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Lent Bible Study 2013

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Preface

IT HAS BEEN said that the history of the Church corresponds closely to the history of biblical interpretation. Yet, we experience real difficulties as we attempt to read these texts across the 'gap' of time and space. How can we be sure we really understand what, if anything, God might be saying to us? A loss of confidence has left many feeling estranged from the very source documents of our Christian faith. Fewer Bible studies, and sermons that only mention the Bible in passing are symptomatic.

One of the express aims of the Biblical Association for the Church of Ireland (BACI) is to draw on the richness of our Christian tradition, and with it the many helpful insights of biblical scholarship, to enable us to bridge the gap between our own time and the times in which the biblical books were written and compiled. We believe that a more informed and engaged reading of Scripture will actually encourage the faith of the Church. This is not a simple task but with humility and discernment the Bible will continue to witness to the Word, the eternal wisdom of God, given human expression in Jesus Christ.

Last year BACI sponsored a Bible study on the theme of economic justice. Once again, this year's theme has been chosen so that the Church of Ireland can participate in the Anglican Communion's "Bible in the Life of the Church" project (see www.anglicancommunion.org). This three-year project has had two specific aims:

1. to discover how Anglicans worldwide read their Bibles, and
2. to begin to provide some of the tools that will enable a deeper engagement with Scripture.

The study for 2013 is on the theme of gender and justice. There are five studies. Each stands alone but together they

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provide a number of perspectives on the social, economic, moral and theological dimensions of gender justice. For every study an Old Testament passage is read alongside a New Testament passage, a short commentary with notes is provided and, finally, there are questions for group discussion. One study addresses the difficult, but all too common problem, of sexual assault. This study alone includes a personal testimony of someone who experienced sexual abuse, her subsequent journey to make sense of her experience, the difficulties she encountered in seeking justice and the on-going challenges of working out her faith as a human being, as a wife, and as a mother.

We extend a warm invitation to all parishes and dioceses to join us in this year's study. Our hope and prayer is that this resource will not only further the conversation between the Christian tradition and the Church of today but will, more significantly, continue to open us up to the transformative wisdom of the Scriptures. Please take the time to consider the process and results of your Bible study. And, importantly, be aware that it is not only the words on the page but also the method of reading the Bible that influences our understanding of it.

Introduction

Lent 2013 Bible Studies—Gender Justice

NOT SURPRISINGLY, the Bible has a lot to say about the relationship between men and women! Whilst we need to recognise that the Bible originates from within predominantly patriarchal societies and that the language of the Bible can raise significant problems for modern readers, many passages provide us with life-affirming perspectives and, on occasion, truly liberating perspectives of great theological insight. For instance, Genesis makes clear that man and woman together reflect the image of God (1: 27) and that together they are given the so-called cultural mandate (1: 28). This theological principle is given a fresh expression in light of the Gospel: '...there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3: 28b). In the end these theological truths must act as a control on our readings of other passages that can appear more ambiguous and unsettling. However, it would be to deny the complexity of human existence if we did not take the time to explore more fully the problematic and painful experiences of when gender relations go wrong.

So, in general terms, what does gender justice look like? In more specific terms, what does gender justice look like in Ireland and in our own communities? How might our lives need to change in order to bear witness to the God revealed in the Scriptures? These are some of the big questions that are addressed by this year's theme. As ever, the answers do not just fall effortlessly off the page. If, in the spirit of Proverbs 2:4, we are to 'make our ears attentive to wisdom', then we will need to read, talk and pray as if we are searching for hidden treasure. We will then move beyond simply an intellectual engagement with our topic and, in very practical ways, we will begin to model communities in which justice between the genders is a reality. We will, then, be able to live as men and women made in the image of God and re-made within the new humanity of Jesus Christ.

Week One

Introduction

Pushing social boundaries

THE CULTURES in which the biblical texts were written were overwhelmingly patriarchal – that is, they were dominated by men, and structured around male authority at every level. Women (and children) had very few individual rights, and their place in society was subordinate to men. Their identity was bound up with the men around them, defined by whose daughter or sister or wife they were. The story of the daughters of Zelophehad in the book of Numbers shows the vulnerability of women whose place within the conventional male-headed structures of society becomes uncertain.

The five daughters of Zelophehad – Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah – are left orphans by their father's death, and have no brothers to assume their father's role and rights as head of the family. Nor do they have husbands who would provide this kind of role for them. They are misfits, without rights or status in a man's world. Their circumstances come to a head with the allocation by Moses of family inheritances in the 'promised land' to the twelve tribes. Their father is dead and so cannot receive an inheritance. His family – and their identity as his daughters – faces oblivion. An inheritance implies more than the continuation of the family name; it is the physical means for subsistence and survival. Women had no independent means of survival, and without a father or brother to provide for them or arrange a suitable marriage, they faced destitution. Without a family inheritance, they have nothing to fall back on; it is hard to see any options for them beyond begging or prostitution. Typically, marriage took place at a young age in the ancient world, so the five sisters may not have been older than teenagers.

Their request is expressed in terms which recognise the male-centred values of their culture. The emphasis is on preserving their father's name by allowing his daughters to

inherit (Num 27:3-4). God responds positively, and their case establishes the legal right of daughters to inherit when they have no brothers (Num 27:6-8). The implications are significant. While the immediate circumstances may be limited, the dominant patriarchy of society is over-ridden in a small way to give independent rights to women who would otherwise have been faced with a difficult existence on the margins of society. Their family identity is preserved, but more than that, their means of survival is ensured.

In this week's second passage, (Matt 15:21 – 28), Jesus encounters a woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon, desperately seeking help for her ill daughter. For a woman to make a public display like this would have been frowned on at the best of times (Matt 15:23), and her unconventional behaviour is compounded by her being a Gentile. She is described as a Canaanite, marking her and her daughter as outsiders: pagans rather than Jews like Jesus and his followers. The ensuing dialogue between Jesus and the woman hammers home her status as an outsider. Yet despite this, she recognises Jesus as 'Lord' and 'Son of David', a messianic title, and refuses to be bound by the barriers which her gender and her race put in the way of access to Jesus.

In different ways, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah – individuals in their own right with their own identities, not just their father's daughters – and the Canaanite woman challenge the prevailing social structures of their day from positions of weakness and vulnerability. They do not accept the hand that fate has dealt them. Their vindication strikes a blow to the foundations of unjust gender structures, and the often closely-related injustices in relation to issues such as poverty and ethnicity.

Num 27:3. Num 16 recounts the rebellion of Korah against the authority of Moses, ending with the destruction of Korah and his followers. The daughters' strategy of dissociating their family from the rebellion of Korah may be a way of emphasising to Moses that their unconventional petition is not intended to be subversive.

Num 27:7. The account of the modification of the inheritance rules in this episode formed an important precedent in Jewish rabbinic thought for the practice of interpretation of the Law as something open-ended, rather than fixed in the form handed down at Sinai. In response to the request of Zelophehad's daughters and Moses' request for a decision, God modifies existing practice with a new ruling. In the *Babylonian Talmud*, the rabbis praise Zelophehad's daughters as wise and virtuous expounders of the Law.

Num 27:8. While this is a significant step in recognising the possibility that women could have rights and property of their own, its immediate impact should not be overestimated. Num 36:1-12 tells of the limitation of the marriage options of any woman who inherits land in this way: she can only marry within her own tribe, so that her inheritance, once she becomes embedded by marriage in her husband's identity, would not pass from her tribe to his. Nevertheless, this small chink in the powerful edifice of patriarchy may have had unexpected impacts in the long term: its currency as an argument for female succession in Elizabethan England is indicated by the fact that Shakespeare has the Archbishop of Canterbury quote this passage in Henry V, Act I, Scene II.

Matt 15:21. Tyre and Sidon were the two major Phoenician seaports to the northwest of Galilee. They continued to thrive as trading centres under the Roman empire. They are mentioned in the land apportioned by Joshua to the tribe of Asher (Josh 19:29); Jesus' visit to this region may have

symbolised his sense of the fulfilment of God's promises of restoration, bringing the proclamation of the kingdom of God to outlying areas of the long-defunct territories of the twelve tribes.

Matt 15:22. Canaanite is a term used to depict the enemies of Israel from whom they take possession of the land in the Old Testament. Here, it probably simply means a Gentile, but viewed in the context of Israel's history, it is a loaded term.

Matt 15:22. 'Son of David' evokes the expectation of a Davidic messiah. It is a title for Jesus favoured by Matthew, beginning with Jesus' royal lineage in Matt 1:1 and 1:6. The inclusion of four non-Jewish women is a noticeable feature of this genealogy, clearly symbolising the possibility of the inclusion of non-Jews in the early Christian community. In this light, it is perhaps not as incongruous as it might first seem that this Gentile 'Canaanite' woman hails Jesus with a messianic title.

Matt 15:26. 'Dogs' literally means small dogs, that is, domestic pets rather than scavenging street dogs. Even so, the word is less than flattering. However, the initial rebuff may serve to make the eventual positive response to this outsider all the more noticeable.

1. What things define identity in our society? How big a part does the role of gender in our social structures play in defining identity?

2. How easy is it to recognise injustice that is embedded within the structures of our society? Can you think of any examples of how you may accept gender inequality as 'normal'? Is there a temptation to use the Bible to support injustice in our society today?

3. How closely is gender related to other issues of inequality or discrimination, such as poverty or ethnicity, in today's world? What should the Church's response to such situations be?

4. *"For Christian Aid, unequal distribution of power and unfair abuses of power are at the heart of poverty. And the greatest, most pervasive inequality in the world is that between women and men. We cannot stamp out poverty without addressing the fundamental inequality between the sexes."* (Quoted from www.christianaid.ie)

Does this statement challenge you? Discuss, as a group, how you might respond.

If you can, listen to the five-minute podcast by Christian Aid Director Loretta Minghella:

<http://audioboo.fm/boos/704682-what-women-want-equality>

Sin, responsibility and justice

THIS WEEK focuses on two dramatic passages, both involving adultery and sexual ethics. Both consider the breaking of the Old Testament law regarding relationships and faithfulness, as well as family responsibilities to a widow who is left childless (i.e. a brother's obligations to marry her). In the first passage, from Genesis, the focus is on a calculated and deliberate action, whilst the passage from John's Gospel does not give enough information to judge whether this is the case or not.

The law prescribed that if a husband dies without children, it is his brothers' obligation to marry the widow and potential children would be regarded as belonging to the first husband (levirate law). A widow without children was regarded as a nonentity. She was no longer a virgin in her father's house; she was not a mother, and hence not a valued member in her late husband's family, and the prospect of becoming a mother had gone. Therefore, the law that provided for the brother to marry the widow offered some security for a young widow and secured her place in her husband's family.

In the case of the widow Tamar, her brother-in-law, Onan, who becomes her new husband, does not want her to conceive and hence he spills his seed. Onan's offence is obvious: he does not fulfil what is expected of him according to the law: fathering children for his deceased brother Er. Onan refuses to shoulder the responsibility that is laid upon him. This was his crime, for which "the Lord put him to death" There was yet again a younger brother. However, this time it is the father, Judah, who is averse and consequently he defies the law. No marriage takes place and he gives a lame excuse and sends Tamar home to her own father's house. At this stage, Tamar does not belong anywhere as she is no longer a virgin, wife or mother. She is a marginal person.

Tamar deals with the situation in her own way when she decides to teach Judah a lesson through trickery: she disguises herself as a prostitute. She plans it carefully and makes sure

that she has proof of Judah's identity, so she later on can expose him. In the end no moral judgement is passed on her. Indeed Judah recognises that she is more in the right than he is.

In John's Gospel in general, Jesus' encounter with women is characterised by their vulnerability; they neither defend themselves nor justify themselves. This is apparent in the meeting between Jesus and the woman who was caught in the act of adultery. She remains in his presence without evading his challenge or making excuses. Today few of us would probably wish to be described as vulnerable and defenceless. But there is something cogent and honest in this. She does not transfer blame, but takes responsibility for her actions. This guilelessness is liberating. 'Vulnerability in a spiritual sense is not merely the capacity to be wounded, but the capacity to receive love and thus be healed.'¹

The passage on the adulterous woman has three acts: when the woman is brought to Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees; when Jesus bends down; and, lastly, when the crowd has departed and Jesus is alone with the woman. It is interesting to notice that Jesus concentrates equally on the woman and the scribes and Pharisees, which leads to the conclusion that Jesus invites them all to begin afresh.

This passage raises questions: What was understood by the woman being caught in the very act of committing adultery? It has to be remembered, adultery can be defined differently in other cultures. Secondly what happened to the man? According to the law (Leviticus 20:10), both should be punished - stoned. So was the woman just a pawn in a wider game between the religious leaders and Jesus?

Gen 38:1. Judah was the older brother of Joseph who said: 'Do not kill him, but sell him' (Gen 37:26). And so he was sold to a group of passing Ishmaelites.

¹ Jane Kopas "Critics Corner: Jesus and Women: John's Gospel", *Theology today*, Vol. 41, No 2, July 1984. p. 203.

Gen 38:18. A signet or a seal is an incised cylinder seal used in the ancient Near East to sign documents.

Gen 38:18. Cord and staff both served as identity cards.

Gen 38:27-30. Zerah and Perez began their struggling already in the womb like Esau and Jacob. The name Zerah is related to the colour red, hence the scarlet thread. Perez means 'breach' and is called so as he broke through to be born first.

John 7:53-8:11. This passage about the apprehension of the adulterous woman has a complex history and appears in our Bibles in brackets or sometimes even placed at the end of this Gospel. It has been questioned if the passage should be where it is after 7:52, or elsewhere; Biblical scholars doubt if this is an original Johannine text, since the earliest and most reliable manuscripts and other ancient witnesses omit it. It was probably during the third century that this passage was incorporated into John's Gospel.

John 8:5. The law as stated in Deuteronomy (22:22-24) argues that both should die, though it does not mention how.

1. How do we define adultery today? Is it solely focused on illicit sexual relations or does it include other ways of unfaithfulness?
2. What is wrong and right when it comes to relationships and equality? And what bearing does generational difference have on what is considered right and wrong?
3. Is deception, as conducted by Tamar, an acceptable way of behaviour to force people to take responsibility for actions as well as inactions, especially when it comes to moral matters?
4. Who has the right to pass judgements about moral matters?
5. In personal relationships, when individuals from different cultures wish to marry, this can raise challenges to both the couple and their respective families. Sometimes this leads to resistance and animosity. Occasionally, it may lead to tragedy, as some relationships may be perceived as bringing disgrace upon families. How do we handle this? How do we respond to 'honour-killings'? How can vulnerable individuals be supported?

Gentile women in Nehemiah and Acts

BOTH OF the readings this week come from times when new communities were being established, and both show the very different ways in which the difficulties involved in fostering group identity can be addressed. Both deserve careful consideration for how they depict the treatment of others and for the close relationship between various kinds of (in)justice - gender, socio-economic and racial.

The Book of Nehemiah comes from a particularly difficult time in the life of the Judeans. The old Northern Israelite and Judean identities centred on national monarchies and cultic structures had disappeared and were slowly transforming into an ethnic and religious identity. Although some still lived in Palestine, large groups of their compatriots lived outside in other lands and the question of whether the Exile had ended was contentious. Most period texts agree that the Exile was God's punishment for idolatry, but there was debate over who was punished (those who had gone into exile in Babylonia, or those who had remained in the land).

Nehemiah was a Judean exile who was a very high official in the Persian administration and was appointed Persia's governor of Judah in the mid-fifth century BCE. At this time Jerusalem and Judah were very small and underpopulated. The majority of the biblical book named for Nehemiah describes his efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. However, Nehemiah's longest-term impact came from his efforts to reorganise the small Judean population into a close-knit community centred on the worship of God at Jerusalem and observance of the Torah. His efforts can be understood as an attempt to preserve a distinctive, communal identity of the Judeans to survive in a large, multi-ethnic empire. Our reading for this week describes some of the measures Nehemiah undertook to demarcate the communal boundaries of the Judeans.

Nehemiah's actions in ch. 13 relate to the temple and who had the right to access it. He removed a relative of the high priest, Tobiah, from the temple precincts, organised the collection of temple tithes, instituted new Sabbath regulations,

and forced males of the community to expel non-Judean wives and their children. All of these actions are based on interpretations of previous teachings, to be found notably in the Books of Deuteronomy, Exodus and Kings.

The Book of Acts describes some of the early history of the church, with a heavy focus on the missionary work of Paul. This mission occurred amid strong dissent over who could belong to the new movement and what the criteria for membership were. A major question was the inclusion of Gentiles. The early followers of Jesus were all Jews, Paul no exception, and the inclusion of the Gentiles was still an open question. It must be stressed that Jewish identity itself was not a constant in this period, with tensions existing between Palestine and the diaspora, eastern and Hellenistic communities, and various schools of legal teaching. Additionally, traditional attitudes towards women in Palestine and in the Hellenistic world were not identical. Although both cultures were male-dominated and male-focused, roles for women were slightly broader in Greek and Roman society. Thus there may have been debate over the roles that men and women could play within the young Christian movement as well.

Within this context, our reading relates two stories about women's engagement with the young Christian community. The first concerns Lydia, a woman convert to Christianity who had probably already converted to Judaism. It is possible that the male Jewish population in Philippi was too small at the time for a synagogue or that the only Jews there were women, but it is also possible that the local Jews allowed women prominent places within the religious community.

The second story concerns a female slave in the service of the cult of Apollo. Unlike Lydia, who is free and able to support Paul and the gospel, the slave girl's recognition of Paul causes her owners to denounce the missionaries' teaching. It is worth noting that neither the missionaries' nor the slave-owners' responses show any concern for the girl's welfare.

Neh 13:1. "It was found written" probably refers to Deuteronomy 23:3-6. Although the phrase "assembly of God" only appears in this

verse, it is usually taken to mean the same as the “assembly of the Lord” which refers to the temple congregation in Deuteronomy. Moabites and Ammonites no longer existed as separate peoples by the time Nehemiah was written.

Neh 13:2. Balaam was a well-known non-Israelite prophet, who appears on non-Israelite inscriptions from the 8th century BCE. He also appears in Numbers 22–24.

Neh 13:4. Tobiah was probably a wealthy Judean or Israelite who lived in the Transjordan. His family is attested separately in archaeological finds and in Josephus.

Neh 13:15–22. Exodus 20:10–11; 31:14–16; Leviticus 23:3 all forbid work by Israelites on the Sabbath, Exodus 20 extending this rule to “slaves” and “alien residents in your towns”, but none of these specify what qualifies as “work” beyond the kindling of fire. Deuteronomy 5:14 amplifies the list of those not to work on the Sabbath, to include donkeys and livestock. Not until Nehemiah 10 is trading explicitly prohibited. Nehemiah’s speech presumably refers to Jeremiah 17:21–27, which forbids carrying burdens on the Sabbath, on penalty of exile. Most scholars believe it was during the exile that Sabbath observance became important among Judeans.

Neh 13:23. Inter-marriage with Ashdodites is not forbidden in the Torah. The precedent in Deuteronomy 23 noted above does not mention marriage at all, only cultic participation. A separate command in Exodus 34/Deuteronomy 7 forbids inter-marriage with the Canaanites and six other nations, either sons or daughters. The reference to King Solomon in 1 Kings 11:1–6 is the only other mention of marriage to foreign women outside of Ezra 10 and Neh 13.

Neh 13:24. The “Judean” language meant here is debated, but it is usually considered to be Hebrew. The other languages are unclear, though likely to be Aramaic, a language closely related to Hebrew and the language used in the Persian Empire. Portions of the Old Testament are written in Aramaic.

Neh 13:25. All the items listed in this verse were official Persian forms of punishment. Nehemiah is using his full authority as a Persian official. The phrase “for yourselves” shows the oath was directly solely at the men, not at Judean women. The women had no choice in the matter.

Neh 13:26. Nehemiah puts the full responsibility for Solomon’s apostasy in the hands of his foreign wives, who would have been married for political, not religious, reasons. 1 Kings 10–11 is more

nanced, placing more blame on Solomon for not obeying the command.

Acts 16:11. Thyatira was a city in the region of Lydia in Asia Minor, well-known for its unique and expensive purple dye. Since Jewish and Christian communities were known there (Rev. 1–2), many believe that Lydia had been a member of the Jewish community there. “Worshipper of God” is usually interpreted to mean she was a Gentile proselyte. Lydia is the first named convert in Europe. She was clearly a self-supporting business woman at the head of a large household.

Acts 16:13. The word translated “place of prayer” probably indicates something like a synagogue. Some commentators suggest the community of Jews in Philippi was very small or largely female, since only ten men were needed to establish a synagogue. However, women could be patrons of synagogues. The word translated “supposed” can also mean “customarily practised.”

Acts 16:16. “Spirit of divination” is more literally “spirit of the python,” referring to the cult of Apollo, god of revelation. Apollo had a famous temple priestess known as the Pythia who would utter oracles that were then translated to worshippers by the male priesthood.

Acts 16:17. “Most High God” is an ambiguous term that could refer to a number of pagan cults or to the Jewish God. Jews used this term to refer to God, particularly in correspondence with Gentiles. There is no article (the) in the phrase “a way of salvation” in Greek. The girl is not trying to aid the missionaries’ proclamation. Mystery and salvation cults were not uncommon in the Roman Empire.

Acts 16:19–23. Luke is generally pro-Gentile. He only records two attacks on Christians by Gentiles, here and in 19:23–41. Both have economic motivations, and both also involve pagan cults.

Week Three Questions

1. How are women portrayed in relation to the proper worship of God in these passages? Do Nehemiah and Acts accord them the same roles?
2. How are previous traditions used by characters in these narratives to justify their treatment of women and foreigners? Are these or similar traditions used in the same way or differently elsewhere? How do we appeal to these traditions?
3. How do the various aspects of social justice – economic, gender, racial – interrelate in these passages?
4. What colour does the history of intermarriage between the Church of Ireland and the Roman Catholic Church give to your reading of these passages?

Week Four Introduction

Power, abuse, victimhood and mutuality

POWER IS a perennial issue in the relationships between women and men. This week's texts engage with the fraught power struggle between the sexes. Together they challenge us to think carefully about how we use our own resources of influence and decision making for the sake of the most vulnerable members of our society.

Tamar's story's disinterest in her ongoing welfare mirrors the attitudes of the men who take part in it (2 Sam 13). Though she gains the title "desolate woman" after she is raped, it would seem that Tamar is abandoned throughout this short episode. Amnon's concerns focus entirely upon his own desires. References to himself dominate his speech (v. 11) and he is driven first by a passionate desire for Tamar (v. 2) and then by a violent loathing (v. 15). She explicitly warns him of what will happen to each of them, but he pays her no attention (v. 12-14). Absalom appears to have foreseen trouble (v. 20), but there is no account of his intervention. Perhaps most significantly, King David is either blind to or unconcerned by the threat to Tamar, and, in the end, refuses to punish Amnon (v. 21). Each of these men has power in their relationship with the young woman, and none of them exercises it in a way that protects her or enforces the justice provided for her by Israelite law (see the notes).

Tamar was denied protection and officially sanctioned justice, apparently because her abuser was the king's eldest son. She knows the laws and what they should provide for her, but these are not enforced. This turn of events raises important questions for us about the nature of gender justice, particularly regarding what good laws to protect the vulnerable can do if societies will not enforce them.

Ephesians 5 is also fraught with power implications. Its command for wives to be submissive to their husbands has been used by some to claim that men should hold power in Christian homes. Any interpretation must bear in mind that Ephesians is a letter written into a particular historical context far removed from our own. Application should be made cautiously and carefully. What is clear in this context is that whatever subjection means for the author of Ephesians, it does not mean that women must submit to self-serving interests of men. Amnon's treatment of Tamar is not what Ephesians is calling for, since Amnon exercises superior physical force in order to serve himself. Rather, Ephesians advocates that men treat their wives as Christ treated the church (v. 25). Christ's behaviour toward the church was not a self-serving exercise of power, but was a self-giving abandonment of privilege (v. 25). The command about submission, then, is nearly ironic. If headship is what Christ exercised then it is precisely the opposite of submission in the way it is commonly invoked in female/male relationships when power, rights, or privilege are at stake. Commanded submission involves placing oneself in the care of one who is willing to give up his or her own interests for the sake of the other.

Together these two stories with their diametrically opposed visions of male power in gender relationships urge us toward a reformed attitude toward power, and a renewed awareness of the need to protect those who are vulnerable to the abuse of power. Amnon abuses his power to serve himself, and both Absalom and David in their own ways fail to exercise what power they do have to protect Tamar. In contrast, Ephesians urges Christians to expose wrongdoing (see v. 11) and to re-envision power as Christlike self-sacrifice.

2 Sam 13:1. "Some time passed." Aside from a brief battle report (2 Sam 12:26-31), what immediately precedes is Nathan's condemnation of David's adultery. Nathan predicts that God will cause David trouble from within his own house (2 Sam 12:11) and that what he has done secretly will be done publicly (2 Sam 12:12). This story begins the fulfillment of that prophecy. Absalom kills Amnon in response to the rape of Tamar, and his resultant house arrest (2 Sam 14:24) leads eventually to a coup. Absalom drives David from Jerusalem (2 Sam 15:13) and fulfils Nathan's prophecy by "going in" to David's concubines on the palace roof (2 Sam 16:22).

2 Sam 13:4. The terms love and hate are thematic in this passage. Amnon loves (v. 1, 4) then hates (v. 15) Tamar. David's failure to punish is explained by his love (v. 21) for Amnon, and Absalom's revenge by his hate (v. 22).

2 Sam 13:14. Amnon's actions parallel his father's a few chapters earlier with Bathsheba (2 Sam 11). The difference is, in this case, that the forcible nature of the assault is explicit.

2 Sam 13:16. When Tamar complains about Amnon expelling her, she is roughly in line with Israelite legislation about justice for a woman who is raped. A man who defiles a virgin must marry her (Exod 22:16) and cannot divorce her (Deut 22:28-29).

2 Sam 13:19. Tamar publicly mourns the rape and the change in her status. The king's silence is not a way of preserving her dignity.

2 Sam 13:21. The NRSV indicates that David "would not punish his son". This notice is not in the Hebrew text but only appears in the Greek translations. Many translations (e.g., KJV, NIV) omit it. While the Hebrew text does not mention a punishment,

Week Four Notes (cont.)

the explanation about why seems a likely addition by a later editor.

Eph 5:11. The passage addresses the need to expose wrongdoing and calls for keeping a close watch on associations with impurity and vulgar talk (v. 3-7). Believers are to avoid collusion with evil, and are to expose shameful things to the light of public scrutiny (v. 11).

Eph 5:21. This heading to the "household code" section provides important context for the whole. It sets what it says to both husbands and wives within the larger context of mutual submission.

Week Four Questions

1. Imagine yourself within the story recounted by 1 Samuel 13. With whom do you identify (David, Absalom, Amnon, Tamar, Jonadab)? Why? What do you learn from identifying with one of these characters? What do you learn from what other study participants say about the character they identify with?
2. Consider the Tamar of this week's study in comparison with the Tamar of week 2. How are the two similar? How are their stories different (especially regarding power and justice)? What makes the difference?
3. Have a group member read "Melissa's Story" (on the following pages) aloud and discuss
 - How does Melissa describe silence and her sense of voice? How does her experience resonate with Tamar's? How do you react to these experiences of silence?
 - Discuss the elements of faith, relationship, and forgiveness in Melissa's story. What do you learn from her testimony about the experiences of victims and the faith issues that are involved?
 - How do you reflect on Melissa's concluding statement of how she would like society and the world to be? How does this compare with the kingdom of God? How should the church act in response to stories like this one?
4. In what ways have you heard "submission" discussed in terms of female/male relationships? How do you respond to the examples you name? How can you imagine these ideas being adjusted by placing them in conversation with the example of Christ's use of power?
5. What instances of gender based violence are we aware of in our community? In what ways do we have power (individually and as a group)? Brainstorm together ways that the community might employ its power in such situations. Then consider each in terms of how it compares with Christ's attitude toward power. What steps is the community willing to take at this time?

I AM A survivor of sexual abuse, but I survived more than that. I also survived being left unprotected by my mother. I survived hatred from my own family. I survived the failures of our judicial system. The abuse was not the only hardship. My mother, my family, my community, my judicial system all failed to care. They all contributed to the healing I've had to go through, and the healing I have yet to face.

My mother divorced my father because he was an alcoholic, but within a year she had married another alcoholic. Her second husband also used illegal drugs, and then began abusing me and my younger sister. When my sister was ten she was brave enough to report to her friends, a teacher, and a coach, that she was being abused. I was barely brave enough to answer "yes" between sobs when my mother then asked if anything had happened to me, but I did. Still it was not enough. I am still working on forgiving myself for not being as brave as my little sister. I came to find out years later that my sister had been questioned by the police while my mother begged her not to ruin our family, not to ruin her life. The police let her pressure my ten year old sister. There was no further investigation. All I knew at the time was that nothing happened. Our step-father returned home, continued drinking and using drugs, and blowing up in a rage on a regular basis. We all remained silent.

There was no further abuse for a while. I had convinced myself that it didn't matter. After all, my mother behaved as if it didn't matter. No one else swooped in to save us, "it must not have been that big of a deal." I even believed I wasn't important enough for it to matter.

About 3 years later, when I was 15, it happened again. It hit me much harder this time. It felt as if my step-father could do whatever he wanted, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. After the 3 years of silence since the abuse was first reported and my mother's lack of action, I had learned what was expected, what I must do to get through it. I had to remain silent.

I clung even harder to the coping mechanisms. I told myself again "it didn't matter. / didn't matter." When my mother chose not to protect us, it told me she didn't love me, that I didn't matter. When it happened again, it told me that the world is a dark and evil place, and bad things *will* happen to me. I remember wondering how I could be such a terrible person to deserve this. That is dark place for a young girl to be.

Thankfully, the world was not completely dark. I eventually married my high school sweetheart. A couple years later we were thrilled to be expecting our first baby! But with this blessing came a difficult realization. The things I had been telling myself for years to cope with the past couldn't hold up when I put my child in the situation. It WAS in fact a big deal! Before I ever felt our baby kick in my belly I knew that I could never allow my child to be at risk of being abused by the same man that abused me because I was afraid of breaking the silence.

As the months passed I not only built the strength to keep my parents a safe distance from my child, but I began to heal wounds I didn't know I had. I was soon able to share my story with my close friends. That is when I realized that breaking the silence in my own heart was not enough. I had to share it with others so they too could make the same decision to protect their families. It wasn't long until I was researching state laws on reporting and charging someone with a crime from so long ago. Soon after that my younger sister and I gave our statements to the authorities reporting the abuse, and the investigation began.

Our report to the authorities was just the beginning of a very long fight for what was right. We had to fight with the local prosecutors to even look at our case. We had to wait on politics to play out. We felt like we were begging people to care. It's not that they didn't believe us, but many of them just didn't care. The prosecutors, the advocates, the judicial system itself were doing to us what our mother had done years ago. They were sweeping us under the rug.

Finally, over 2 years after we first reported the abuse, my step-father was indicted for 7 felonies, and two others had been charged for their involvement in covering it up or allowing it to happen! We felt like we were well on our way to doing everything we could to make sure our abuser wouldn't do this to another child. We thought our story would serve as an example of how being strong and brave in the face of the fear could yield so much good. Then, minutes before the next hearing, the prosecutor on the case dropped all charges. She cited a state law as the problem. We thought we had resolved this exact problem earlier in the investigation, but there was no other information given. I'm still wondering how this could be over. My best efforts were not enough.

The months that have followed have undoubtedly been the most difficult since the abuse started years ago. I'm healing from

being told yet again that I don't matter. I've been so angry for the little girl that I used to be; no one loved her, no one protected her! Now people are hateful to me for what I've done in reporting the abuse. I never thought I could be hated because I was abused. I won't try to understand it, but it can still hurt. I've got my hands full moving through all these emotions and still maintaining the rest of my life. That balancing act is much harder than burying the past and remaining silent.

As I continue through my healing, I expect that I will continue to learn what it means to forgive. By forgiving I don't mean I will ever be able to have any kind of relationship with my step-father again, or trust my mother or family again. I don't mean anyone is excused. I mean I will learn how to steer clear of hatred, and minimize the anger. What will grow in its place is compassion. I believe we are all created by God, and it would be a terrible thing to hate what God has created. When my mother dismissed my yearning for justice saying "if he did do it then he will answer for it when he dies and is judged by God" it broke my heart. But I cannot hope for forgiveness for myself when I am unwilling to attempt forgiveness for others. I deliberately say "attempt" because I am not graceful in my efforts of forgiving. Some days I lapse back to a painful anger. I don't feel good when I feel that way, and I work to get past that anger again. There aren't too many times in our lives we have so much and so many to forgive, so I try to have faith that I will get better with practice. Maybe I will be working on this process of forgiveness until the day I die, but I would rather face that obstacle than the potential of a life with so much hate and anger in my heart.

In the end I regret that this kind of pain exists in the world, but it does, just like the pain from any other hardship. I hope that my having experienced this pain could serve some good in the world, that somehow to someone it does matter. I want to live in a society that shares the same voice saying "Every victim matters, no matter the victim, and no matter the abuser!" I want the world to see that the evil doesn't end with the abuse, that silence opens the door for an abuser. If we can communicate to victims that it does matter then along with their pain they can also have hope.

Destitution, determination and inspiration

THE GRIPPING short story of Ruth could be said to be like a movie, beginning as it does with the tragic deaths of three husbands, leaving destitute widows reliant on their own wits for survival and ending with a new marriage and baby safeguarding the future.

The book begins with some background scene setting. During the time of the judges a Bethlehemite family, two parents Elimelech, Naomi and their sons Mahlon and Kilion moved to Moab (Ruth 1:1). Having settled there, the two sons married Moabite women Orpah and Ruth. On the death of her husband and sons Naomi was left in the desperate state of widowhood with no social status and economically dependent on society. She was without a male protector and this may have forced her journey to Bethlehem to find some relatives. Ruth's decision to accompany Naomi is written in some of the most memorable words of the chapter (Ruth 1:16-17). The passage seems very romantic and indeed may be heard read at weddings, but in reality, for all Ruth knows of their future, death by starvation could be closer at hand than finding a male protector in a strange land where she would be a foreigner and a widow (Ruth 1:22).

The intervening chapters (Ruth 2 and 3) which are not part of our study show how Naomi and Ruth survive in Bethlehem. In desperation they fall on the social security of the day as set down by law (Leviticus 19:9-10, Deuteronomy 24:19-22) – gleaning in the fields. Whether through love or need Ruth puts herself at the mercy of Boaz, a close relative of Naomi's husband. Could he support the two widows? Could he, as provided for under the Jewish law, marry her and provide an heir for her late husband's family line? Generations have praised the solidarity of these two women in the face of adversity, but in reality they are dependent on men for food,

their only hope the birth of a son, their fate to be decided by the men at the gate.

In chapter 4 we see Boaz manoeuvring the situation to resolve the problem. He will care for Naomi and will give Ruth the opportunity to bear children. Their first son would, according to Jewish law, become the heir of Elimelech and his sons. Ruth was in fact part of the deal involving her ex-husband's land (Ruth 4:9-10). Despite the obvious gender inequality that existed in this time Ruth, the non-Jewish heroine, is said to have enabled the survival of the family of Naomi into future generations (Ruth 4:17-22).

The second Bible text for this study is from Paul's letter to the Galatians (Gal.3. 23–29). It addresses some of the controversies of the day, particularly the tension between the gospel and the observance of the Jewish law for Gentile believers. Some Jewish males greeted each day thanking God that they were not a Gentile, a slave or a woman. Paul states that faith in Christ transcends these differences and makes all believers one in Christ. There is no room for posturing or domination. This is not to say that every aspect of human identity is irrelevant; Paul is not saying there should no longer be Jews or Gentiles, male or female, but that their status in the Christian family is equal. Did hearing this letter being read give women confidence to become leaders in the early Church? Did Ruth's legacy as a Gentile and a woman inspire them as women, both Jewish and Gentile, to seek equality and to serve God in his church?

Ruth 1:1. A number of wadis cross the region of Moab and were good fertile lands.

Ruth 1:13. In Israel the law had established levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-6) where if a man died, leaving his wife childless, then his brother had the responsibility to care for the widow to keep her from poverty and so the family line of the deceased would not die out. Ruth's potential sons could not be fathered by her brother-in-law, who had also died, so the nearest male relative, formally known as the "kinsman redeemer", should fulfil this role.

Ruth 1:4-5. Marrying a Moabite, or any woman not of the people of Israel was strongly discouraged, and specifically forbidden by Nehemiah after the Exile (see week three's study). Moabites were not allowed to worship in the Tabernacle.

Ruth 1:16-17. Ruth's loyalty is to Naomi. She will tend to Naomi's burial and the rituals associated with death. "Your God will be my God" suggest Ruth's full acceptance of the God of Israel, which would arguably remove the interdict on marrying foreign women.

Ruth 4:1. The gate of the town was the open space where business activity would have taken place. Merchants, visitors, messengers and judges all congregated there.

Ruth 4:4. If this had just been a case of land then it would have been an attractive business transaction to the relative.

Ruth 4:5-6. As the nearest relative this man had the right to buy the land, but also had to marry the widow. The relative may have feared that some of his land and property would have transferred to the family of Naomi too.

Ruth 4:18-22. The genealogy shows that the kingship of David may be traced back to this story.

Gal 3:24. The picture of the law as a guardian or a tutor supervising a child teaches that we no longer need that level of supervision. Trust in Christ is essential.

Gal 3:29. The original promise to Abraham was intended for the whole world. All are blessed by this promise.

Week Five Questions

1. What is your impression of Ruth? What words would you use to describe her personality? How would you compare her to other Old Testament women?
2. How do you think marriage has changed since the time of Ruth? How has it changed in the past few generations? Are the changes for the better? To what extent is there gender equality in marriage in our society today?
3. What is absent from the story of Ruth is any sense of a woman being an agent in her own right. Do you think Ruth accepted her status in society? How did she confront the problem of her situation? (See.3.7 – 9) Consider women's rights around the world today. Where are improvements still to be made?
4. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) What does it mean to be "one in Christ Jesus"? What bearing does this have on the roles men and women have in church and parish life and ministry?
5. Naomi as an older woman and Paul as a church leader gave advice to those who would listen. How should we promote gender equality? How do we encourage younger women and men to serve God in their generation?

Many artists have used the story of Ruth as inspiration. Here are a few suggestions for artworks that could be viewed.

- Ruth and Naomi : HIQI 2001
- 'The Story of Ruth', Thomas Matthews Rooke, 1876
- Marc Chagall: various art works on story of Ruth
- 'Ruth and Boaz', Barent Pietersz Fabritius, 1660

Alan Burgess, *The Small Woman* (The Reprint Society, 1959) tells the story of Gladys Aylward, who also left familiar surroundings and took personal risks to serve others. This story is also available as a film starring Ingrid Bergman: *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*.

Publications relating to Gender Justice Additional Resources

THE FOLLOWING are some suggestions for further reading on issues relating to gender justice and the Bible. This list is by no means exhaustive. The books represent a variety of perspectives; BACJ does not endorse the views of any of the authors listed here.

- Bailey, Kenneth E., *Jesus through the Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, SPCK, 2008.
- Bellis, Alice Ogden, *Helpmates, Harlots and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, Second Edition, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.
- Collicutt McGrath, Joanna, *Jesus and the Gospel Women*, SPCK, 2009.
- Frymer-Kensky, Tikva, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, Schocken, 2004.
- Guinness, Michele, *Woman: The Full Story*, Zondervan, 2010.
- Hardin Freeman, Lindsay, *The Scarlet Cord: Conversations with God's Chosen Women*, John Hunt Publishing, 2010.
- Keener, Craig S., *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Womens' Ministry in the Letters of Paul*, SPCK Publishing, 1992.
- Kopas, Jane, "Critics corner: Jesus and Women: John's Gospel", *Theology Today*, Vol. 41, No. 2, July 1984, 201-205.
- Kraemer, Ross Shepard, and Mary Rose D'Angelo (eds), *Women and Christian Origins*, Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Lapsley, Jacqueline E., Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.
- Meyers, Carol, Toni Craven and Ross Shepard Kraemer (eds), *Women in Scripture*, Eerdmans Publishing, 2001.
- Moltmann Wendel, Elisabeth, *The Women around Jesus*, SCM Press, 1984.

Additional Resources (Publications relating to Gender Justice (cont.))

- Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob, "In the Wilderness, Awaiting the Land: The Daughters of Zelophehad and Feminist Interpretation", *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 1988, 179-196. Available online at <http://journals.ptsem.edu/id/PSB1988093/dmd006>.
- Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, *In Memory of Her: Feminist Theological reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Second Edition, SCM Press 1996.
- Spencer, F. Scott, *Dancing Girls, Loose Ladies, and Women of the Cloth: The Women in Jesus' Life*, Continuum, 2004.
- Thurston, Bonnie, B., *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary*, Wipf and Stock, 2004.
- Tidball, Derek and Dianne Tidball, *The Message of Women*, Inter-Varsity Press, 2012.
- Time for Action: Sexual Abuse, the Churches and a New Dawn for Survivors*, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2002.

Additional Resources (Internet resources relating to Gender Justice)

- The following websites contain information or resources on issues relating to gender justice, mainly from a Christian perspective. BACI does not endorse the contents of the websites listed here.
- <http://www.christianaid.ie/whatwedo/in-focus/gender/index.aspx> – Christian Aid's materials on gender issues
- <http://bishopsappealireland.anglican.org/> – the Church of Ireland Bishop's Appeal
- <http://www.wcrc.ch/node/487> – the World Communion of Reformed Churches' resources on gender justice
- <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/the-wcc-and-the-ecumenical-movement-in-the-21st-century/women-in-church-and-society.html> – the World Council of Churches' project on Women in Church and Society
- <http://www.ecumenicalwomen.org> – a coalition of churches and ecumenical organisations with recognised status at ECOSOC, the United Nations Economic and Social Council
- http://www.trocaire.org/education_resources/778/812 – materials on gender justice from the Irish Roman Catholic Church's aid and development agency, Trócaire
- http://www.tearfund.ie/what_we_do/vulnerable_women/ – The Evangelical Alliance Relief Fund's materials on gender justice
- <http://www.franciscansinternational.org/Women-and-Children.114.0.html> – resources on gender justice by Franciscans International
- <http://www.ntgateway.com/women-and-gender/websites/> – New Testament Gateway website links to a wide range of other sites on issues related to the New Testament
- http://www.nd.edu/~archives/la_bib.html – bibliography on women and religion compiled by Susan Lau, University of Pittsburgh
- <http://www.stoa.org/diotima/> – materials for the study of gender in the ancient world

Prayers

God of reconciliation and grace,
you promise us a world where all is new,
where love is born when hope is gone,
where broken relationships are restored to wholeness.
May we live as people who know your story of love,
and may we have the vision to imagine what could be possible
if we dared to live this story.
God of abundant life,
may we be witnesses of love, hope and peace,
and co-creators of your life in the world.
Amen. (from Christian Aid)

Loving God, you make us in your image.
Forgive us when we fail to see your image in each other,
when we give in to greed and indifference
when we do not question the systems that are life-denying.
As we are made in your image,
let us live in your image
and be Christ-like in service, endurance and love.
Amen. (from Christian Aid)

Spirit of integrity,
you drive us into the desert,
to search out our truth.
Give us clarity to know what is right,
that we may abandon the false innocence
of failing to choose at all,
but may follow the purposes of Jesus Christ.
Amen. (from the Iona Community)

Creator God, source of all life,
as a mother you nurture and care for us.
May we value equally the roles of women and of men in your
world,
created, male and female, in your image.
May we resist discrimination and oppression
And seek always to give space to your transforming love
To reach its potential for renewal and growth in our lives and
communities.
Amen.

Prayers

God of healing and wholeness,
we remember before you women who are victims of
discrimination and violence.
We pray that they may know your healing for their hurt,
and your justice in deliverance from their oppressors.
Forgive us for our complacency in turning a blind eye to such
injustice.
Open our eyes,
and empower us to work in your name
for an end to all oppression on the basis of gender.
Amen.

Gracious God, as Ruth responded to your call and to Naomi's
need,
grant that we may discern your will
in the challenges we face in our daily lives,
and that we may be prepared to be courageous
in caring for others who need our help,
and especially for vulnerable women
in this country and throughout the world.
Amen.

See also the following liturgical resources:

General Synod of the Church of England, *Making Women
Visible: The Use of Inclusive Language with the ASB*, Church
House Publishing, 1988.
Kate McIlhagga, *Green Heart of the Snowdrop*, Wild
Goose Publications, 2004.
Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, Movement for the
Ordination of Women, 1988.
Margaret Rose, Jenny Te Paa, Jeanne Person, *Lifting
Women's Voices*, Canterbury Press, 2009.
Steven Shakespeare, *Prayers for an Inclusive Church*,
SCM Canterbury Press, 2008.
The St Hilda Community, *Women Included: A Book of
Services and Prayers*, SPCK, 1991.
Janet Wootton, *Eagles' Wings and Lesser Things:
Hymns, Prayers, Drama and Other Resources for Worship*,
Stainer and Bell, 2007.

About BACl and the authors

THE BIBLICAL Association for the Church of Ireland exists to enrich and deepen the use of the Bible in the Church of Ireland by encouraging rigorous and faith-based biblical study.

These materials were written and compiled through the efforts of the following:

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The patrons of the Biblical Association for the Church of Ireland are his Grace, the Most Rev. Richard Clarke, the Archbishop of Armagh and his Grace, the Most Rev. Michael Jackson, the Archbishop of Dublin

Feedback

AS PART of the Anglican Consultative Council's project 'The Bible in the Life of the Church', BACl is seeking feedback on this study itself as well as reflection on how the Bible is read in the Church of Ireland today. To do this, we encourage all groups who use this resource to answer the questions on this and the following page and return them to BACl at baci.anglican@gmail.com. We would hope for at least one response per group, but individuals are also encouraged to relate their experiences. BACl will collate and forward the results to the ACC.

What was the group? (Parish, diocesan, ad hoc)

Was this a new or established group?

How many of the passages were studied? _____

Who was present? Was there an 'expert'? _____

Did the group discuss equally, or was there a speaker?

How involved were the members? _____

Feedback

Were other biblical passages mentioned or discussed? If so, which?

How similarly or differently did people interpret the passages?

Were links made with people's lives?

What energised the group?

What were the group going to do with what they learned?

Did they find the selection and notes helpful?

Any critiques of the material?

Feedback

What would your group have liked to make the study more relevant or interesting?

Reflecting on the Study itself, please consider these questions:

In what ways did your group engage with the Bible?

Did you find your study confirming what you already knew/believed, or was it challenging/transformational? Why?

Thinking about what you have just done, what were you doing with the Bible, and why were you doing it?

Feedback

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

What do you think this means for the way the Bible is read and used today in the Church of Ireland? Does anything need to change?

Any other comments or observations?
