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Thank you for leading this small group series! In recent years theologians have started to look at how the world views of people who live in, and under, empires have affected how the Bible has been interpreted. The Bible was formed, written, and edited in imperial ages - the mighty empires of Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and Rome were the background to all the stories, teaching, poetry, hopes, and despair of the Biblical writers. When the Psalmist sat down and wept by the Rivers of Babylon the Jewish people were formed anew in the crucible of imperial oppression; when Jesus was nailed to the Cross he was executed in the way the Romans dealt with those it held in utter contempt. Biblical writers struggled with the advantages and disadvantages of Empire - good roads and

communications meant the Gospel could be spread whilst unimaginable oppression was cruel and anti-Christ.

We still live in empires, but our empires now are harder to see - just as, it is believed, goldfish don't perceive the water in which they live. We have world powers who seek to rule as ruthlessly as their imperial forebears, we have economic systems at least as cruel as the ancient institution of slavery and most Daily Devotion readers live in lands which once ruled much of the globe.

The Biblical writers' experience and critique of Empire has much to teach us now. A series of reflections published by the Daily Devotions project in 2019 is offered now as a small group resource. The reflections were written by two URC ministers, the Rev'd Peter Cruchley, Director of the World Council of Churches' Commission for Mission and Evangelism, and the Rev'd Gethin Rhys, Policy Officer for Cytun - Churches Together in Wales. We hope these studies will help us reflect on the interaction between the ancient Biblical witness in the context of Empire and our own contemporary situation.

The material has been designed to deliver over 4 sessions – these might be mid-week group over four weeks or it might form the focus of an away day for a church group. It could be delivered in person or on line. These notes are to assist you prepare to lead a group.

*Andy Braunston  
Minister for Digital Worship, June 2023*

Gethin uses Biblical images of God as judge – not popular images in contemporary Christianity. What do you make of the idea of God judging humanity?

- If we're burgled we want justice.
- If someone we love is scammed we want the scammer's brought to a court.
- If we've read of violent crime we want to have sentences imposed by the court to punish and deter.
- So judgement is a key part of our society – it's interesting to tease out if they believe that God is judge or not.

Gethin confidently holds that the empires that control us will fall – just as Jesus noted Satan falling from Heaven and the writer of Revelation proclaiming that Babylon had fallen. How might you help the empires that control us to fall?

- the first step is to see the empires that surround us. Multi national companies, the economic norms of our society, the violence of war.
- Once we've done that we can make some blows against it – remember Fair Trade was once seen as quirky yet it changed the world!

- The book was written by the victors after the event; so maybe the writers wanted to justify their actions and used God to back them up. (After all God loved the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites and the others as much as God loved the Jews).
- Passages like this have given encouragement to colonisers ever since and are still used to justify some policies of the State of Israel.

Gethin noted that Welsh people who had experienced oppression were instrumental in oppressing First Nations people in Canada. Why might oppressed folk become oppressors?

- Oppressed people can become instrumental in their own oppression; they take on the values of empire and see them as normal.
- To speak English might have been seen as progress rather than “backward” native languages.
- Sometimes the first step of liberation is to see our own bonds.

### Babylon has Fallen!

Have you ever read, or attempted to read, Revelation? What did you make of it?

- people will probably have found it confusing.
- The visions of the seven churches are quite easy to understand but the rest is in a style we find difficult to access and the disturbing language and images – sometimes sexist – are ones we find hard to access.
- It might be worth asking folk if they’d appreciate a study like this on Revelation bringing out its radical ideas. (and let Andy Braunston know if they’d like something like that)

### What You Will Need...

*The Notes* are in booklet form and large print. You might want to print them for people or to email them for them to either print themselves or read on a device during the sessions.

*Music* Each session starts with a hymn. The tunes should be well known and able to be downloaded online. Please email via [Andy.Braunston@urc.org.uk](mailto:Andy.Braunston@urc.org.uk) if you’d like some help finding music to sing along to. People like to sing and it’s a good way to start each session.

*To Keep Your Wits About You!* The task of the leader is to facilitate the learning so know who you can ask to read a Biblical passage, the information box or the reflection box. It’s good to have other voices but remember not everyone is comfortable reading in a small group.

Be prepared to gently encourage the quiet and quieten the more bubbly ones. “Thank you, has anyone else got a perspective on this, how about you Mabel?” is a good way to move a discussion on. Be aware of people are being too talkative and who isn’t speaking enough.

Glance through the notes on each set of questions, below, in case folk get stuck! Your role isn’t to answer (these are questions for discussion not to pass a quiz!) but to get conversation going.

*Refreshments* Someone, not necessarily you (!) should sort out refreshments and the setting and clearing up. I suggest people grab a coffee and biscuit as they come in and then get started. That might be easier than breaking and gathering everyone back again!

## The Discussion Questions

In black I reproduce the discussion questions. Then in red some ideas to get them going if they get stuck!

### Session 1

#### Standing up to the 'all powerful' presence of Empire

What are the empires that rule our world today?

- multinational companies like Google, Apple, Amazon – often have more money than many countries, selective on how and where they pay tax, often have poor employment practices, very hard to exist without them.
- Countries like America, China and Russia who, in different ways, try to impose their values and, in some cases, seek more land. Their might is hard to resist.
- the empire of wealth. At one point Christians, along with Jews and Muslims, argued against the lending of money with interest seeing it as sinful. The financial problems of the medieval Church soon changed that theology. Money dominates us and we think it's normal; some have too much, many have almost none.

What is good and bad about those empires?

- for those who with the financial resources we have unimaginable, to our forebears, wealth and resources. They can be efficient and effective. They can, however, be ruthless. We see the vile nature of Russian imperialism played out in their invasion of Ukraine and Chinese imperialism with threats to Taiwan and the occupation of Tibet; we're less likely to see the imperial games of America in the

Latin. Might there be similar reasons for the English speaking world to set it to exquisite, yet rather inaccessible, tunes?

- The English choral tradition – often replicated in Scottish Cathedrals – is beautiful. It's very Radio Three. Yet the beauty of the tunes does, I think, take away from the power of the words. They make it safe. But the Church has been making Mary safe for over 2,000 years.

What do you make of Gethin's (and Mary's!) premise that for the hungry to be filled with good things, the rich will have to be sent away empty handed?

One's answer might depend on whether one thinks one is rich or not. It's great for other people to pay more tax after all...

#### Empire is Violent

Many nations are now finding a form of liberation in recovering and reviving their native languages – we see this in Wales and in Scotland where governments have promoted the learning of Welsh and Gaelic in school. In Scotland it's possible to study at the University of the Highlands and Islands through the medium of Gaelic. Why do empires want to impose one language on their subject peoples?

- In part it's convenient but it's also about control. To learn a language is to also learn how another culture thinks, understands and ideologises the world. To allow native languages to flourish is to encourage diversity not just in tongue but in ideology. Empires find that dangerous as empires are fragile things for all their might.

Why might the writers of Deuteronomy have commanded genocide? What consequences have passages like this had?

## Session 4

### The Magnificat can Undermine Empire

How might you find ways to live more in harmony with the created order of things rather than the imposed order of things we often think is normal?

- no mow May is one example of letting some wildness in our gardens to benefit insects.
- not building on flood plains might be another!
- releasing beavers back into the wild to counter floods – and planting more trees might be others.

Does the pairing of Fred Kaan's hymn about the Magnificat with the tune used for the Red Flag help reflect the cadences that Gethin sees in Mary's hymn? (why, why not?)

- The tune might annoy people with its association with socialism – though others might be annoyed it was taken from a German Christmas carol by the socialists!
- The tune generally has a radical feel; one that fits the sentiments of both Fred Kaan's hymn and that of the Magnificat but we're not used to thinking of Mary's song – we don't use it liturgically much in the URC as we don't have a pattern of evening prayer in church like Anglicans and Catholics do - and we are often made uncomfortable by its words.
- Maybe it would be good to explore those words and what people think of them!

It is said that in Latin and South America in the 80s repressive governments banned the singing of the Magnificat unless it was sung in

the same way as we're an ally of them but we'd be unable to pursue any meaningful policy the Americans disapproved of.

Peter says we can subvert empires and reveal their shame and charade. Can you think of ways we might do this?

- small ways but powerful ways. It's possible, for example, to get savings accounts, and mortgages, which don't use interest but, instead, offer an expected profit, or charge a set fee.
- We can change where our institutions invest their money so we're not investing in the worst of imperial designs – like guns, alcohol, gambling and fossil fuels.
- Find alternatives to Amazon for online shopping;
- join a union!

### Standing up to Empire and the authority of men

Peter sees the discovery of the empty tomb by two women, who then were the first witnesses of the resurrection as being deeply subversive. Do you agree or disagree – why?

- In Jewish law the word of a woman was not believed unless it was corroborated by a man yet Jesus has women as his first witnesses. There's a thought that the Apostles were the witnesses of the resurrection – Paul's claim to be an apostle was that he too had seen the Risen Lord. On that, Pauline, theology, Mary Magdalene and Mary were apostles. I wonder why the Church doesn't dwell on this...of course it would need then to make women bishops as the bishops, in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions are the successors of the Apostles.

In the URC we are so used to women's ministry we forget how radical it is (when we think of the world wide Church) and how radical we were in

ordaining women long before most other churches did. In what other ways are we radical?

- We not only ordain women but don't have a hierarchical ordered ministry. Women can be moderators and Moderators of Assembly. Our ordination of Elders means that we open other forms of ministry to women and men. We were radical in being the first mainline UK church to allow the solemnization of same sex marriages and, before that, to accept lgbt ministers and members. All this undermines patriarchal imperial systems.

### **Standing up to Empire's claim that humanity is the centre of the Universe**

Is creation joyful about you? What will it miss about you when you're gone?

- One suspects Peter thinks that Creation is not joyful about us and the way we live – from fossil fuels to electric car batteries we exploit the earth. We eat too much in general and too much meat in particular. We can't avoid plastic no matter how hard we try and much of it ends up in our seas.

much of what we need to change is on the imperial level – systems of trade, production and transport rather more than on our own less exulted levels but what changes can we make to save the earth?

- much of what we already do from reusing, recycling but also reducing our consumption; it's also about using our voices and our money for better policies.

- greater divorce rights
- more women in public office and in industry.
- right to say no to sex in marriage.

Do you agree with Gethin's assertion that women rather than men are more likely to save us from the seemingly irresistible power of fossil fuelled empires?

### **A Higher Law than Empire's**

Gethin considers the missionaries that evangelised various countries were, unwittingly or not, agents of empire – what do you think?

- you might want to think about the recent law changes in Uganda giving life imprisonment for homosexuality or even execution – built on British colonial laws and an understanding of Christianity funded by American evangelicals but building on colonial ideas.

Gethin thinks, however, these imperial agents in bringing the Bible also brought the power to resist imperial policies – the empire was subverted by its own agents. How do you think the Bible is subversive?

- think of Mary's song at the start of Luke's Gospel
- think of Paul's idea that there's no distinction between men and women, slave and free etc.
- think of Jesus' radical treatment of women.

## Session 3

### Reminding Empire of Suffering

The rich don't like being reminded they are rich; just as King Charles I didn't like the radical slogan "No King but Jesus!" How might the Church speak truth to power today?

- It might want to ask why the poor have no food or enough money to pay their bills.
- It might ask why benefits can't increase at the same rate as pensions (it might need to provide the answer – pensioners vote more!)
- The Church might need to move on from simply helping food banks but to ask deep questions about why they are necessary and to condemn a world which lets them exist.
- The Church might need to use its own money in such truth telling.

The underlying implication of these studies is that whilst there is much spirituality in Christianity it's not just a spiritual faith – instead we're called to change the world. Does this make you comfortable or uncomfortable – why?

- Let folk talk, if they resist the premise of the question read them Jesus' sermon at Nazareth Synagogue in Luke 4.

### Women Undermining Empire

What changes in the rights and status of women have you seen in your lifetime?

- right to get bank accounts and financial products without signature of a man.
- right to serve in armed forces on same basis as men

How would you feel if the changes we need to make mean that those of us in the west need to have less in order for a better distribution of resources?

## Session 2

### Subverting Empire's claims to say wealth should be rewarded

What does it feel like to read the parable with Jesus as the man discarded by the master?

- disorientating? Odd as we've not heard it that way before? Makes you cross? Excites you? If they get stuck read the parable again but use Jesus' name for the last servant. See if that makes a difference.

Peter holds that the Church tweaked its doctrine and approach to be more compliant to an imperial world – why might it have done this?

- to become legally recognised at first and then to maintain its legal protections with regard to money, buildings, tax exemptions etc. Interestingly when King Charles was crowned his first oath was to maintain the rights and privileges of the Church of England. One imagines if he had declined that vow the Archbishop wouldn't have crowned him!

Do you think the Church now challenges or supports the economic systems we have?

- generally supports but food banks are a challenge as are credit unions which the churches often support. If all this is getting too much for them suggest they research the internet on the Bank of Dave in Burnley. Set up by a businessman to offer low cost loans to folk who wouldn't normally qualify and where all the profit is

ploughed back into the community. If you find the film of the story “Bank of Dave” you see how the financial establishment tried to stop him.

### Standing up to the racism of Empire

How has migration been used as a weapon in our contemporary politics?

- the current (2023) government is determined to bring immigration down and to end the passage of people over the Channel (but not open up legal routes to claim asylum as is a basic human right). Suella Braverman (Home Secretary at the time of writing) uses powerful rhetoric against migrants and is trying to persuade the courts it is lawful, and safe, to deport people to Rwanda.

What benefits might migration bring?

- In the west we have aging populations where more and more of us live longer after retirement. Our social security systems are funded by current taxation not savings made throughout our working lives. More people need to work and pay tax to pay for the social support we need as we age. Brexit has already caused labour shortages, more migration would offset this.

Some years ago an asylum charity in Manchester produced a Christmas card with the Holy Family depicted as asylum seekers – how might such an idea change some attitudes?

- Might we change our attitude to asylum seekers if we remembered Jesus, Mary and Joseph also found asylum in Egypt?

### Standing up to Empire’s claims to say what love looks like

Peter uses the term “queer” to mean “disruptive”, “not the normal or expected” and, in this way Jonathan and David’s love was certainly queer! Saul became very jealous – maybe he thought David was inveigling his way into the royal family (he ended up king after all) and maybe he wondered if David was a safe person for Jonathan, the crown prince, to love – David, after all had a murky love life. Why do religious traditions seek to control and regulate love and physical expression of that love?

- They might say that the religious texts are concerned with this but I’m interested in why those texts say this stuff. Is it fear of what can’t be controlled – women falling in love with other women rather than being under the control of men for example? Is it about a disease with minorities who go against the norm? Is it jealousy or repressed sexuality (the biggest bigots often end up coming out themselves).

Uganda has recently (2023) passed a law which includes a provision for the execution of lgbt people; politicians there have been funded by right wing religious extremists in America; both the Anglican and Catholic church there, and in other African countries, have approved these repressive measures. Why should lgbt people be Christian given how the Church so often treats them?

- Answers might include differentiating between Christ and His Church; a feeling that one’s religious needs compel one to believe even if the Church is not a safe space and, of course, many lgbt people have left the Church believing it to be oppressive.