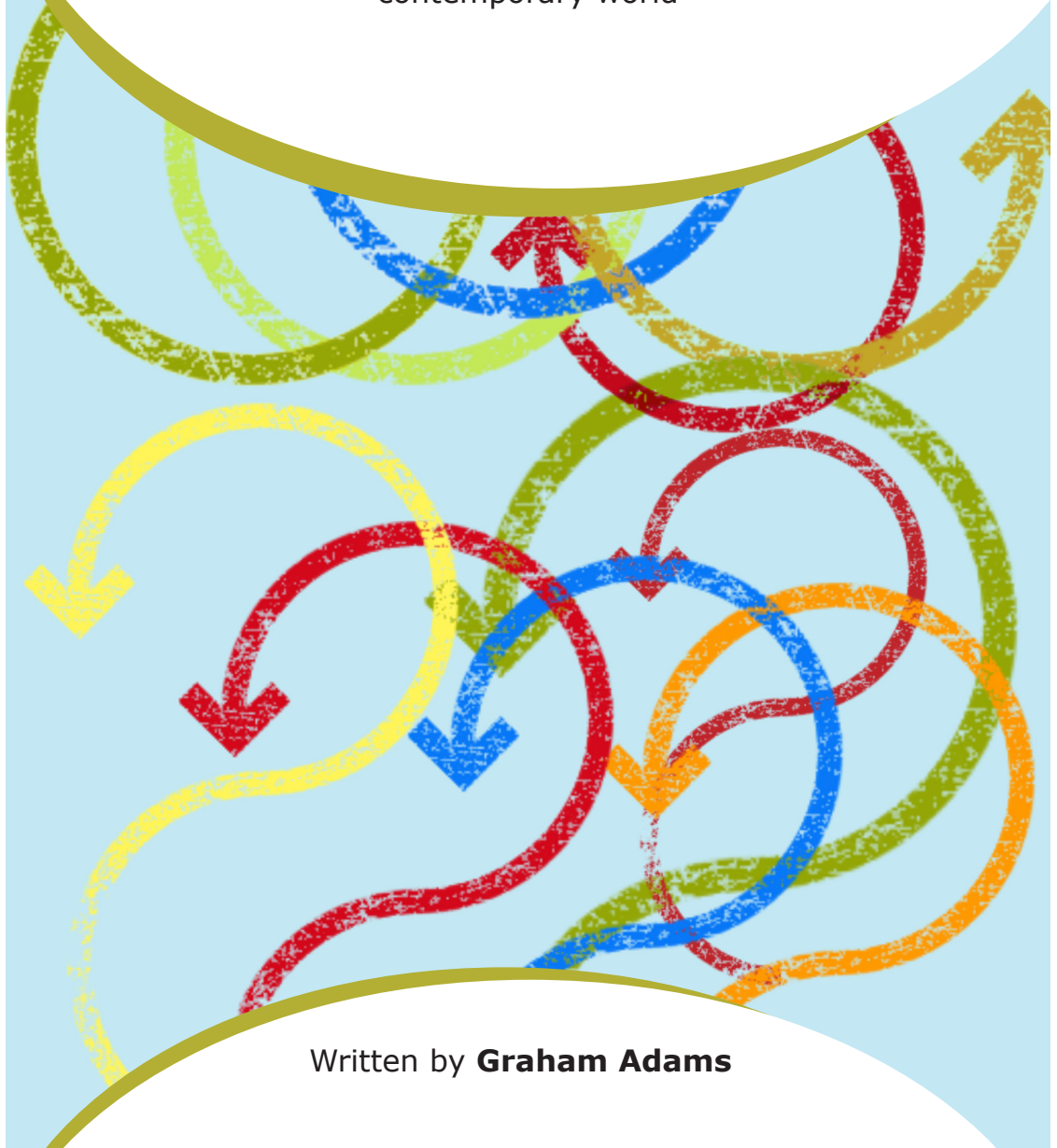




TO AND FRO: GOOD NEWS IN RESTLESS TIMES

Biblical Resources to help churches engage with features of the contemporary world



Written by **Graham Adams**



Produced by CWM Europe

Colin Sanders Innovation Centre, Mewburn Road, BANBURY, OX16 9PA.
Email: admin@cwmeurope.org
Website: www.cwmeurope.org
Charity number. 1097825 registered in the UK

CONTENTS


To and Fro: Good News In Restless Times

 **Introduction**

Sessions

 **1. Engaging with context:**
knowing where you are

 **2. Transforming conversations with the Bible:**
more light and truth

 **3. Engaging with culture:**
believing in a scientific age

 **4. Transforming mission:**
being good news today

 **5. Engaging with citizenship:**
faith in the public realm

 **6. Transforming worship:**
dreaming wide awake

Note: The Scripture quotations contained herein are from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicized Edition © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Christian Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and are used by permission. All rights reserved.



To and fro:

Good News in Restless Times

Introduction

Chapter 5 of the Book of Jeremiah opens with these words:

*Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem,
look around and take note!
Search its squares and see if you can find one person
who acts justly and seeks truth—*

The **ethos** of this resource is captured by this passage, and it reflects the restlessness many churches are experiencing – or if they aren't feeling restless, maybe they should be! In essence, the ethos is that:

- to share Good News in restless times, we need to 'look around and take note' of our fluid, restless age itself;
Ww
- to make the connections, we need to go energetically 'to and fro' between different aspects and glimpses of this age;
- to make a difference, we need to join in with God's activity in the world, and with any who 'act justly and seek truth'.

The method involves guided discussions which engage with biblical texts. We hope they help your church navigate a way through the maze that is today's restless world. In essence, the method is:

- to go 'to and fro' between aspects of the world around us and aspects of the church's life (affirming that we are called to shape the world but we must recognise how it shapes us);
- to go 'to and fro' between Old and New Testaments, and between biblical times and ours (*see the next paragraph*);
- to pose questions to help you examine any taken-for-granted assumptions about the life of faith and the wider world, but also to help you engage energetically with the world as it really is, not as we often imagine it to be.

The biblical dimension consists of markers from the Book of Jeremiah, together with encounters with Jesus from the Gospels. Although the historical context of Jeremiah is clearly specific and very different from ours (prophesying invasion and a time of exile), there are remarkable points of contact – and real challenges for us too. The prophet was painfully realistic about the precarious future and yet peculiarly hopeful: he wrestled with his calling, suffered for his integrity, found himself at odds with others who interpreted their faith and the signs of the times so differently, but nevertheless offered glimpses of hope. This restless, awkward but inspiring message is an entry-point into each of the subjects, which are explored and illuminated further through encounters with Jesus.

The perspective of the resource does not claim to be the only way to consider the issues or the biblical texts concerned; rather, it invites your critical engagement, so wrestle with the biases and work out where you stand in relation to these things – but also be prepared to go 'to and fro' between different viewpoints! In fact, once you have explored all the sessions, why not start again? – perhaps at a different place, and quite possibly with different biblical passages as the basis for your next movement 'to and fro', to build on your earlier discoveries and questions. After all, your church will have experiences of these subjects different from another church in a different context, so you will not all reach the same conclusions: but still it is important to engage with these issues if we are called to share Good News in our restless times.

Two further features: There are questions to 'go further', if your church is interested in going deeper into the issues; and there are also 'suggestions for worship' which you are obviously free to adapt according to your context. Make the resources your own; involve different people in leading them; explore the best ways to go 'to and fro' as you practise sharing Good News in restless times.

1. Engaging with context:

Knowing where you are

Jeremiah 38: 6b

Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud

Opening thoughts ... to consider together

The officials come to the king and tell him that Jeremiah 'ought to be put to death, because he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in the city, and all the people, by speaking such words to them. He is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm' (38: 4). How easy it is for us to be tempted to silence anyone with an unpopular message – including an unpopular message about the church's future! It can be so discouraging to hear about decline, to hear that we are not engaging effectively with our communities, that we should be doing more about the points of contact between our faith and God's wider world. After all, it takes energy – as well as willpower – to respond, and many churches are low on energy.

• **What gives you, and your church, that sinking feeling?**

But the reality is that, unless we dare to face some of the hard questions posed by people with unpopular messages, it will not be they who sink further into the mud – it will be us. The longer we wait to understand the world we really are living in, rather than the one we imagine it is, the further and faster we will sink. But it's not just about church institutions sinking; it's also about the prophetic force of good news itself – it too might be silenced, even in those churches who feel they are strong, effective and relevant. For it is not always the strong, or guardians of the old certainties, who have the answers: in fact, it is an Ethiopian eunuch who comes to Jeremiah's rescue. So, too, there are signs of wisdom and renewal in strange places today: but are we ready to listen and respond?

Give to the emperor: Mark 12: 13-17

1. Remind yourselves of the story where people ask Jesus whether they should pay taxes to Rome. (Try to do this without looking up the story, because it is a useful exercise in itself to draw on our 'remembered Bibles': it brings some interesting angles to light.)

2. Discuss together, briefly, what you feel the story means (without looking at the points below!)

3. Consider this:

I don't think Jesus was trying to divide issues between 'religious ones' (things we should give to God) and 'worldly ones' (things we should give to the emperor), but was making us think for ourselves about how we judge and value various aspects of our lives. If we think about it, we surely owe *everything* to God, ultimately – even the things we entrust to the State powers of our day, and those we give to shops, banks, charities, etc. In other words, the challenge is: How can we ensure that the whole of *life* is ordered as closely as possibly according to the purposes of the just and loving God?

4. Exercise: Map out your community on a big of piece of paper. Put some of the key features: areas of housing, the community meeting-places (pubs, post office, schools, hospital, community centre), the key employers (or indicate rows of small shops), open spaces, and indicate where your church is.

5. Think about it: May be this exercise has raised questions, such as: How do some people access local healthcare? (What is 'local?'), Where do people meet?, Who are the employers? (Do you know?), How varied is the housing?, Is the church rooted in these issues and questions or separated from them? ... Consider these – in the light of the idea that everything we do, or give, should be 'given to God'.

6. Now think bigger: What other forces impact on what happens on your map? Jot them down around the edge of your map. For example, how do some of these impact on your context? [Local statistics about employment/housing use/deprivation are available]

- local and national politics / decision-making,
- transport infrastructure;
- television and other media;
- advertising (how it enters your mind without your knowing!);
- business, employment opportunities and training;
- but also things we can't easily 'see' – the global economy, trends and changes across generations, and what else?

(Note: it's not about having a big debate about it all, but starting to recognise all the things which shape our 'local' context – to help us see how, if we believe in shaping the world in line with the purposes of God, what relationships between Faith and Life need attention.)

'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's.'

7. From your list of factors and forces shaping the 'local' area, can you identify anything that is the emperor's but not God's? (i.e. is anything worldly but not the concern of God?)

'Give to the emperor ...'

8. Pray for all the issues you have identified which seem 'worldly' but which affect people in different ways – and all those involved in decision-making, in politics or business or community life.

'Give to God ...'

9. Consider how your church might better express God's concern for all these issues – and pray about this too.

Suggestions for worship

You could finish with a 'prayer walk' outside, or around your church building from door to door, or simply gathered around your map – and with a song of hopefulness.

Going further (for ongoing reflection and action, as appropriate)

10. You have been thinking about how various factors and forces influence what happens in your local area. Now consider the ways that these factors and forces have influenced your church:

- a) How has people's increased mobility affected church attendance (mobility in terms of travel, and social mobility, affecting how much people move away from 'home')?
- b) To what extent has 'church' shifted from the centre of community life to one amongst many options?
- c) To what extent are people wary of the idea that one religious story can claim to have the Big Answers to everything?
- d) To what extent is 'church' seen as:
 - (i) a vital part of life – for those who believe;
 - (ii) a vital part of life for those who find it helpful, but not essential for people who believe;
 - (iii) meeting particular social needs (e.g. for funerals and weddings, and caring for senior citizens);
 - (iv) a community asset, enriching the life of the community as a whole;
 - (v) a witness to the liberating power of God in the world, as embodied in its vibrant fellowship;
 - (vi) basically irrelevant to most people's lives;
 - (vii) something else [make your suggestions ...]
- e) If people find community in very different ways nowadays (e.g. online, and no longer tied to a local geographical area), what *might* this mean for the future of the local church?

2. Transforming conversations with the Bible: more light and truth

Jeremiah 23: 28-29

Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the Lord. Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

Opening thoughts ... to consider together

Jeremiah is a profound prophet and biblical book, not least for our times, because of the extent to which there is this wrestling with different interpretations of reality. Even within the prophet himself there is a deep restlessness – can he bear the weight of the truth as God reveals it to him? – but he is also brought into conflict with other prophets who offer a very different account of events. This surely resonates with us and our experience of the Bible: not everyone interprets it in the same way; there are profound implications for the diversity of our interpretations; these cannot be taken lightly but must be faced as honestly and openly as possible.

• Think of some key examples of how people and churches interpret the same biblical stories in different ways

People are increasingly realising that none of us reads the Bible in a vacuum: we are all shaped by our experiences and context. This is not something to resist but to be worked with, while accepting that we need to listen to others' stories – not least, to hear those whose stories have gone unheard and to understand how we have taken our interpretations for granted, assuming everyone thinks like us. So we need to rediscover the art of letting the word be 'wheat', which nourishes us, and also 'like a hammer', shattering our idols.

We need to rediscover the Bible's many voices, with each other.

The Other Side: Mark 4: 35-41

Read this short story together.

We are going to consider this story through two lenses – both of which have been sharpened through the church's openness to the world around it, but each brings to light dimensions of Good News which have often been overlooked and which are in the Bible.

Lens One: a multi-ethnic world (a post-colonial approach to the Bible)

The Sea of Galilee had different sides – not simply east and west, but Jewish and Gentile – so to be invited to 'go across to the other side' was an awesome challenge in its day ... and still today the challenge to encounter 'the Other' can cause storms.



1. How may the disciples have felt about the challenge to go across to the other side?

2. What makes some people anxious today about ethnic or cultural diversity? (The purpose here is to recognise the points of anxiety, whether or not they are justified or defensible)

3. If Jesus brought peace to nervous disciples in such a situation, how is the church called to act in such situations of anxiety today?

4. What might it mean for us to be peace-makers between groups and cultures where one side has much more power than another?

Lens Two: a feminist perspective



There is a supposedly obvious point to make here and a less obvious point. First, the 'obvious' point: women are 'absent' from this story, which raises questions about the male-centred nature of biblical times and how churches have tended to interpret them. But wait: does the text actually say no women are present? A key feminist insight is to question the presumption of women's absence and to re-imagine Christian history through the lens of those who may actually be present but who are (or have been) rendered voiceless:

So imagine yourselves going from the 'male' side of the text, where we assume the fishers are all men, to the more 'female' side, where the community is more diverse and complex; and imagine the storm in such a community, where women and men ride the waves of discipleship together. Here, again, Jesus makes peace possible!

5. Think of people or groups, in churches and in society, who are virtually absent, because their presence is not named or their voices are not heard. Acknowledge the church's part in people's exclusion.

6. How might we be peacemakers in the sense that we work at building a community which doesn't deny its diversity or complexity but celebrates the contributions that all are called to make?

The second point: Jesus rebukes them for their 'lack of faith'. Again, we make an assumption: they lack faith in him. But what if he were actually frustrated with their lack of faith in themselves? After all, they would have faced storms before, so why make themselves dependent on him and forget their own capacity? This is a feminist insight, too: we should not disable ourselves by giving our power to those 'over' us, but should affirm our mutual inter-dependence.

7. When have you not had faith in yourself or yourselves? Why?



8. If Jesus calls us to have faith in our own capacity to face storms, how might we help each other to play such a dramatic role?

Suggestions for worship

Scrapbook: cut up newspapers and magazines, and stick faces from many different contexts and stories reflecting diverse experiences to make a People's Bible (scrapbook-style). Make it a focus for your prayers ... while using a song or two from contexts other than yours.

or 'Peace, be still': Gather around a picture of a storm; name some injustices or divisions in need of healing & peace on post-it notes, and stick them on the picture. Close with a song from another context which explores the quest for justice or wholeness in the world.

Going further (for ongoing reflection and action, as appropriate)
9. Consider these biblical stories from the following perspectives:

a) The Book of Ruth (especially chapter 1), from the perspective of Orpah, not Ruth:


Whose interests are served by seeing Ruth as the model to follow (willing to integrate into a new community), rather than Orpah (preferring to maintain her cultural identity)?

b) The Exodus, from the perspectives of both the ordinary Egyptians (e.g. the wives of the soldiers) and the Canaanites:

Whose interests are served by reading these narratives mostly from the Hebrews' perspective? What happens when we read them from the alternative perspectives?

c) Creation narratives (Genesis 1, Psalm 104, Proverbs 8: 22-31, Job 38-39), from the perspective of ecological concern:

What if, to be human and filled with God's breath, is to recognise our deep connections with all of God's creation?



3. Engaging with culture: believing in a scientific age

Jeremiah 10: extracts from verses 14-16
*Everyone is stupid and without knowledge;
goldsmiths are all put to shame by their idols;
for their images are false, and there is no breath in them.
They are worthless, a work of delusion ...
Not like these is the Lord,
for he is the one who formed all things*

Opening thoughts ... to consider together

Medical science, stem cell research, gene therapy treatment, iPads, quantum - and astrophysics, our grasp of neutrinos and neurones ... the pace of scientific and technological developments is breathtaking! Even if we cannot keep up with it, our culture is greatly shaped by the methods, knowledge and fruits of science. It leads many of us to wonder at this amazing collection of human disciplines – and to wonder at the things we are discovering about the universe.

• In 2 minutes, think of as many things as you can which science has now made possible which weren't possible 50 years ago

But humans have always tried to curb our ambitions to 'develop' too. For our ability to craft new things can quickly turn them into 'idols', objects of worship detracting from the living God. When, though, does our crafting become idolatrous? As Jeremiah warns, our progress can sometimes become 'delusional'; in our cleverness we can bypass our dependency on God's grace. But God made us inquisitive, and our creations in themselves may be fine; the key issue is the power we allow them to have, as marked by our use of them.

• How can we use the gifts and fruit of science and technology in God's service?

Like Trees, Walking: Mark 8: 22-26

Read this reflection together (we come to the Bible story shortly)
Science is a very restless field. Although some religious people accuse it of being over-confident, science is essentially fuelled by doubt – because it is doubt which makes human beings strive to test things. Doubt is a creative experience, which makes us examine pre-existing assumptions, to see whether reality matches up with the theory.

So science goes 'to and fro' between theory and practice, coming up with new discoveries or practical uses often by accident. It is a world of serendipity – where human beings experience the joy of discovery.

Is religious faith so different? Having doubts and asking questions is a natural part of faith (otherwise it is 'blind faith' which ploughs on regardless of the clashes between theory and real-life experiences). So our faith is right to struggle with the differences between theory and practice, and to see where theory needs to change as a result.

1. How does this 'restless' view of faith fit with your experience?

Now read the Bible story together. (It is an interesting one to act out, so that you get to see the movement from place to place.)

2. Briefly discuss what you feel this story means for us today.

A way of interpreting

Science has affected how the Bible is interpreted in different ways: i) some people insist it must be read as unquestionable facts, ii) others boil down its miraculous elements to what is factually (scientifically) plausible. These distortions do a disservice to science and faith. By contrast, iii) if the Bible is interpreted in the light of its pre-scientific context, we can affirm the 'restless' ways of both science and faith ...

It is simply about noting what precedes this story (see Mark 8: 14-21), where Jesus asks his disciples, 'Do you have eyes, and fail to see?' (verse 18), and what follows it (verses 27-30), where he wonders how they understand – or see – who he is. In its pre-scientific world, then, this story points to how Jesus heals our limited vision; how he opens our eyes, our hearts, our minds, to new ways of being in the world. That such healing occurs in stages, not in a single moment, resonates well with both science and faith: new knowledge is revealed in stages, and our discipleship of Jesus is constantly fine-tuned by the Spirit.

3. Help each other to understand those three different ways (i – iii) of interpreting this Bible story. Now consider their relative strengths and weaknesses in terms of how each helps you to be disciples of Jesus.

Let's look again at this story – in light of the third way of seeing it.

4. Think of our limited vision – as church, and as people struggling to understand the world. What would you like to understand more fully?

5. Jesus led the man out of the village (the place known to the man). How may we too need to be led away from 'what we know' (in faith, in science, or in all of life), if we hope our vision will be transformed?

6. At the first attempt, the man saw people, but only like trees, walking. a) How do we see or understand each other partially, as our prejudices or preferred ways of thinking are hard to shake off? b) Is this also true of how we see other disciplines (including science): do we sometimes prejudge them and resist deeper understanding?

7. The man's healing progressed, in stages. Once he saw everything clearly, Jesus told him not to go back to the village – perhaps because healing or enlarged vision (of any kind) involves taking a new path.

So: a) How does Jesus enable us to take a new path? b) How, too, does our encounter with science urge us not to take old ideas for granted but even to see our faith itself in new ways?

8. How does this approach help in reading other miracle-stories, so not to react against science or dance wholly to science's tune, but to affirm instead that we always need our limited vision to be expanded: valuing what we currently know but expecting to learn much more?

Suggestions for worship

Compose a psalm of praise together, in light of scientific discoveries since biblical times! (e.g. update Psalm 8, 19, 24, 29, 65, 104 or 136)

A Prayer to say together:

Healing God, forgive us for seeing and judging by each other's bark, when we fix our gaze on what is superficial and only half true. Teach us instead to go beyond the walking trees of our partial sight, to see with the fullness of your vision the richness of your world. May we embrace many ways of seeing: science, religion and more, and give us grace and courage to trust in new possibilities. Amen.

Going further (for ongoing reflection and action, as appropriate)

9. Choose a scientific issue in the news (e.g. stem cell research), find out more about the science, and discuss any challenges for our faith.

10. a) I.T. is becoming more mobile, more focused on a few powerful brands, more 'personalised' (targeted at 'me'), and more participative (we interact with it). What challenges does this pose for churches? b) In what ways could we use I.T., with others, to curb its idolisation?

11. Evolutionary science resonates with God's intimate involvement with Nature; but how should our faith (in a generous God) account for the loss of whole species and the violence of 'natural selection'?

4. Transforming mission: being good news today

Jeremiah 31: extracts from verses 3-5, 8-9 and 13

*I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.
Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel!
Again you shall take your tambourines
and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.
Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria;
the planters shall plant and shall enjoy the fruit ...
See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
those with child and those in labour, together;
a great company, they shall return here.
With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back ...
Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
and the young men and the old shall be merry.
I will turn their mourning into joy,
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.*

Opening thoughts ... to consider together

What is the mission of the churches in our restless age? This passage from Jeremiah is not the whole answer, but it has much to teach us. It tells us that people who were regarded then as un-whole (such as the lame and those in labour) are welcome in this joyful dance. So it is our mission to share the good news that people do not have to be 'whole' to belong; all are welcome, in the spirit of the dance and the joyful return – which is rooted in God's everlasting love for us.

- **What can your church learn about mission from this passage? How might you be involved in turning mourning into joy?**

No one had the strength: Mark 5: 1-20

Read the story together.

Read this reflection and then consider the questions:

We could focus on a specific way of interpreting this story: it concerns the damage done by living under military occupation. (The clues to this are: i) the location is Gerasa, where the Romans acted especially cruelly in the late years of the Jewish Revolt, which Mark's readership would have known; ii) the man calls himself 'Legion', the name for a section of the Roman army; and iii) the words describing the pigs (dismissed like soldiers and charging like a military advance)). The point is: Jesus' mission includes the mission to heal society of the pain of armed violence, because the impact of the Roman Empire is another of the obstacles to the progress of God's Kingdom. Like the religious establishment, the divisive purity regulations, and the culture's ethnic and social divisions, violence itself is another obstacle which the Way of Jesus aims to overcome. Mission involves so much more than we tend to imagine ...

But this brings me to another angle on this: what if this is a story about the church and our mission today? For example:

- the man inflicts harm on himself – just think how some of the church's greatest injuries have been self-inflicted!
- he lived among the tombs – much like the church's tendency to wallow in the past (or in particular versions of it)!
- it seems he has become isolated – need I go on?

But notice these signs of encouragement:

- he could not be restrained (though people had tried); in fact, 'no one had the strength to subdue him' (verse 4) – for even though the 'western' church seems down, it is not done yet;
- even in his torment, he recognises Jesus – as we do, we hope?

1. Discuss the reflection and whatever questions it begs for you

2. Exercise: Make a Mission Banner – either based on Jeremiah 31 (see the Opening Thoughts) or as follows [you will need: a big piece of paper, pens, sticky strips of coloured paper to make paper chains]:

a) on a big piece of paper, sketch some images of tombs as a background – or one big tomb / gravestone;

b) amongst the tombs, list all the aspects of our mission which you can think of, drawing on your knowledge of the Bible (for example: healing, evangelism, peace, justice ...) – i.e. what kind of difference does God call us to make in the world?

c) now think of some 'chains' and 'wounds' which obstruct your church's fulfilment of these mission-goals (whether self-inflicted, or circumstances which make you feel you don't have the strength or capacity, or forces working against you) – write these on paper strips, and make them into chains to place across the banner.

3. This story reminds me of Lazarus's resurrection (John 11). Jesus calls out to the dead man, 'Come out!', and as he comes out, Jesus instructs the bystanders to 'Unbind him and let him go!' So too, in this story of the Gerasene demoniac, there is a sense of being 'unbound' and of being 'let go', because the man feels able to be an evangelist in the city ... **So have a time of prayer: pray the church may be unbound from its chains – that it may find new strength to fulfil the breadth and depth of God's mission [also see worship suggestions below].**

4. As a closing thought, celebrate that this is a story of an unlikely person becoming an agent of God's mission (a victim of terrible violence and social exclusion). You may feel that you are 'an unlikely person', for whatever reason, or that your church is 'unlikely' – but the Way of Jesus shows us that God works through such people. **Give thanks for this, and encourage each other with words of hope – i.e. actually share words of personal encouragement with each other.**

Suggestions for worship

Together with your prayers for the church, in the light of your Mission Banner, you could also enjoy a feast and a dance!

Longer term, consider how to make your usual worship more 'unbound', e.g. more open to a wider range of experiences, more experimental, more expressive of the church's mission to free those who suffer limitations or oppression [and see Session 6].

A Blessing:

May God bless us with faith that, though we often live among tombs, new life is in our midst!

May Christ bless us with hope that, though we are bound by chains, freedom is coming!

May the Spirit bless us with love that, though we are unlikely people, we may share it with all people, now and every day, Amen.

Going further (for ongoing reflection and action, as appropriate)

5. Consider how your church might give better expression to Jesus' mission to heal the world of the damage done by violence. (For example, look into campaigns about peace, the arms trade, torture and human rights). How could this become a public feature of your mission (e.g. who might be your partners in this mission)?

6. How could your church confess the role churches have played in acts of violence and damage to human community? How do you think such acts of humble and honest confession would be viewed in the community – and how might they be part of your mission?

7. How might you help each other to be braver in your mission, less inclined to succumb to your fears about the dangers and more inclined to believe in the possibility of unexpected outcomes?

5. Engaging with citizenship: faith in the public realm

Jeremiah 29: 7

*But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,
and pray to the Lord on its behalf,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare*

Opening thoughts ... to consider together

On the one hand, our wider culture generally wants Religion to stay quiet, but sometimes it expects us to speak out with the moral authority it assumes we claim to have. But often we are judged not to get the balance right – we seem to be silent when we should be vocal; we are too vocal (on the wrong issues) when we should be silent. It seems we can't win! And of course, as we noted in relation to Science too, a media culture which constructs a good conflict, to turn complex issues into something approaching entertainment, does not help in this regard. Religion's attempts to be a serious participant in Public Life often do not turn out as we would hope.

• How should we decide when to speak out and when not to?

On the other hand, churches can seem to be in retreat from public life. We can look more like private clubs, escaping the realities of a messy world, but worse still, where we barely manage to be public about our faith even with each other. For our worship does not often prompt us to think aloud or act publicly: so our faith remains private in our heads ("it's just personal") and private in our churches. Meanwhile, Good News is needed in society, but is also already active out there, waiting for us to join in, as citizens of God's new world. So we need to nurture ways of being public; of knowing when to affirm our culture, as its friends and its citizens, and when to be critical or counter-cultural. But this involves patiently being in it 'for the long haul', for the sake of society's welfare and ours.

You give them something to eat: Mark 6: 30-44

The story of the feeding of over five thousand people does not offer a blueprint for every situation where we want to be public about our faith and discipleship, but it poses important questions for us. (You do not need to read the story as a whole to start with – its outline is considered throughout these questions.)

1. Jesus recognised the need to get away and rest (verse 31: they had been 'coming and going', or to-ing and fro-ing!, all day). **In what ways is church an opportunity for you to recharge your batteries?**
2. But it soon became obvious that they could not escape; people saw where they were heading and arrived ahead of them (verse 33). **In what ways is it inevitable and right that our faith is confronted with the needs of the wider world (the to-ing & fro-ing can't stop)?**
3. Jesus saw the great crowd and had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. **What situations in our culture and in the world prompt your compassion?**
4. He responded by teaching them many things. **Speculate what he might have said – and how we might say similar things.**
5. The disciples then wanted to send the crowd away to find food, because it was late; but Jesus told them to provide for the crowd – a choice between fitting in with the wider economy and society, or doing something different. **How do we decide when to 'fit in' (for example, by expecting people to pay their own way) and when to be different (for example, by being a community of generosity)?**
6. But the disciples did not have much – just five loaves and two fish. **How do we hold back from public life because we feel inadequate?**

7. But Jesus told them to organise the crowd, and (as though recognising their communion with each other) he blessed and broke the bread, and shared it out – and it was more than enough. **Consider these three elements:**

a) If we practise the methods of 'community organising', we too can make a real impact*

b) If we see the connections between worship (communion) and life (feeding the hungry), we too can make a real impact**

c) If we use well the gifts we have, it will be more than enough

*Community organising involves:

- building public relationships with community movers-&-shakers and decision-makers (councillors, community leaders), by seeking to understand each other's motivations and find areas of common cause;

- building partnerships with other faith-based or community groups, on specific issues in order to effect change in your communities [*Note, in Mark 9: 38-41, Jesus affirms another exorcist as an ally, because he engages in healing work, even though he is working independently*];

- recognising that partnerships and alliances do not have to be permanent; they can be temporary but still effective.

Suggestions for worship

**Share a simple meal together, perhaps salmon or tuna sandwiches (fish and bread!), as a sign of your communion with God and each other – but as part of the meal, commit to share food with others.

Recognise the gifts you each have: affirm one another (e.g. say: 'God has blessed [Jane] with gifts of ...') – and make a commitment together to use your gifts well (e.g. say: 'We promise to use our gifts well, trusting God blesses and shares our gifts for the sake of others')

Compose a Letter together to 'the Church at [your community]', to encourage the congregation to be public witnesses to their faith and active citizens in the world. Print it and distribute it for everyone.

A Hymn

Give thanks to God who gives us bread
and calls us still to share it out.
When faced with crowds who must be fed
'thank God for gifts!' we sing and shout!

Give thanks to God for what seems small –
the humble things we bring and share;
With even these we can stand tall
for Christ sees in them how we care.

Give thanks to God who takes our bread
and helps us value others' too;
that with these gifts the crowds are fed –
so may we work to see it through.

For thanks to God it can come true
if no-one's gifts are yet denied;
for with these gifts that start a few
all shall be fed and satisfied!

© Graham Adams (2005)
LM (Long Metre: 88 88), Suggested tune: Truro

Going further (for ongoing reflection and action, as appropriate)
8. How could your church a) celebrate the achievements and public good of our society in itself, and b) build alliances with other social movements critical of the status quo (campaigning on issues of social justice, development, human rights, ecology, as well as peace)?

9. How can we help each other to be better prepared for public dialogue (discussion about our faith) as much as public action? And how can we cultivate spaces where such dialogue can thrive?

6. Transforming worship: dreaming wide awake

Jeremiah 7: 4

Do not trust these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord'.

Opening thoughts ... to consider together

There is a global online movement called 'Avaaz' (it means 'voice' in various languages), which campaigns on issues of democracy, peace, justice, and human rights. When it recently celebrated an anniversary and sought words of encouragement from its activists, one used this striking phrase: 'dreaming wide awake'. The sense is that, by drawing diverse peoples in many countries to campaign on matters of justice, in a spirit of solidarity and togetherness, Avaaz is 'dreaming wide awake' of the real possibility of a new world – not dreaming in a naively optimistic way, ignorant of the world as we know it in our waking hours, but dreaming while wide awake.

• What are your 'wide awake dreams' for the world?

In contrast, there is something sleepy about religious communities who go through the motions of their religious habits, not least their acts of worship, as though in a dream-like state; those who intone familiar words (much like 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord'), as though to convince themselves of their faithfulness; but whose routine-like behaviour and activities are actually holding them captive – and holding captive the 'wide awake dreams' of their religious faith. If we allow the self-deception to be broken (as in Jeremiah 7: 5-6, 'if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, the widow, or shed innocent blood...') then imagine the possibilities (*verse 7: 'then I will dwell with you in this place ...'*) Imagine worship which is truly set free ...

'He called her over': Luke 13: 10-17

Read the story together ... you may like to act it out, to see how the woman comes from the margins to the centre of people's attention.

Note!

This is another healing story in which the woman is not the only one to be healed. The religious community – the synagogue – which might well have been addicted to intoning the same words and repeating the same actions, has its worship disrupted and so is healed of its own dream-like self-deception. It learns from Jesus that worship has purposes beyond the needs of 'the faithful'.

Questions, including some worship suggestions

1. In what ways is your church addicted to its own habits? And in what ways is it open to disruption?

2. The synagogue leader tried to limit Jesus' actions to other days, but good news cannot be restrained. **In your church's worship, in what ways is its good news limited?**

3. The woman was an outsider. **Whose experiences are usually the 'norm' in your worship? How might other people's experiences (including 'outsiders') get a hearing and affect what happens?**

4. Create a piece of art or a prayer or a psalm, lamenting the way people have felt excluded from church.

5. Jesus lets his sermon be disrupted (and illustrated) by a real-life situation and an argument. **How might your church's worship more fully include sermons and activity, listening and discussion, as well as both celebration and lament?**

6. By the end, Jesus' opponents are put to shame and the crowd are rejoicing: **So how might your church's worship lead to public effects? i.e. How might its celebration reshape the world around it? (e.g. how might it rebuild and reshape community?)**

(Further) Suggestions for worship

Covenant: Make a commitment with each other to expect worship to be bound up with actions in pursuit of transformation in the world.

For example, you could say the following:

Leader: With all who know the living God calls us to obedience

All: we join together in faithfulness to the Ways of Jesus.

Leader: With all who know this Way is a way of transformation

All: we join together in mutual encouragement and hope.

Leader: With all who know the failures of our best intentions

All: we join together in humility, in need of renewal.

Leader: With all who know we tend to make worship safe

All: we join together in a new spirit open to disruption.

Leader: With all who know the Way of Jesus changes lives

All: we join together in commitment for others' sakes.

What would it involve to worship so that the voices of those not present are heard? ... whether the housebound who belong to your church; those in your communities who feel alienated from church because of bad experiences in the past; those who give it no thought because they are overwhelmed with their own struggles; or those in communities far away who are ignored or poor, imprisoned, pursued or tortured for their religious or political beliefs, or who live with violence every day ... what might they hope or pray for you?

Worship conversationally: Chat about the 'To and Fro' process in pairs or small groups, giving thanks for new insights, remembering the challenges, and praying for the strength to put things into practice.

Going further (for ongoing reflection and action, as appropriate)

7. If worship consisted of a mix of conversations (between the Bible's world and ours, diverse people, sciences and arts, personal encounter and public action), what might the effects be in these restless times?

Further resources

www.cwmeurope.org – resources:

- Sharing the Gospel
- Shaping missionary congregations
- Multi-cultural ministry
- Exploring worship and mission
- Faith sharing in a European context

McLaren, Brian, *Church on the Other Side: Exploring the Radical Future of the Local Congregation* (Zondervan, 1998, 2000, 2006)
well suited to help churches explore the nature of today's culture

Morisy, Ann, *Journeying Out: a new approach to Christian mission* (London: Continuum, 2004) ... drawing on insights from several areas

Myers, Ched, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) the basis for some of the interpretations of Markan texts found in this resource, and with the potential to help churches be communities of intent, to impact on the world around them

Further questions begged throughout these resources:

1. How might we best articulate the nature of the Good News today?

2. How might we demonstrate with integrity that both our words and our deeds must bear witness to the Good News we believe in?

3. How might we learn to listen to our complex culture, or cultural mix, in order to learn how to speak and act in appropriate ways?

4. How might we engage with our culture's various media, in order to demonstrate our willingness to listen and to speak and act?



Produced by CWM Europe
Colin Sanders Innovation Centre
Mewburn Road
BANBURY
OX16 9PA.

Email: admin@cwmeurope.org
Website: www.cwmeurope.org
Charity number. 1097825 registered in the UK