

General Assembly Bible Study – Saturday 1 July, 2023

A Space of Grace is a Space of Transformation

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Good morning everyone. It's a great privilege for me to be asked to offer the Bible Studies for your Assembly and thank you so much for the warm welcome and hospitality.

I was invited to share some reflections from my experience as General Secretary of CTBI, but I'm also going to draw quite a bit from some recent experience in a voluntary role for my own Church, the Catholic Church.

You may be aware that Pope Francis has called the Catholic Church around the world to a rediscovery of the practice of synodality, encouraging the Church at all levels to develop structures and processes that will allow for wider input into decision-making, particularly from those who currently find themselves on the margins of the Church.

The Irish Bishops asked me to chair the committee tasked with exploring what this might mean for the Church in our context, both in terms of what the experience of synodality might offer in the life of the Church and the practicalities of how that might be organised and structured. So we don't currently have any structure like this Assembly and we're trying to build something, working as much as possible from the ground up, while also obviously keeping an eye on what's coming from the Vatican. So your prayers for the work, your words of wisdom and just generally expressions of sympathy would be most welcome.

The theme for today's Bible Study resonated so much with our hopes in the Catholic Church for this synodal process as we seek to create spaces of grace for deep listening and dialogue that will allow for the transformation of the Church. Pope Francis has rightly placed great emphasis on ecumenism as one of the pillars of the synodal Church, and the most recent document issued by the Vatican invites us to reflect on the question: How can a synodal Church fulfil its mission through renewed ecumenical commitment?

Yesterday listening to the reports here and hearing about 'deep and careful listening', about being an 'honest and hopeful Church' and a renewed ecumenical vision was really encouraging and I was struck by how much we can learn from you in this work.

We are at a very early stage in this journey where there is particular emphasis on communicating to people the invitation to get involved, addressing people's fears that opening up a dialogue will weaken our faith, and encouraging people to take responsibility for shaping the vision for the future. So we're thinking about who we need to reach, how best to reach them and what it is we want to say and offer to them when we do manage to connect?

As part of this work we did an exercise in our Steering Committee where we each had to share a Scripture passage that helps us understand and communicate this synodal process. I chose the story of Zaccheus for a number of reasons. Jesus is with a group that is travelling through Jericho, so you get that sense of the journey, being a Christian

community 'on the way'. Zaccheus is an outsider, but curious. Jesus is clear and intentional in the invitation. The hospitality is mutual. Jesus welcomes Zaccheus into the group, and then goes to Zaccheus' house. There is an exchange of roles of host and guest. Zaccheus begins in a position of vulnerability because hanging out of a tree is not exactly a dignified posture, but he is called to a position of responsibility. Zaccheus is moved to repent of his sins of greed and failures of solidarity and to seek to make amends, creating the conditions for the healing of relationships and reconciliation which is at the heart of this work.

I have found it helpful to reflect on the story of Zaccheus from two perspectives.

Firstly, I invite you to imagine yourself in the place of Zaccheus and connect to that feeling of being personally called by Christ.

For those of us in positions of leadership, sometimes we can get so caught up in the busyness of organising, structuring, leading, reporting, that we can lose ourselves in the pressures of work, particularly where resources — human and financial — are stretched to the limit.

There can be a need to recentre ourselves, to reconnect to Christ's call to us as individuals, a call that is to and for our whole selves, beyond the particular roles and responsibilities that can sometimes condition how others see us.

How does it feel to be really seen by Christ as He saw Zaccheus on that day?

The knowledge that we are seen by Christ perhaps brings both comfort and discomfort. Christ sees the sincerity of our efforts and the depth of our struggles in a way that others cannot always.

Yesterday we heard many examples of ways in which people are struggling, in this denomination, in the wider Church, in our local communities. Many are struggling to just keep going. What resonated with you from what you heard about the pressures of leadership? What might feel isolating for you, and what might help you to overcome that, to feel more included, accompanied in the work?

Christ also calls us to recognise our failures of connection, of solidarity. What might we need to let go of to strengthen our relationships? Where could we be more generous?

Something that has been a real challenge for me in our synodal process has been managing my own and others' expectations about the pace of change. On the one hand, there is this urgency to the need to adapt to a rapidly changing context in terms of needs and resources, and to put in place the processes and structures that will ensure that our values and commitments are made real through action. On the other hand, there is a need for pastoral sensitivity to the fact that change can be deeply unsettling for people, and there needs to be more to the process than a list of tasks if we are to hold people together in an authentically relational way that strengthens us as a community of believers. So I find myself at times struggling with my own impatience with those who are not ready to move to the next phase, or take up the next task, and at other times getting frustrated with those who are impatient with me because things are not moving fast enough. And of course we need these healthy tensions in a process and in a community, but there are days when my appreciation for the blessing of that tension is weaker than others.

I find that the Zaccheus story is a helpful reminder that we are all in need of God's grace, because sometimes when we are the convenors and organisers of the conversations we can leave ourselves out of the equation and focus on what we need to help others acknowledge and repent for.

Christ's invitation is demanding, it may be helpful to take a moment to reflect on where those demands might be stretching us at present.

The themes of greed and dishonesty in relationships also prompt us to think about issues of global justice, from our personal perspective, and that of the Church community.

As we think about the global justice issues coming before us at this Assembly, some of which we heard already yesterday, where might Christ be calling us to reflect, to repent, to change our behaviour, to be more generous with what we have?

For the World Council of Churches General Assembly last year the worship materials included a beautiful prayer inspired by this Scripture passage. That Assembly took the theme 'Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity' and, gathering against the backdrop of so much war and suffering around the world there was a recognition that the global Church was failing to fully live up to our calling to be Peacemakers and a recognition of the need to strengthen the Churches' witness by reconnecting with Christ and with one another.

The prayer called on the 'God who walks with us' to:

"Call us by our name, remind us that you are not indifferent to our stories. Invite us to go with you on a pilgrimage to a new world of justice, reconciliation, unity, peace and wholeness.

In response we open the doors of our homes in solidarity, we offer a place at our tables to all, and we commit ourselves to live a new life, transformed by your grace."

And now I invite you to shift your perspective to the crowd travelling with Jesus. What would it mean to truly live out that commitment 'to live a new life, transformed by grace, as a Christian community?

Who do we need to lift up our gaze to see in the midst of our busyness and that struggle to just keep going? Who may be isolated, out on a limb as we pass by? And what might they have to offer us that we could be missing out on?

Undoubtedly we could all make a long list in response to these questions. This time last year, in our synodal process in the Catholic Church, the Vatican gathered reports from every Bishops' Conference around the world reflecting on local listening in response to questions on Communion, Participation and Mission. The group of experts appointed to produce a synthesis of these reports found themselves drawn to the words of Isaiah: 'Enlarge the space of your tent'.

Now, as you can imagine, since then we've been having a lively debate about what that means: who's in charge of this tent? How do we stop people from moving the tent? But the theme that we keep coming back to is co-responsible leadership.

Initially a lot of people decided that enlarging the tent was about welcome. And it was relatively easy to be comfortable with that, saying to people 'you are welcome in *our* tent'. But then there was pushback from a number of different perspectives. Some felt that just saying to everyone that you are welcome was letting us off the hook from having the hard conversations about the cost of discipleship and the need for conversion. Others found the message of welcome patronising and alienating when it was directed at people who are already present. They said 'I don't need you to tell me I'm welcome. I need you to stop treating me like I don't belong.'

That struck a chord with me because a number of years ago I was involved in some research with the Irish churches looking at their response to migration and issues of racial and ethnic diversity. One of the main findings was that churches were often very enthusiastic in the promotion of a message of welcome — with posters saying hello in different languages, outreach activities etc. but then they seemed to get stuck there and struggle to move people from a place of welcome — 'you outsider are welcome in our space' — to one of belonging. The research indicated that one of the things that distinguished true belonging from welcome was responsibility — the extent to which people were being allowed and facilitated to take up responsibilities, to make a contribution, and to feel they have a stake and a voice in what happens in the Church, rather than being the passive recipients of the generosity of others.

As we reflect on the story of Zaccheus it seems clear that this is what Christ calls us to do, to be intentional in our invitation to people, while challenging them to take responsibility. We find that difficult at the best of times, but in the current cost-of-living crisis these are certainly not the best of times. Churches with their involvement in food banks, in warm hubs during the cold weather, and in other forms of community support are acutely conscious of how stretched people are, struggling with time poverty as well as insufficient income.

This challenge was raised in some work CTBI has undertaken in recent years looking at the role of the Church in responding to identity-based fractures in society. Participants pointed to the way in which socio-economic exclusion leaves people feeling that they don't belong, and in doing so identified a tension between the need for the Church to be at the service of society, and yet not let its role be reduced to that of a service provider. What is distinctive about the care the Church offers to people as a Christian community?

Obviously there are no easy answers to these questions, but I feel there is something important in the approach of deep and careful listening mentioned yesterday. This will surely allow for pastorally sensitive invitations that might support even those who feel they have nothing left to give to make some form of contribution.

For example, people can make a powerful contribution to social change by sharing their stories, because truth-telling creates the conditions for change. Here perhaps the Church could do more to lead by example, sharing our vulnerabilities as we navigate uncertainty, financial pressures, difficult choices, while also not failing or forgetting to share the hope that sustains us and the faith that guides us.