

1) ESTHER AS FOREIGNER

'BIBLE STUDY'

For many people, 'Bible Study' involves taking a passage of Scripture between 10 and 20 verses long, analysing it in terms of language, context and theology, and often ending with some kind of ethical or spiritual conclusion.

This can be both a very edifying and dangerous process. It is dangerous in that verses taken out of context can undermine the integrity of scripture and be used to diminish or victimise people.

For example, someone may preach on the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, recorded in John's Gospel, where Jesus says, 'Unless you are born again, you can never enter the kingdom of heaven' Having looked at Nicodemus and spoken of his fearfulness of being an open disciple, the conclusion might be drawn that we have all to be 'born again.' Indeed some people would regard such a cataclysmic event as being necessary before you can call yourself a disciple of Jesus.

Once in Australia I was working with a conference of pastors in the week before the Nicodemus story was the Gospel reading. I asked the pastors to line up between myself and the backdoor according to how keen they were to preach on the passage

Three got close to me, twenty were in the middle, another twenty were at the back door and four had gone outside.

Those who were reticent about the story were understandably puzzled as to whether what the words meant and whether they were equally applicable to everyone.

The term 'being born again' only appears once in the New Testament and Jesus never says anything like that to any of the many other people he addresses. Might it be because Nicodemus was a peculiar person. He was a Pharisee for whom – as for all Pharisees – two things were important – Pedigree and Law. They all were able to trace their family tree back to Abraham, and they all kept as many laws as they could remember. That was what proved the depth of faith and decency. But that was not how Jesus thought. For him water and Spirit – baptism for repentance and membership of his body, and an openness to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit were the true hallmarks of faith.

Elsewhere in the three synoptic Gospels, we find another encounter with a very different man, someone who is more confident and who visits Jesus not under cover of dark but in plain daylight. To this rich, young ruler, Jesus says,

'Go and sell what you have and give to the poor and then come and follow me.'

Jesus says similar things to other people, and there is a consistent witness in the Hebrew scriptures as well as the New Testament regarding the dangers of being burdened and compromised by great wealth. But I have yet to hear anyone ever claim that you cannot be a follower of Jesus unless you dispose of your wealth with anything like the same enthusiasm as some people make being born again the litmus test of discipleship.

.....

There is another form of Bible study, which we will be adopting in these sessions. It involves taking a number of texts from different places in scripture and looking at the coherent teaching of the Bible on a particular issue. In German, this might be called a Gestalt.

It might be presumed that given the title of this conference, FOR A TIME LIKE THIS, I will be looking at the story of Esther because it is from that book that the conference title comes. I am presuming that people will know this and that they may be familiar with the book of Esther whose uncle Mordecai encouraged her to be the saviour of her people, the Jews, a race whom the Prime Minister of the day had decided to annihilate. Mordecai says to Esther, who had been made Queen of the country, that it is FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS that she has been created.

I will allude to the story, but I am not going to expound the text. Instead I am going to take three issues which arise in the story and look at how they are reflected elsewhere in the Scriptures.

The three issues are:   The Experience of Immigrants...  
because Esther is a Jew who has become an immigrant in a society which has turned hostile to Jews.

                                  The Role of Women...  
because Esther is a woman, one of the only two women in the otherwise male-dominated story.

                                  Speaking Truth to Power  
because that is what Esther does with great and transforming effect.

As we look at these themes and the Biblical material, my intention is that from time to time I will stop speaking and encourage people to engage with each other. I do this because all I can offer is my perspectives on the texts. But that is only one perspective and it is a gross misuse of scripture to imagine that the definitive word will be presented by the lecturer who has studied the text in advance.

It would be a very small God who determined that only those with degrees in theology could understand the Bible. And it would be a very shallow scripture if it only had one 'right' answer.

                          God is a mystery  
                          Scripture is deep

It needs all of us to bring our intelligence, our experience and our imagination not to find the right answer, but to explore the riches of God's word.

#### THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

Before we look at the texts, I would like us to share with those around us what we know or what we have experienced of immigrants. Those of us from European nations will be well aware of their arrival in our shores from all over the world, but particularly in recent years from the Middle East – Syria, Iran, Iraq, Palestine.

Others who come from the great continent of Africa may know within our nations of those who have come from neighbouring countries, or who have -as in the case of Zimbabwe or Uganda or Northern Nigeria – left their native land through fear of persecution or the experience of hunger or deprivation.

Or is you have no direct experience, you might simple want to share what you have heard or read which has shaped your thinking.

To take you there, I will tell a story.

#### SYRIAN REFUGEES

Three years ago the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, announced that the United Kingdom would take 20,000 asylum seekers from Syria over the next five years. This seemed very generous, but is insignificant compared to Germany which nation, at that time, was receiving 20,000 asylum seekers every two weeks.

However, among the first to arrive in Great Britain were thirteen Syrian families who landed in London and were then sent to a Scottish island where the largest town has a population of around 3,000 people. The population grew by 4% when the Syrians arrived.

The islanders welcomed them, the local council found houses for them, and the Catholic church gave its hall as a welcome centre. The church's pastor, who is also a musician, organised a concert to raise money so that every child who came (and there were around 25 children) would be given a new bicycle, a crash helmet and a fluorescent jacket. The local people also agreed not to speak to the press or television.

Three years later, everything is going very well. All the refugees have either started businesses or found work. The Syrian cafe is a favourite in the island. It has three generations of the same family working in it.

But the one thing that now we in the UK realise is that when Britain decided to take 20,000 asylum seekers, it was very particular who it took. Most people were educated and had previously been in the wealthy middle class. We did not take the poorest who were unable to flee from Syria into camps in Lebanon and other surrounding countries,

By contrast, British Columbia, one of the provinces of Canada, said that they would take the refugees no one else wanted – those who were old or handicapped or single mothers with children. They, not we, were the most generous.

That is my story, now I invite you to tell yours to those who are around you.

## CONVERSATION

\*\*\*\*\*

ESTHER

Esther was of Jewish parents who had been taken from Palestine and put into exile in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. She was an orphan. Her parents had died and she was brought up by her uncle/cousin Mordecai. So she had a double disadvantage – no parents and exiled from her homeland, living among her nation's oppressors.

They lived in Susa, which was the capital city of the empire of King Ahasuerus, an empire which we are told stretched from India to Ethiopia. Esther's racial origins were not known to all.

The role of the foreigner in society is something which appears frequently in the Bible.

Abraham and Sarah is a foreigners from the moment God calls them away from a settled life of retirement to go to a land which God will show them. (Gen 12: 10)

Before getting to Canaan, where they eventually settle, they live as foreigners in Egypt.

Move on three generations and Joseph the son of Jacob is sold into slavery by his brothers. He moves from Canaan to Egypt where, even though a foreigner, he becomes the chancellor of the nation. He is the Barak Obama of ancient Israel.

His family come to join him during a time of famine, as to other Jews, and they become a significant immigrant community, eventually maltreated and persecuted by the native Egyptians.

Moses is born into a family of exiles, but – as we know – is put as a baby into a small ark and sailed down the river. He is picked up by the Pharaoh's daughter who brings up this Jewish boy as an Egyptian in her nation's palace.

Moses – the religious outsider – like Esther, a long time later, is the one who almost single-handedly confronts the institutional racism which the Pharaoh has initiated through his command that Jewish male babies should be killed at birth. And Moses liberates the Hebrew slaves,

We might consider, therefore, that Moses is the spiritual ancestor of Esther.

Enslaved Africans transported across the Atlantic to America and the Caribbean took great solace from this story. For they – who, coming from throughout the continent did not have a common language or culture – found themselves in the service of their oppressor. And, like the ancient Hebrews, they raised their cry to heaven.

(Sing WHEN ISRAEL WAS IN EGYPT'S LAND)

#### OTHER FOREIGNERS IN AN ALIEN LAND

Move on to four women to whom we will return to tomorrow -

Rahab, Tamar, Bathsheba and Ruth

Each was a non Jewish woman who ended up marrying a Jewish man and living as exiles in Jewish communities, some en route to Israel, some when the Jews had settled there.

We have, in the history of the Jews, recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, the story of the exile when Judah, under king Jeconiah, was forcibly evicted from the Holy City and sent to Babylon... an experience which, among other things, led to the writing of songs of exile, of which Psalm 130 is one

Refer to Psalm 130 v 1-4

And in their exile, the prophets indicate that God's chosen race did not always behave well in the country to which they were transported. They were frequently seduced into worshipping heathen gods which led to them being flayed by the tongues of the prophets. But they were also promised that when restored to their native land it was to change from being a Jewish enclave to a place of hospitality for people from all nations.

Isaiah 49: 6

#### ANY FOREIGNERS IN THE GOSPELS?

But when we come to the New Testament and to the Gospels, is there any witness there to refugees or to the engagement of Jesus with people who were not Jews?

There is one immediate incident which involves Jesus himself. It is the experience of the Holy Family taking him as a child into exile. They became refugees in Egypt.

Ref Matthew 2: 13-15

These verses from Matthew are very interesting because, as we discovered earlier, Egypt was no a friendly power. Egypt was the land of bondage from which the ancient Hebrews had pled to be delivered. And yet it is the country that the Holy Family go to for safety.

This has great poignancy for us in Britain – or it should have – because our air force has been involved in the bombing of Syria. Yet when Syrians sought to come here for safety, our then Prime Minister said we would only take 20,000 in five years.

I'd like us to sing a song about this

Sing: IF MY NAME WAS MARY

We may assume that between the ages of 1 and 11, Jesus grew up in a non-Jewish environment. But I want to suggest that this was not his only experience of engaging with people who were not of his race or religion.

I want to suggest that in the Gospels there is evidence of him engaging with people from at least seven non-Jewish nations, many of whom he met when they albeit temporarily were exiles in Jewish society.

But I'd like you to find out for yourself what these seven nationalities might be.

We have recognised he meets the Egyptians. What other nations does Jesus interact with? Let us tell each other.

#### CONVERSATION

Results:	Persian (Iraqi)	wise men
	Egyptians	as hosts
	Syrians	as audience and the Syrophoenician woman whose daughter was ill.
	Greeks	brought by Andrew for a hearing
	Samaritans	woman at the well ...and her entire village grateful leper
	Libya	Simon of Cyrene
	Roman Empire	Centurion 1 with sick servant Centurion 2 who names him 'Son of God' (Pilate) Pilate's wife who tries to stop the crucifixion

#### GIVING AND RECEIVING

Given that all Romans did not come from Rome, there are potentially nine national groups with whom he interacts.

What interests me is whether Jesus takes from them or gives to them, because it was Jesus himself who said, 'It is better to give than to receive'.

So we could go through them and ask... does he give or receive:

Wise men	receives gifts
Egyptians	receives hospitality
Syrians	receives an audience from and gives a talk to
Syrian woman	receives a complaint about his language (calling her people 'dogs) gives healing to her daughter.
Egyptians	receives their interest
Samaritan woman	receives water, gives her faith, and gets his first evangelist in return
Samaritan leper	receives thanks after restoring health, and sees the leper as a non-Jewish model of gratitude.
Simon of Cyrene	receives help to carry the cross

Roman Centurion 1	received an example of faith even before he heals the servant and pointedly says that he has never seen such faith in all of Israel while speaking to a group of Jewish elders.
Roman Centurion 2	receives his rightful name ' the Son of God.'
Pilate's Wife	the only person to try to stop the crucifixion

If we were, rather crudely, to ask whether Jesus give to or receives more from these people. We would probably have to admit that he receives more than he gives or, at least, that he enters into a relationship of dialogue and inter-dependence.

Jesus does not remain either physically or spiritually or emotionally remain untouched by the non-Jews, the temporary exiles, the foreigners he meets.

Rather he recognises that in them there is virtue,

there is potential

there are qualities which God has planted and which  
it is his purpose to recognise, name and encourage.

For him and his time non-Jews recognise and honour the redeemer of the world

For him and his time the hospitality inherent in Egypt, an enemy state, is shown to the infant Christ

For him and his time a Roman Centurion shows a measure of faith which no Jews have shown with such conviction.

For him and his time a black man helps to carry the cross to Calvary.

In the light of this, I would like to ask two questions:.

#### FIRST QUESTION

What gifts have we received from people who are not of our nationality, ethnicity or denomination which have enriched our lives.

And to enable you to think about that, I'll tell two short stories of what I have received from non Scottish, non- British people.

#### a) A gift from El Salvador

In 1990 I met a young man called William Ramirez. He was a refugee from his homeland, El Salvador.

At that time El Salvador was in a state of civil war. The government did the will of 13 wealthy families, poverty and disease were everywhere and the church – to which most Salvadoreans belonged – did not object.

He became involved in an illegal organisation to smuggle boys out of the army who did not want to be in the army, because the army was the means by which the government oppressed and controlled the people.

It was a very dangerous thing to take boys out the army and transport them to other countries where they would be safe. William and his friends knew that they would be killed if the military discovered them.

He was not a 'big tough guy'; but he was a person who believed that for a time like this, he had to defy the government and break the law.

I asked him how he and his colleagues had kept safe.

He told me that they always met in secret, never took notes, never phoned, and kept their plans in their memories, not on paper.

But he also said that whenever they met and planned to get people out of the army, they always read the bible and prayed and sang.

I asked them what they sang and he said there was one song which was very important to them, but it was in Spanish. I asked if he would sing it to me and then give me the words. He did this, writing four verses from memory. He said, 'this is the song I keep in my heart when I am in exile from my country'.

I wrote down the tune and later I managed to get the song translated into English. You have the words in front of you. It begins in a rather unusual way, asking God to waken up, and in verse four it seems to move into the world of politics.

When my colleagues and I had finished the translation, we thought that perhaps it was too radical a song to sing in British churches. So I put it on a shelf. Then four years later, at my morning prayer, I read Psalm 94 and realised that what I was reading was the song that William had sung.

But it was not just a song that I received from him, it was the revelation that the songs we don't sing, especially the Psalms of Anger or Lament are intended for those who are not angry and whose lives are very happy.

These songs are there to tell us how other people feel, so that our understanding of exiles, of marginalised people, of people who suffer from depression or despair... our understanding might become more profound.

#### SING: O GREAT GOD AND LORD OF THE EARTH

It was William Ramirez from El Salvador who showed me the political importance of the psalms for our personal and public spirituality

#### b) A Gift from the USA

The other story is much shorter. I am a protestant, a Calvinist, a Presbyterian. For much of my life I suspected the Roman Catholic faith. But I have friends who are Roman Catholics. One of them is called Michael. He lives in Chicago. And when I am visiting there, I often go to church with him on Sunday morning.

We have been to Presbyterian churches, Episcopal churches, Black churches, Roman Catholic churches.

And one Sunday we went to a Methodist church.

It was an oddly shaped building. The entrance door was just to the right of the pulpit and altar. So when you came into the church everyone saw you.

We were late; a minute late.

As we walked in the door to this busy church, every eye was on us. Michael walked in first. He saw a baptismal font, near the altar. So he went over to it, dipped his fingers in it and blessed himself.

I was appalled. My face changed colour. I could not understand why he did such an outrageous thing.

So later, after the service, when we were having coffee, I asked him, 'Why did you put your hand in the water and bless yourself in front of all these people?' And he replied, 'Are you ashamed of your baptism?'

What he was doing was reminding himself that he belonged to that place, even as a Roman Catholic. He had not been baptised into the Roman Catholic church, he had been baptised into the Christian church, the Body of Christ. He belonged there.

And I thought that what he was doing was superstition!!!

Now it is time for you to turn to each other and answer the first of two questions:  
What gifts have we received from people who are not of our nationality, ethnicity or denomination which have enriched our lives?

## CONVERSATION

### SECOND QUESTION

The second question which I want to ask is a question which a young woman put to me last year. She lives in a multi-cultural part of London and therefore we had something in common, for I live in a multi-cultural part of Glasgow.

Her question was, 'Should we be trying to convert all those immigrants and asylum seekers who live in our neighbourhood?'

I asked her how she would answer the question and she said, 'I'm not sure now. At one time I was. I thought we should try to convert them all. But I'm not sure now.'

I am similarly not sure, but my uncertainty comes from the Bible rather than what I understand about evangelism in a pluralist society.

For if we look at the way in which Jesus interacted with the non-Jews he met, there is no mention that he actively sought to convert them.

We do not find him saying to the Syrophenician woman:  
'Unless you are born again, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.'

He says these words to a Pharisee called Nicodemus.

We do not find him saying to the Samaritan leper whom he has cured,  
'Come and follow me.'

He says it to Matthew who is despised not because of his religion, but because of his job.

We do not find him saying to the Roman Centurion,  
'Go and sell all you have and give to the poor and then you will have treasure in heaven.'  
He says that to a wealthy young Jewish celebrity.

Does this mean that Jesus who is the saviour of the world does not want everyone to become Christians?  
I don't think so.

I think rather that he believes that they will be drawn into discipleship not by being asked to assent to a religion they do not understand, but rather by discovering that God affirms them and loves them as they are, and that God nourishes the potential in them for goodness which they might not realise they have.

I believe that this acceptance and affirmation coming from a Jew is what was more likely to win them for the kingdom of heaven than a condemnation of their 'heathen' ways, or a prolonged session of religious brainwashing.

I say this because I profoundly believe that God operates through people who are not Christians, and God's kingdom and God's justice are celebrated and shown by people who are not Christians. The Holy Spirit is not the exclusive possession of the Christian Church.

In the Hebrew Scriptures God calls Cyrus – a non believer – an agent of God's own purpose.

'Thus says the Lord to Cyrus, his anointed,  
whom he has taken by the right hand....

For the sake of Jacob my servant  
and Israel my chosen one,  
I have called you (Cyrus the non-Jew) by name  
and given you a title, though you did not know me.

(Isaiah 45 v 1-6)

When we pray, we do not ask, indeed we cannot expect, that the Holy Spirit will answer our prayers only through the good offices of Christian people.

When we pray for the sick to be healed, the marginalised and persecuted to be heard and affirmed, the governments of the earth to work for peace....

...we are effectively acknowledging that this healing, this affirmation, this peacemaking – all of which are divine initiatives – may be undertaken by people who are not of our faith or of any faith.

When I pray for my doctor – which I do every week – I do not pray that she who is a female Iraqi Muslim will become a Christian. I pray that she will be a good doctor, enjoy her work, and I pray that I will always affirm and encourage her.

But having said that, I do not for a moment deny that there are times and there will be occasions when without pressure or judgement, we may encourage those of other faiths or of no faith to consider the call of God which is there for everyone in Christ.

So back to Esther, back to this Jewish exile living incognito in a non-Jewish society.

It is to her that her uncle addresses the words:

'FOR A TIME LIKE THIS'

And she - acting alone - in a world which does not share her faith, becomes the agent of God to rid the society around her of its incipient racism, starting with the Prime Minister – whose name was Haman - who wanted to annihilate all the Jews.

SING: FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS