expressions may actually be yesterday's will of God for us, or, adapting John Phobee's phrase of "fossil culture," these cultures and cultural expressions may be the fossilised will of God. Cultures which deny any person – especially women, girls and children, and people with disabilities – their dignity and equality, and deprive them of the opportunity to move toward God's promise of abundant life, are not the will of God. Instead what we are called – in fact challenged – to strive toward is to live God's will for us and for our relationships today as

14. 'Transforming initiatives' is a description coined and usedby Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee. 2003. Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context. Downers Cove: InterVarsity Press Academic. This description is used by the authors to describe the way Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God and thereby transforms Old Testament teachings and/or categories into something new, counter-cultural and transformative.

15. For an overview of the kingdom of God see Cliff Bird 2016. Human Dignity and Gender Equality from a Biblical-Theological Perspective (Framework Paper). UnitingWorld, Sydney.

16. Stanley Hauerwas. 2006. Matthew. London: SCM Press, 56.

THE RADICAL NATURE OF JESUS

this will is embodied in God's kingdom declared and practiced by Jesus. This means letting go of cultures and cultural processes which deny the transforming power of God's will as expressed in and by Jesus Christ.

STEP 4:

Applying the text

To help the group appropriate the text for today's context, discuss the following questions.

1. What are your cultural and societal expectations and roles for:

a. Children?

b. Youth?

c. Women (including mothers, wives)?

d. Men (including fathers, husbands)?

2. Considering what has been discussed in this study, what do you think is the will of God for children, youth, women, men, etc? Explain.

3. In light of the radical and countercultural nature of God's kingdom, how might you be able to transform these roles and expectations?

4. Take one category or group in question 1 above. What might a 'transformed' situation for them be?



NOTES



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STUDY 2

Joseph and Mary: A Non-Violent and Transforming Relationship

INTRODUCTION

An important aspect of the ministry of Jesus is on building and nurturing life-affirming relationships with people, especially with those perceived and deemed by social norms to be on the margins of society. Furthermore, Jesus demonstrated a life that is non-violent and his teachings also centre on non-violence.[17] The conception and birth of Jesus occurred in unusual and extraordinary circumstances – circumstances which in many cultures in Oceania would often result in some level of violence and retribution. While there are various ways in which this text could be read and analysed, our particular interest in it is from a non-violent and relational-transforming position.[18] As this study will show, the unusual and extraordinary circumstances which surrounded the conception and birth of Jesus did not erupt into violence or abuse, thanks to the powerful transforming presence and work of God and the willing human responses.

In this study we aim to do the following:

- Look closely into and analyse the social world of marriage in the time of Jesus, particularly as this world relates to young girls
- Move beyond a purely spiritualistic and moralistic interpretation of the text, which is common in most churches throughout Oceania
- Engage in critical analysis of the gospel narrative(s) surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus
- Discuss how the relationship between Mary and Joseph, under the extraordinary circumstances mentioned above, does not result in violence between them. (Cross-reference Luke's account to Matthew's account of the annunciation)
- Guide participants to see how and in what ways this kind of non-violent relationship could be realised and practised

17. Refer to Bible Study 3 in Vol One: Cliff Bird 2016. God's Vision for Human Relationships. UnitingWorld, Sydney.

18. See Huub Welzen. "Exegetical Analyses and Spiritual Readings of the Story of the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38)." Acta Theologica. 2011 Suppl 15: 21-36. See http://www.uovs.ac.za/ActaTheologica. Welzen uses four readings of the text from the point of view of spirituality, and arrives at the conclusion that, "it is not the use of a specific method that is decisive for spirituality, but rather the openness of the researcher," p.21. This conclusion is important for the position taken in this study.

TEXT OF THE BIBLE

Luke 1:26-38 Common English Bible (cf. Matthew 1:18-25)

Jesus' birth foretold

26 When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, 27 to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" 29 She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.
30 The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. 31 Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. 33 He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom."

34 Then Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?"

35 The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son. 36 Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant. 37 Nothing is impossible for God."

38 Then Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Then the angel left her.

STEP 1:

Reading in front of the text.

1. Read the text in Luke 1:26-38. You can read it together as a group, or one person may read it, or the group can divide according to how many speakers or voices are in the text. E.g. in this text there are three speakers, namely angel Gabriel, Mary and the author (who would be the narrator when reading). It is necessary that you also read how Matthew 1:18-25 tells the story!
2. Invite open sharing on what participants think the text is about. Ask members of the group what the text is telling him/her directly. At this point there are no wrong or correct answers.

STEP 2:

Reading (inside) the text.

To help group members to 'read inside the text' you are asked to discuss the questions that follow, and only then read the explanatory notes after.

1. In what ways is this story similar to or different from the story which comes before, (Luke 1:5-25)?
2. Who are the characters in this story? What do we know about these characters?
3. Mary is described as "a virgin" (v.27). How else is Mary described or presented in the text and related texts? (v.28, 29, 30, 38, 45, 46; 2:19, 51b).
4. In Matthew's account (1:18), it is stated quite categorically that Mary was pregnant before her marriage to Joseph was consummated. In view of verse 19, what was the likely punishment for Mary?
5. What could be the reason and significance of highlighting "Joseph, a descendent of David's house" or of linking Joseph to David (v.27)?
6. In Matthew 1:18-25 how is Joseph described? Joseph appears to have pushed back on the marriage. What changed his mind?
7. What would have been the effect of what Gabriel said (v.30-33) on Mary and her reaction? Explain.
8. Does Mary appear to be a mere pawn, or to have no say whatsoever in the intentions of God for her as conveyed to her by the angel Gabriel? In other words, does she have agency (space/room to choose) or not in the entire story? (Think critically about the space-time or moment between verse 34 and verse 38). What is the significance of this "space-time or moment" in the story?
9. In between Mary's push-back (v.34) and her acceptance/obedience (v.38) is recorded what the angel said to her (verses 35-37). What would have been the effect of this on her choice and decision-making?
10. The legacy of Mary's choice and Joseph's choice (in Matthew's gospel) lives on: discuss how we might be living examples of these choices!

STEP 3:

Reading behind the text

In order to properly and correctly understand and/or interpret the text, it is necessary to re-read the text in its wider context and especially to explore the social-cultural context and processes around marriage in the time of Jesus.

THE WIDER CONTEXT

Immediately before the annunciation (1:26-38) comes the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist (1:5-25). This announcement sets the scene and provides entry into the story of the birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph. The two stories are similar and yet dissimilar. For instance, angel[19] Gabriel delivers God's message to both Zechariah and Mary; Elizabeth gives birth to John in her old age; Mary gives birth to Jesus in her youth; names of both children are given through the angel Gabriel to Zechariah and Joseph, etc.[20] The hint of the miraculous conception of John (way past Elizabeth's child-bearing age!) provides literary context for the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus (to Mary in her early youth!)

Narratives in Luke and Matthew

Matthew and Luke present the annunciation story with some commonalities and some divergences. Nevertheless, there is common agreement among scholars that the primary focus in Matthew's narrative is on Joseph, while in Luke's narrative it is on Mary, in which 'Joseph is but a shadow in the background.'[21] The reason for this, according

19. Angel meaning "messenger" here.
20. Paul S Berge. "Commentary on Luke 1:26-38." See https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=187, cited 16/01/17.

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to Hare (1993) is that, 'By focussing on Mary, Luke emphasizes the essential passivity of the human response to God's actions: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Matthew, on the other hand, by selecting Joseph as his leading actor, stresses the active component in the human response. Three times Joseph is instructed by an angel in a dream, and three times he must do something.'[22] However, as attractive as such distinction appears to be, it does not do justice to Mary's push-back in verse 34 and her ensuing deep contemplation between verses 34 and 38. A more realistic view is advanced by Karoline Lewis in a bold and evocative manner which is generally in line with more usual human responses:

> Why is Mary bewildered? To call attention to Mary's response to the angel's first words is to emphasize to what extent Mary cannot even believe this impossible possibility. Me? Who am I? Why am I favored? How can the Lord be with me? She knows her place. She knows who she is. And this should not be happening. She's a she, a teenager, and from the wrong side of the tracks. Gabriel then tells her the big news that she's going to be pregnant with a son, but not just any son, the Son of the Most High, no less, from the lineage of David, with a never -- to -- end kingdom. OK. What? "How can this be?" Can we voice her disbelief with the kind of incredulity that must have been Mary's? Or, do we perpetuate an obedient response, relegating Mary's true astonishment to some sort of obligatory prophetic answer? ... *To collapse "Here I am" too quickly into our idealistic notions of answering God's call reduces Mary to simply a pawn in some sort of divine play and further marginalizes her* (italics added.)[23]

Clearly Mary was not a pawn in a divine drama. She was not simply a "yes God" or "yes sir" kind of teenager. She displayed a wilfulness and agency in the divine drama, and her final response was not reflective of an 'essential passive human response' to God's intentions, rather it was a response made in deep contemplation and struggle within her very being, and a response to the grace of God. She struggles inside because she knows exactly what is acceptable and not acceptable in her culture and religion. For Mary to say yes, knowing exactly what the consequences of unwed pregnancy were, was a very brave call on her part!

Traditional Jewish marriage

There were basically two stages to a traditional Jewish marriage in antiquity: the betrothal, and the consummation.

- The betrothal: this was the first stage in a Jewish traditional marriage, and was "usually arranged between families when women were quite young, still only girls."[24] This generally involved the signing of a contract[25] between the bride's father and the groom. In that culture during those times girls were betrothed and married off quite young, and Mary was no exception. In fact it was very common for a girl to be married by the age of 13, and because of this it was generally assumed and expected that a young girl was still virgin. There was no sexual union between the bride and groom in this stage of marriage. From the text (v.34) and more so from Matthew's version of the story (Matt. 1:18), this was the stage in which Mary and Joseph's marriage was at, and yet Mary was found to be pregnant.
- The consummation: this was the second stage in a Jewish traditional marriage, which involved sexual union between the bride and groom for the first time, observing the cultural marriage ritual test of the "virginity cloth."[26] The marriage then ended with a celebratory feast, if the bride was found to be virgin. If she was not a virgin her prospect was not good, to say the very least.

Mary's pregnancy and the function of God's involvement

Mary was found to be pregnant before her marriage to Joseph was consummated. Matthew's version says that when Joseph found this out (prior to the appearance of the angel), he planned to dismiss/divorce Mary privately in order to not expose her to public disgrace or worse. According to the Old Testament, if a man marries a woman who has claimed to be a virgin, and then finds that she is not, "they shall bring the girl to the entrance of her father's house and there her townsmen shall stone her to death" (Deut. 22:20-21). Mary knew exactly the punishment she faced — stoning in the presence of her father in public. Under the prevailing Judaic religious system Joseph would have been well within his rights, even within his duty, to expose Mary's sin and witness her execution. An important point is given by Hare:

> It is not out of anger that he [Joseph] resolves to terminate the relationship but out of deep religious conviction. No matter how much he still loves Mary, it is his religious obligation to annul the marriage contract, because she is apparently guilty of fornication, a capital crime according to Deut. 22:23-24. It is not his prerogative to forgive her and act out that forgiveness by consummating the marriage.'[27]

From Mary's perspective, she faces certain death. On Joseph's side, he plans to divorce her in secret, but when her pregnancy became public she still faced the prospect

21. Douglas R. A. Hare. 1993. Matthew. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville: John Knox Press. 8. See also Fred B. Craddock. 1990. Luke. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville: John Knox Press.

22. Ibid., 8.

23. Karoline Lewis. (n.d.) "To Be Regarded … Commentary on Luke 1:26-38." See http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1148, cited 14/01/17

24. Craddock, 27.

25. Ketubbah Contract. See Steve Rudd. "Marriage in the Bible and Ancient Marriage and Jewish Wedding Customs: The Three Stage ritual of Bible Marriages." See http://www.bible.ca/marriage/ancient-jewish-three-stage-weddings-and-marriage-customs-ceremony-in-the-bible.htm, cited 12/01/17. Rudd points out that there were three stages to a traditional Jewish marriage (contract, consummation, celebration); however, what he refers to as stage 3, i.e. celebration, was in effect the conclusion of stage 2 and of the marriage rituals.

26. Rudd. "Marriage in the Bible." A few cultures in Oceania observe this ritual test of virginity.

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of social-cultural-religious death or actual physical death. Either way Mary's prospects are not bright. Then enters the good news of God into the bleak and hopeless situation! Not just to Mary (in Luke's gospel) but also to Joseph (in Matthew's gospel). It is only with the intervention of angel Gabriel to Mary and her acceptance of God's message through him, and Joseph's own faith-filled acceptance of the message from an angel of the Lord in a dream, that saves Mary's life, the life of her unborn baby and her marriage to Joseph. A very important insight here is that according to Judaic religion and culture Mary is doomed to die. Yet God steps into this very culture of death and saves her and her child – the Son of God. What the Judaic religion and culture will for her is death. Clearly this is yesterday's will of God. God's will is for her to have life and to play an integral part in the unfolding of God's kingdom. This is today's will of God (Refer to Study 1 in this volume). Throughout this ordeal there is no violence perpetrated by Joseph in response to Mary's premature pregnancy before consummation of their marriage.

Jesus – authentic child of Joseph

The angel Gabriel told Mary that the child to be born is conceived of God and is to be named Jesus. This name comes from the Hebrew name "Yeshua" or "Joshua" which mean, "Yahweh saves." Many Christians are uncomfortable with the designation "Jesus son of Joseph" in light of the divine conception of Jesus. However, even if Jesus' birth was a miracle of God's power through the Spirit, still Joseph was the real father. Joseph named the child according to God's command and by doing so, in effect, adopted Mary's child as authentically his own.[28] Without this adoption by Joseph Jesus could not stand in the line of Davidic ancestry. Without this adoption Jesus could have neither the ancestral foundation nor the legitimacy to carry out his ministry under the Davidic ancestry.[29]

It is important to note here that Joseph adopted and accepted Mary's child, Jesus, as his very own – all of this without resorting to violence. In the process and especially through the intervention of God in their situation, both Joseph and Mary were transformed. Joseph changed his mind, consummated his marriage to Mary and adopted Mary's child as his own. To achieve all of these Joseph had to defy the relevant and associated religious and socio-cultural requirements and prohibitions to marriage. This was no small thing for him! Mary, in the words of Karoline Lewis, moved 'from peasant girl to prophet, from Mary to mother of God, from denial to discipleship … Mary's story moves us all from who we think we are to what God has called us to be … remarkably, impossibly, Mary's story demands that we acknowledge the very transformation of God.'[30]

27. Hare, 1993: 9. Deuteronomy 22:23-24 is also applicable in the situation facing Mary and Joseph: "If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lays with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry out for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst."

28. Hare points out that "It was common for women to name their babies (cf. Luke1:31). Joseph's naming of Mary's baby constituted in this instance an acknowledgement that, by God's will and act, the boy is authentically his son," (1993: 12).

STEP 4:

Applying the text

To help the group appropriate the text for today, discuss the following questions.

1. What is the minimum legal age for marriage affirmed by your church?

2. Are there cases of underage marriage in your community/church, especially with regards to girls? If yes, how does your church address this illegal action?

3. Is teenage pregnancy an issue in your community/church?

4. How is teenage pregnancy perceived in your culture, community, church?

5. Are you aware of violence in boyfriend-girlfriend relationships in your community, church? How does your church respond to such violence?

6. In situations where a young girl who is in a relationship with a boy is impregnated by a different boy or man, what would be the cultural repercussions of such a situation?

7. In what ways might and could the story of Mary and Joseph, and God's involvement in their story, help your church to address issues such as violence in boy/girl relationships, and teenage pregnancy and the stigma associated with it?

29. This is the reason why Matthew spends the first seventeen verses of his chapter one to list down the ancestry line that arrives at Jesus' birth – to connect Jesus to the Davidic ancestry as the way to root and legitimise Jesus' ministry.

30. Lewis, (n.d.) To Be Regarded … Commentary on Luke 1:26-38.

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STUDY 3

Fullness of Life for All of God's People

INTRODUCTION

At the very heart of the good news of the reign of God is life – God's offer of life for all people through Christ.[31] Well-known theologian Jürgen Moltmann makes this very clear when he says, "The Gospel of John tells us quite simply what it is that is brought into the world from God through Christ: life."[32] The sad and painful truth is that this offer of life from God is not realised by so many people, especially women and girls and people living with disabilities. There are various explanations for this situation, and two of them are as follows: many cultures and traditions around the world, including Oceania, continue to look down on women and girls as not equal to men, and are therefore denied ways and means to realise God's offer of fullness of life; and many biblical interpretations continue to support and justify these views about women and girls. Both of these stand contrary to God's offer of life for all people.

In this study we aim to do the following:

- Look closely into and analyse the words attributed to Jesus which offer fullness of life
- Move beyond a purely spiritualistic and moralistic interpretation of the text, which is common in most churches throughout Oceania
- Engage in critical analysis of the concept of life as used in the text, and suggest contextual interpretations for churches in Oceania
- Guide participants to see how and in what ways this fullness of life could be realised and practiced

TEXT OF THE BIBLE

John 10:1-10
(Good News Translation, GNT)

The Parable of the Shepherd

[1] Jesus said, "I am telling you the truth: the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a robber. [2] The man who goes in through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. [3] The gatekeeper opens the gate for him; the sheep hear his voice as he calls his own sheep by name, and he leads them out. [4] When he has brought them out, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they know his voice. [5] They will not follow someone else; instead, they will run away from such a person, because they do not know his voice."

[6] Jesus told them this parable, but they did not understand what he meant.

Jesus the Good Shepherd

[7] So Jesus said again, "I am telling you the truth: I am the gate for the sheep. [8] All others who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. [9] I am the gate. Those who come in by me will be saved; they will come in and go out and find pasture. [10] The thief comes only in order to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come in order that you might have life—life in all its fullness.

STEP 1:

Reading in front of the text.

1. Read the text in John 10: 1-10. You can read it together as a group, or one person may read it, or the group divide according to how many speakers or voices are in the text. E.g. in this text there are two speakers, namely Jesus and the author (who would be the narrator when reading).
2. Invite open sharing on what participants think the text is about. Ask members of the group what the text is telling him/her directly. E.g. what does Jesus mean here by "life"? At this point there are no wrong or correct answers.

STEP 2:

Reading (inside) the text.

To help group members to "read inside the text" you are asked to discuss the questions that follow, and only then read the explanatory notes after.

1. What is the main theme (or themes) in the story? (Related question to Step 1).
2. To whom was Jesus speaking? Or who was the original audience? (To answer this you will need to go back about two chapters earlier to have an appreciation of the audience: e.g. John 8:57, John 9:2, John 9:41 and even John 10:19).
3. What is the first image (metaphor) that Jesus used to refer to or describe himself in verses 1-5?
4. There are two interesting things about the shepherd with whom Jesus identifies himself in verses 1-5. What are these? (v. 1-3, 4-5).
5. Because his audience did not understand his use of figure of speech (according to verse 6), what is the second image (metaphor) which Jesus used to refer to or describe himself in verses 7-10?
6. The story mentions a shepherd (v. 1-5) and a gate (v. 6-10). What is one common function of these two images or metaphors?
7. Imagine a shepherd, sheep, and pasture. What did pasture mean for the sheep? (List down as many as possible).
8. In the context of a shepherd, sheep and pasture, what could or what does "life in all its fullness" mean for the sheep? (Note: do not try to spiritualise the word "life" as used in the context of the text because you will surely lose its meaning and misinterpret the text!).

31. God is the source of life, and not only human life but all life, which includes all non-human life. God as source of all life is affirmed in this study but not its focus. For a concise treatment of this truth see Jürgen Moltmann. 1997. The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life. London: SCM Press. See also Jurgen Moltmann. 1992. The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

32. Moltmann (1997), 19.

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9. Imagine the gate, going out and coming back through it. What did gate mean for the sheep? (List down as many as possible).

10. In 10:10a, Jesus as the gate offers salvation to those sheep that "come in and go out". In the context of gate and finding pasture, what exactly is this "salvation"? (In answering this question do not try to spiritualise or moralise Jesus' words!)

STEP 3:

Reading behind the Text

In order to correctly understand and interpret the text, especially John 10:10, it is necessary to re-read the text in its wider context.

1. Firstly, the wider context here is chapter 9, which is focussed on a man, blind from birth, whom Jesus healed and thereby saved. The healing and salvation in this story connects the reader to the fullness of life which Jesus offers in chapter 10:10. But with the blind man in chapter 9, what was salvation for him? From what, in effect, did he need to be saved from? The salvation he experienced was very tangible indeed: in that world he was saved from isolation, darkness (not being able to see), social stigma and marginalisation. The salvation he experienced provided him place, safety and security of community.[33] Furthermore, he now had a fuller experience of life than before.

2. Secondly, the immediate context requires us to analyse the images which Jesus used to describe himself, namely a shepherd and a gate.

a. Shepherd: On the one hand this image is quite strange to contexts in island countries of Oceania where there are neither shepherds nor sheep. On the other, the crowd around Jesus would have had little or no difficulty in understanding what Jesus meant by the use of this image. Two interesting and important points about the shepherd need mentioning. Firstly, "this shepherd has the well-being of the sheep at heart, not his own well-being. This shepherd is neither a thief nor a bandit who would steal sheep, a profoundly anti-social act and one in which the sheep would come to no good end."[34] Secondly, the shepherd brings the sheep out of the sheep fold and then goes before them. The sheep are not simply brought out from some form of confinement to wander aimlessly in the world beyond the fold; rather, this shepherd leads them out to find pasture, that is, to find food and water. (In verse 10, Jesus states that the thief's goal is to steal, kill and destroy.)

b. Gate: This is the second image which Jesus used to describe himself. Jesus' use of "I am …" here is intended to highlight the contrast between him as the right and proper entry and exit point, and the others as "thieves and bandits". Jesus' presents himself as the way in and out of the sheep fold. Moreover, Jesus as the gate is the source of salvation and pasture (v.9) and abundant life (v.10). It is very important at this point to bear in mind that "salvation" and "abundant life" must be properly understood from a close reading of the text. Jesus said, "I am the gate. Those who come in by me will be saved …" (v.9a). Salvation here is NOT salvation in general; rather, it is salvation linked to protection ("in … and … out" v.9b) and salvation linked to promise of pasture (v.9b). Salvation in this context has to do with sustenance, protection and security from harm and death and destruction – not from sin as traditionally taught. This is further strengthened by Jesus's promise of "fullness of life" (as explained in 3 below).

3. Thirdly, the word Jesus used for "life" (zoe) needs to be contextually understood (as used in the text) and then correctly interpreted for today. In Oceania, the most common and traditional interpretation of "life" in verse 10 is restricted to spiritual life: relationship with God and life that is in store for believers in heaven after death; spiritual disciplines such as worship, prayer, meditation, fasting, fellowship, etc; ethical practices such as love, compassion, respect, care, forgiveness, etc. Abundant life includes all of these, but there is still more as to what zoe means. Unfortunately these other meanings and aspects of abundant life are commonly considered as too mundane and earthly by many Christians and that anyone who works toward achieving these is considered as running after the things of this world – as being too materialistic. This is an erroneous view and is far from the truth. The Greek zoe has three primary uses:[35]

a. One's means of life (i.e. livelihood);

b. life or existence itself; and

c. lifestyle.

The well-known theologian Rudolf Bultmann said that, "zoe denotes in Greek the physical vitality of organic beings, animals, men [sic] and also plants. Life is understood, not as a thing, but as vitality, as the nature or manner which characterizes all living creatures as such."[36]

From the foregoing it could be said that the abundant life that Jesus speaks of is much more than just spiritual life; it has to do with all of life in its entirety and includes all that makes life meaningful and worth the living. Abundant life is about the wholeness of life and involves healthy relationships with God and people, and with the web of land-sea-atmosphere. In the context of the Pacific Islands, the theology of the interconnectedness of life speaks of this view of the wholeness of life.[37] However, in practical terms abundant

33. Karoline Lewis. "Commentary on John 10:1-10." See http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1993, cited 02/02/16.

34. Sarah Henrich. "Commentary on John 10:1-10." See http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=931, cited 02/02/16

35. See Zoe at http://www.wenstrom.org/downloads/written/word_studies/greek/zoe.pdf

36. Quoted from Zoe at http://www.wenstrom.org/downloads/written/word_studies/greek/zoe.pdf

life also has to do with the tangible issues of life, such as:[38]

- Food
- Clean water
- Shelter (a home)/safety
- Education
- Meaningful work (with fair and just wages)
- Freedom to make (informed) choices
- Leisure time
- Inclusion and participation
- Health
- Safety and protection and freedom from violence. It is important to remember that both the violated (victim in violence) and violator (perpetrator of violence) do not experience God's offer of fullness of life
- Dignity and Respect. However, in saying this, it needs to be borne in mind that respect here does not mean being culturally or situationaly silent in the face of injustices and abuse. Certainly it does not mean the culture of silence! Respect must be earned by the one who wants to be respected; it must not be given at any cost to anyone. Respect must be shown to be mutual and reciprocal, not one-way only.

God's offer of fullness of life for ALL people. Cultures, religions, churches, authorities, institutions, etc. do not have any right to deny this fullness of life to anyone. This challenges the privileged position that cultural norms and practices place on men throughout much of Oceania. The kingdom of God is about reversals and transformation. (See Cliff Bird. 2016. Framework Paper).

STEP 4:

Applying the text

To help the group appropriate the text for today's context, discuss the following questions.

1. What new insights have you learned about "fullness of life" as embodied in the concept of zoe?

2. How should we interpret the understanding of "life in all its fullness" as explained above in today's contexts?

3. How could you, your church, group, etc. ensure that this understanding of "life in all its fullness" as explained above is practiced?

4. Review the list at the end of Step 3 as the tangible meaning of zoe. Identify ways and means, in and through which, your church could work toward achieving these as an integral part of its mission and ministry.

37. This theology of interconnectedness of life popularised by theologians such as Ilaitia Sevati Tuwere, Vanua (1992, 2002); Ama'amalele Tofaeono, AIGA (2000); Winston Halapua, Waves of God's Embrace (2007), etc.

38. Seforosa Carroll, "Church Partnership Programme Forum," PowerPoint Presentation, Madang, Papua New Guinea, October 2014.

NOTES



STUDY 4

Resisting Violence and Abuse of Power

INTRODUCTION

A major characteristic feature of Jesus' ministry was his association with, compassion for and acceptance of people on the lower ranks and rungs of society – the so-called sinners and outcasts. Included in this category were tax collectors, prostitutes, women, children, those infected with illnesses and people with disabilities, and those considered to be possessed with demons and evil spirits. The text for this study is an example of how Jesus related to such people, in this case a woman who was allegedly caught in the act of committing adultery and as a result faced death by stoning in public.

In this study we aim to do the following:

- Look closely into and analyse the story
- Trace the growing confrontation of Jesus by religious leaders and its culmination in the story of the unnamed woman
- Engage in critical analysis of the power dynamics that were at play, and in which the woman almost became a victim
- Highlight what Jesus did and said to restore the woman in multiple ways
- Guide participants to see how and in what ways this story can help address domestic violence and violence against women and girls

TEXT OF THE BIBLE

John 8:1-11 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

[1]While Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.
[2]Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them.

[3]The Scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, [4]they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. [5]Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" [6]They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. [7]When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." [8]And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.

[9]When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. [10]Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" [11]She said, "No one sir." And Jesus said,

"Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

STEP 1:

Reading in front of the text.

1. Read the text in John 8: 1-11 above. You can read it together as a group, or one person read it while the rest listen and follow the story carefully, or the group divides it according to how many voices (characters) there are in the text and read out or enact the story.

2. Invite open sharing on what participants think the text is about. Ask members of the group what they understand about the text and what it's directly saying to him or her? There are no wrong and right answers here.

STEP 2:

Reading (inside) the text.

To help group members to "read inside the text" you are asked to discuss the questions that follow.

1. What are the main themes in the story? (Related question to step 1)

2. Who are the main characters (actors and actresses) in the story?

3. What do we know about these actors and actresses?

4. What does the text tell us about these actors and actresses? (Who were they and what did they do? The woman? The Pharisees? Or the crowd – what kinds of people would most likely be in this crowd?)

5. What was the relationship like between the characters in the story? (Examples: between Jesus and the Pharisees and Scribes? The woman and religious leaders (Pharisees and Scribes)? The woman and Jesus? Or the crowd and the Scribes? etc.)

6. What was the power relationship between the different characters? Who held and exercised more power in society at that time in history?

7. In our text, it was easy for the Pharisees and Scribes to drag the woman out into the public to be charged. What about the man who was also caught in the act? Where was he? Why did they not drag them both out to be charged before Jesus? (The Law of Moses in Leviticus 20:10 and Deut 22:22 required both offending parties to be put to death. Why did the religious leaders not bring the man?

8. What can you say about the way the religious leaders tried to apply the relevant laws in the Old Testament?

9. How did Jesus respond to the accusations against the women by the religious leaders?

10. What does this tell us about Jesus and the outcasts and sinners in society?

STEP 3:

Reading behind the Text

The text must be located in its wider context in order to move toward a more appropriate reading and interpretation.

THE WIDER CONTEXT

The text in this study (8:1-11) is the climax of what has been building up from chapter 5.

- Jesus healed a paralysed man on the Sabbath (John 5:1-18), which according to the leaders was against the law – they looked for a way to kill Jesus as a result.
- Jesus' claim of God as his Father (5:19-47) had also made the Jewish leaders want to kill him.
- The miraculous feeding of the 5,000 and the crowd's reaction saying that Jesus was the long-awaited prophet who was to come – the crowds wanted to make him king (John 6:1-15).
- Jesus claimed that he is the "bread of life" that has come down from heaven, his flesh the bread of life and his blood the water of life (John 6:22-59).
- As a result of his counter-cultural and counter-religious teachings (John 6-7), the Jewish leaders became increasingly angry and wanted to arrest him (John 7:32-36), but they could not.
- Growing division amongst the crowd and anger of the religious authorities made them again want to arrest him, but they could not (7:40-44).
- Chief priests and Pharisees jointly agreed that Jesus was neither a prophet nor the Messiah (7:40-52). All of the foregoing leads to the story in John 8:1-11.
- Because they could neither arrest nor stop Jesus, the religious leaders used the woman in the text (John 8:1-11) to get to him. The woman was used as a a victim to get Jesus.

Old Testament background to adultery

In the Old Testament adultery is a crime for which the punishment is death:

- Leviticus 20:10 – "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and adulteress shall be put to death" (NRSV).
- Deuteronomy 22:22 – "If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman" (NRSV).

According to the text the "woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery," (v.4), which means that those who witnessed the very act of adultery also saw the man. The Scribes and Pharisees brought only the woman before Jesus to be stoned. Why did they not bring the man? Where was he?

Woman with no name and the status of women

The status of women in the time of Jesus (or in the Bible generally) was very low. Their presence was not important, therefore, the five thousand people whom Jesus fed with only five loaves of bread and two fish (John 6:1-15) were men – women and children were not counted or not mentioned. Women were regarded as the properties of men, and they were inferior to men. Their status in societies very much depended on the men with whom they were connected in one way or another, such as a father, husband, husband's relative,

son and so on.[39] So the nameless woman in the text had everything against her: being a woman, she was already on the wrong side of the tracks; she committed adultery; she broke the laws of Moses. She was seen and regarded as unholy and was stigmatized by the community. Elijah M. Balovi highlights the ill-treatment of women in society at that time: "It is worrying that the Jewish community, from which Christianity originated, promoted the oppression of women. This might have been the reason why some cultures that received Christianity also accepted the culture of seeing women as secondary human beings."[40] In the text, this woman has no name and she has no voice – was silenced by the religious leaders and the prevailing religio-cultural norms and expectations. Were their accusations genuine and true? Did she actually commit adultery? Was she being raped when they saw her? We will never know because she had no voice to explain herself.

Religious leaders – Pharisees and Scribes

Pharisees and Scribes were powerful and influential religious leaders in Judaism. According to Chris Keith, the "Pharisees and Scribes functioned within a retainer class, separate from the ruling Jews and ruling Romans[41] … [they were] dependent upon their learned status for their social status, especially those Pharisees and Scribes portrayed in the gospels whose area of expertise was the Jewish law."[42] It is no wonder Jesus reprimanded them time and time again. However, Jesus did not use violent methods in resisting the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, and the text for this study provides alternative possibilities of addressing a Jewish law in a non-violent way. [The only time Jesus appeared to have resorted to minimal violence was when he chased the marketers from temple (John 2:13-22), an act directed more against structural and institutional injustices and corruption, and less against the individuals who were selling and buying.]

From the wider context (outlined earlier) the religious leaders were up against Jesus from chapter 5, and their opposition to him culminated in chapter 8 when they dragged the unnamed woman before Jesus. They saw Jesus as a major threat to their status, power and influence. In the end they had him killed so as to eliminate the threat that Jesus was to them.

Jesus wrote on the ground, defended and empowered the woman

When the Scribes and Pharisees brought the woman to challenge Jesus – what do you think of Jesus' initial reaction of silence? (John 8: 3-6). He bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he rose up, told them that anyone who had no sin could throw the first stone at her. Then he bent over and wrote on the ground again. We may wonder what Jesus wrote on the ground with his finger! We can guess, but Keith (2008) says that Jesus' two actions of writing on the ground were superfluous.[43] The text really does not tell us what Jesus wrote on the ground, which implies that it was not really significant for us to know. He might have just scribbled on the ground, yet the action that he took by writing on the ground with his finger in response to the accusers was powerful. It challenged the Pharisees and the Scribes and made them rethink their original intentions to trap him by misusing scripture, and then hand down punishment to the woman according to the law of Moses (which they themselves already misinterpreted and broke in the first place.)

In a somewhat indirect way, Jesus defended and saved the woman. He did not use violence, but confronted the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and their actions. He resisted violence from the Pharisees and Scribes by addressing them on their terms and in their field of expertise. His action and words spoke deeply to the consciousness of the religious leaders – "When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders" (v.9). What Jesus did and said must not be taken as condoning adultery, if it was true the woman was indeed guilty. Rather it must be seen as righting a wrong interpretation of Jewish law, and a restoration of justice for the woman. Jesus did not condemn her, but rather empowered her to take control of her life and to not sin again. Jesus gave her a fresh, new future.

39. See Cliff Bird 2016. Framework Paper. Human Dignity and Gender Equality from a Biblical-Theological Perspective.
40. Elijah M. Balovi. 2010. A re-reading of John 8:111 from a Pastoral Liberative Perspective on South African Women.
41. Chris Keith. 2008. Jesus began to write: Literacy, the Pericope Adulterae and the Gospel of John.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.

STEP 4:

Applying the text

To help the group appropriate the text for today's context, discuss the following questions.

1. Look carefully, even critically, to your communities. Identify yourself, your friends, and especially your leaders in your communities with the characters in the story.

2. Take the example of domestic violence in your community:

- What power relations or power dynamics factor into the issue of domestic violence?
- Who is perceived to hold more power, and over whom?
- What are the expectations upon those who are perceived to have less or no power?
- How do the structures and power relations of your community perpetuate domestic violence?
- How does your church and community deal with domestic violence, particularly as they affect women and children?
- And what are you going to do in response? How might you help to transform power relations to give a voice and hope for the marginalized?

NOTES



STUDY 5

Martha and Mary: Combining and Transcending Traditional Gender Roles

INTRODUCTION

This text, the story of Martha and Mary, is one of the most preached about, quoted and taught texts in the New Testament. It has been interpreted variously by preachers, and has been a text of hope and challenge.[44] Martha is one woman in the gospels who is well known in churches throughout Oceania, albeit in a more negative way, similar to the way in which Thomas is commonly perceived. Sentiments such as "don't be like Martha" [where Martha is associated with being too concerned about worldly issues] or "don't be like Thomas" [where Thomas is associated with unbelief or lack of faith] are commonly heard from preachers throughout the region.

In this study we aim to do the following:

- Look closely into, and analyse, the nature of the story of Martha, Mary and Jesus
- Move beyond a purely moralistic and dualistic interpretation of the text, which is common in most churches throughout Oceania
- Highlight the social-cultural background of the text as the way to properly understand the text
- Establish the point that both Martha and Mary and the roles they each play are important and necessary, and the need to honour them both
- Demonstrate that God's kingdom is radical, transformative and inverts traditions
- Guide participants to see how and in what ways the story could enrich their church and community

TEXT OF THE BIBLE

Luke 10:38-42 Common English Bible (CEB)

Jesus visits Martha and Mary

38 While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message. 40 By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So Martha came to him and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me."

41 The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. 42 One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her."

44. See Joan Alleluia Filemoni-Tofaeono. 2003. "A Reflection on Luke 10:38-42 Marthya: Hermeneutic of his story" in Weavings: Women Doing Theology in Oceania. P 108.

STEP 1:

Reading in front of the text.

1. Read the text together by going around the room reading one verse each, or one person could read while the rest follow along reading their own text silently. Alternatively, the group could divide into different voices in the text, such as the narrator, Jesus, Martha and Mary.
2. Do the readying method:[45] listening to stories from participants. An example:[46] when I was attending college in my late teens, I was cooking a lamb curry dish for my father to attend a family fellowship meal. He was very proud of the delicious lamb curry and encouraged his friends to at least taste it. His friends knew immediately that I did the cooking and told him that he need not be proud because he did not cook the dish; it was my dish. His response was, "well, it does not matter what qualifications she got or what level of education she reached, she belongs to the kitchen because she is my only daughter." Invite stories from participants.
3. Invite open sharing on what participants think the text is about. Ask members of the group what they understand and know about the text? There are no wrong and right answers here.

STEP 2:

Reading (inside) the text.

To help group members to "read inside the text" you are asked to discuss the questions that follow.

1. Who are the major characters in the text?
2. What does this text tell us about these characters' personal characteristics and their relationships with each other?
3. Martha and Mary live in a village (Bethany). How do you think the villagers would have reacted to or perceived Jesus (a man) going to their home?
4. Martha welcomes Jesus as a guest. What would this have meant in practical terms in that culture? Was this normal?
5. Martha is not happy with Mary. Why? What would you say about Martha's mood and behaviour? Is she justified in her frustration?
6. Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him. Is it usual for a woman to do this in the culture? Who is culturally expected to take on the role that Mary took?
7. Jesus' response to Martha is, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her."

45. Lee, Bouen. "When the Text is a Problem: A postcolonial Approach to Biblical Pedagogy." A readying method enables participants at the start of the study to "enter into" the gospel text by retelling their own experiences in the light of the story of Martha and Mary. It is a kind of comfortable space for the participants to feel that they belong to the group; a space that they can hear, recognise and realise that every person has their own stories or has gone through some form of gender role experiences, which may or may not be like those of Martha and Mary.

46. This story is told by Siera Bird from her own experiences at her own home as a young girl and youth.

a. What do you make of Jesus' response? Does Jesus mean to belittle or discard what Martha did? If not, then what do you think Jesus means?

b. How would Martha have felt? (Use your imagination.)

c. How would Mary have felt?

8. In that world, women were expected to do what Martha did and men were expected to do what Mary did. Why would Jesus reprimand Martha when she was already frustrated?

9. Is this story about prioritising one role over another, or are there other ways of looking at the text?

STEP 3:

Reading behind the text: background and explanations

The text must be located in its wider context and in its social-cultural context in order to move toward a more appropriate reading and interpretation.

THE WIDER CONTEXT

The wider context of the text includes Luke 10:1-37 (before the text) and Luke 11:1-8 (after the text). This context is important because it links together the story of Jesus in the home of Martha and Mary, with Jesus sending out the seventy followers two-by-two on a mission, the parable of the Good Samaritan in chapter 10 and the parable of the friend at midnight in chapter 11.

- When Jesus sent out the seventy (10:1-16), he instructed them to not take provisions with them but to depend on the hospitality of those in towns who welcome them. Hospitality is stressed by Jesus.
- Following Jesus' visit to Martha's home, the narrative continues with another incident in which a friend refuses hospitality to a friend in need (11:5-8). Again in this parable Jesus stressed the importance of hospitality.
- In both situations (sending out of the seventy and friend at midnight), Jesus underlines the importance of hospitality. In between these two stories is the hospitality of the innkeeper who took in the wounded traveller in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. With all this in mind, why would Jesus rebuke[47] Martha for her role of hospitality? The words of Jesus to Martha go against the grain and are out of step with contexts where Jesus stresses hospitality. Something else is happening in the text.

Importance of hospitality

As pointed out above, hospitality is of paramount importance in the world of the Bible.[48] However, hospitality is not only about preparing a meal and serving guests as Martha does in the text; hospitality also means being there and being truly present for, and to, the guests as Mary does. Elizabeth Johnson presents it this way: "The problem with Martha is not her serving, but rather that she is worried and distracted … Martha's distraction and worry leave no room for the most important aspect of hospitality - gracious attention to the guest … Martha's worry and distraction prevent her from being truly present with Jesus …"[49] To be truly present with a guest or guests is an integral part of being hospitable. This rings true in Oceania where an integral part of hospitality is sitting with and being truly present with the guests.

The radicality of God's kingdom and inversion of traditions

There is more to the background of the text. The wider context, along with the text, illustrate the radicalness of the kingdom of God. Earlier in the chapter Jesus speaks about the kingdom of God being near: "the kingdom of God has come near to you," (10:9). However, this kingdom works in ways that are counter-cultural, in ways that invert norms and expectations.[50] For instance, it is the Samaritan who is the hero, the model of religious faith, and the religious leaders who are the villains in the parable Jesus taught (10:25-37). This is an inversion of piety. In our text, Mary assumes the role of men and thereby inverts the long-held tradition of men sitting and listening to rabbis (Jewish religious leaders). As Craddock says, "Rabbis did not allow women to sit at their feet, that is, to be disciples. However, this story accords well with 8:1-3; Luke has no problem with women being numbered among the disciples."[51] Such is the nature of the kingdom of God.

Narratives in Luke and John

Only Luke tells the story about Martha, Mary and Jesus, but John joins him in knowing Martha and Mary (John chapters 11 and 12). In both chapters they are sisters of Lazarus, and in both stories that John tells, the behaviour of the two sisters corresponds to Luke's description.[52] In John's gospel:

- Martha goes out to meet Jesus, while Mary sits in the house (John 11:20);
- At dinner Martha serves and Mary anoints the feet of Jesus (John 12:1-3).

In Luke's gospel:

- Martha welcomes Jesus into her home, while Mary is described, but she does not speak (Luke 10:38-39a);
- Martha serves Jesus, while Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him (Luke 10:39b-40).

While the two gospels' accounts of the behaviour of Martha and Mary do correspond, there is one important insight about Martha in John's gospel which is not found in Luke's gospel. In John's gospel it is Martha who

47. Elizabeth Johnson, "Commentary on Luke 10:38-42," argues that Jesus' words are not a rebuke of Mary but an invitation. It is as if Jesus is saying 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.' Marilyn Salmon does not share such a view which tries 'to justify Jesus.' See Marilyn Salmon. "Commentary on Luke 10:38-42," http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=625, cited 01/11/16.

48. See Fred B. Craddock. 1990. Luke. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. 151-152. See also Elizabeth Johnson. Commentary on Luke 10:38-42," http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1723, cited 1/11/16; Marilyn Salmon. "Commentary on Luke 10:38-42," http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=625, cited 01/11/16.

49. Elizabeth Johnson. Commentary on Luke 10:38-42. Johnson notes that 'The word translated "distracted" in verse 40, periespato, has the connotation of being pulled or dragged in different directions.' Yet the question continues to arise: how could Martha not worry or be distracted?

50. See Cliff Bird. 2016. Framework Paper, and Bible Study 1 "The Radical Nature of Jesus and the Counter-Cultural Challenge of the Good News of God's Kingdom," in this booklet.

51. Fred B. Craddock. 1990. Luke. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. 152.

52. Craddock, 152.

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declares Jesus as the Messiah: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world," (John 11:27, NRSV).[53] This commonly neglected text (relative to Peter's declaration in Luke 9:20) is very important because it puts Martha in a very different picture. It corrects the Oceanic preachers' image of her as being too concerned with the things of this world (refer to the Introduction of this study). Taken together, these two gospels portray Martha as someone who is hospitable in the home, as in serving Jesus, and as someone whose spirituality and faith is dynamic enough to recognise the other side of the human Jesus. This recognition is also evident in Luke's gospel where Martha addresses Jesus as "Lord".

Not pitching one role against another but honouring both Martha and Mary

The words attributed to Jesus in the text, "Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her," (Luke 10:42) have resulted in mixed reactions to the text. Many who read this text or hear this story may cheer for Mary because she inverted traditional roles. Many may also empathize with Martha's resentment of her sister for leaving her to do all the work. These words attributed to Jesus have frequently been used to pitch the two sisters against each other and the roles each supposedly represent. Two points must be said about this. Firstly, the text raises the important element of choice. Mary makes a choice to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to him. Jesus endorses her choice and thereby endorses her right to make that choice, knowing very well that it is not a culturally appropriate thing for her to do. As Study 3 has shown, to be able to make informed choices is an essential part of the meaning of zoe or of what it means to experience fullness of life. This is an insight that cultures and churches in Oceania must think about seriously.

However, secondly and in light of all the foregoing, the words of Jesus are not to be interpreted in isolation, but within the intertwining and totality of the roles they play. Taking the wider context into focus, the words of Jesus to Martha are not meant to belittle what she does. Both roles are important and necessary and both must be affirmed for what each one does, not belittled. This common position is taken by various bible scholars:

- "If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to sit and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment."[54]
- "Both listening and doing, receiving God's Word and serving others, are vital to the Christian life, just as inhaling and exhaling are to breathing. Yet how often do we forget to breathe in deeply? Trying to serve without being nourished by God's Word is like expecting good fruit to grow from a tree that has been uprooted."[55]
- "In the subsequent history of interpretation, Martha also represents the *vita active*, the active life. Mary, on the other hand, represents the *vita contemplativa*, the contemplative life. She sits at the feet of Jesus as a student and listens to him teach. Both the active life and the contemplative life are needed; to choose one over the other can create a false dichotomy."[56]
- "Jesus' presence points to the coming of God's realm and the reordering of what is customary and expected. Martha does the right thing and misses the presence of Jesus and the good news he represents. Mary risks contempt to be fully in the presence of the guest. This brief encounter within the gospel narrative purposely disrupts expectations and disturbs our sense of propriety. I hope to hear a sermon that resists the temptation to justify Jesus, and allows Jesus the guest to offend my sensibilities. Sometimes listeners need expectations to be challenged in order to hear the gospel. And I hope to hear a sermon that honours both Martha and Mary."[57]

53. In Luke's gospel, it is Peter who declares Jesus as "The Messiah of God," (Luke 9:20, NRSV).
54. Craddock, 152.
55. Elizabeth Johnson, "Commentary on Luke 10:38-42".
56. Mikeal C. Parsons, "Commentary on Luke 10:38-42".
57. Marilyn Salmon, "Commentary on Luke 10:38-42".

STEP 4:
Applying the text

To help the group appropriate the text for today's context, discuss the following questions.

1. List down the roles traditionally expected of men by society or culture.
2. List down roles traditionally expected of women by society or culture.
3. What do you notice about these roles? Could these roles be switched?
4. What are women and men expected to do, or not do, in your church?
5. The kingdom of God is not confined to traditional gender roles, but inverts traditions. How does this relate to your church?
6. What important insights could you begin putting into practice in your church? Make a plan.

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NOTES



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