

Session Five—A Kaleidoscope of Meaning: Reading the Bible Today

After all the modernist criticism of the Bible in the last 150 years, from Schleiermacher to the Jesus Seminar, can the Bible still have a place in the life of the 21st century church? And even if it can survive the onslaught of modernism, surely it will wither away in the face of postmodern deconstruction and the general challenge to any kind of authority. *Prima scriptura* (Scripture first), let alone *sola scriptura* (only Scripture) must surely be a red rag to the unchurched?

Some might argue so, but we should not be surprised to see that the Bible can retain its power and authority in contemporary Western culture. We may need to learn to read it in culturally appropriate ways; we may even need to unlearn the culturally inappropriate ways in which we have been reading it; but the Bible remains just as potent for mission and discipleship today as it ever did.

In this session we will look at some ways of reading the Bible which offer the possibility of engaging authentically with people who are attuned to contemporary culture.

What does the Bible say about God?

Let us start with a simple question: what does the Bible say about God? The answer is not simple or harmonious. The Bible tells us of a warrior God (Is 63) and a peacemaker God (Le 26:6, Is 11:6); a God who never changes (Nu 23:19) and a God whose mind can be altered by argument or bribery (Ge 18:23ff); a God who is always watching his people (Is 49:15) and a God who falls asleep (Ps 44:23) or is in danger of forgetting his own words (Ge 9:16); a God who made everything good (Ge 1:31) and a God who created evil (Is 45:7); a God who creates division (Ge 11:6) and a God who wants to bring all peoples together (Is 60:1ff).

As Peter Rollins points out (2006:13), the interesting thing is not so much that all these contradictions exist but that the writers and editors of the Bible knew that they existed—and did nothing to ‘harmonise’ them. They were, apparently, quite content with this multi-faceted picture of God—and rightly so, since no one picture could possibly do justice to the fullness of the divine creator of the universe.

However, this does pose a difficulty for excessively modernist readings of scripture. If you believe that there is one absolute truth *and* that reason is capable of grasping and demonstrating that truth then having all these contradictory pictures in the Bible is surely a problem.

A postmodern perspective sees no such difficulty. Of course, there are lots of ways of seeing; they depend on the perspective of the writer and the reader. A cynic might argue that this internal lack of consistency points to the absence of any absolute truth underpinning the text. A realist will argue that the opposite is true: the text offers us a number of windows onto the divine, illuminating its unknowability in ways which enable us to grasp and apprehend something of its infinitely diverse nature. On this view scripture is like an icon—to use it properly we must not let our gaze rest upon it but must instead look *through* it to the deeper truth it reveals.

This latter way of reading the Bible is likely to be much more accessible to contemporary unchurched people than traditional approaches and it is this which we will explore further in this session.

Is there a metanarrative?

But first, is there a Biblical metanarrative; a 'grand story' which starts with Adam, climaxes with Jesus and ends with the new heaven and new earth? Many people think so. Even Brian McLaren, often identified with 'postmodern Christianity' seems to think so. His book, *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (2003), contains an exposition of the grand story in seven parts—Creation, Crisis, Calling (of Abraham & Jews), Conversation (with priests, prophets, poets & philosophers), Christ, Community (of the church) and Consummation.

But there is a problem with this scheme. For if you ask for chapter and verse for this grand story we cannot answer. The Bible is actually made up of lots of little stories; there is no grand story to be found anywhere within its pages (though passages like Psalm 78 attempt to tell part of it). Sometimes an editorial hand has attempted, with varying degrees of skill and according to conventions which may not always be ours, to stitch together some of the little stories into a bigger story. Mark's repeated use of 'and' (*kai*) to link stories is a good example—perhaps it should be translated as, "and another thing..."

The grand story is a tale constructed, not by any of the Biblical authors or redactors, but by later commentators (Christian commentators—the Jewish grand story is rather different from our own). It is their attempt to make sense of the patchwork of tales which make up what we call the Bible—and it is very useful. But it is important to remember that the grand narrative is read out of the Bible; if we then use it as we read back into the Bible we are in danger of swamping the text with our own interpretations.

Power and narrative

David Boje wrote a fascinating paper about storytelling in the Disney Corporation in which he shows that some stories (about the heroic contribution of Walt Disney etc.) are permitted and encouraged while others (such as how Webb Smith pioneered the famous Disney storyboarding technique) are prohibited. Boje points out the role of power in deciding which stories may be told and which are suppressed.

Something similar can work with the church's use of its grand stories. For instance, consider John 5:28-29:

"Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation." (NRSV)

Taken at face value this says quite clearly that those who have done good will be resurrected to life and those who haven't will be resurrected to condemnation. But we find it hard to 'hear' this reading because it appears to be in conflict with a grand story about 'justification by faith'. So those of us who accept the justification by faith grand story (which is also not to be found in the Bible in the pure form in which it is usually presented) will discount or explain away passages such as this.

Of course, those who see a 'salvation by works' metanarrative will give it great importance but they might be inclined to gloss over passages such as Romans 3:28:

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

Either way, it seems hard to read the Bible without doing damage to our preferred metanarrative or to hold to our preferred metanarrative without doing damage to the Bible. The power of our own received orthodoxy may actually be constraining our ability to read

the Bible. The unchurched, with no religious orthodoxy to guide them will spot the clashes soon enough. Will we be ready to respond?

Defences against anxiety

The modernist quest for a biblical truth which is simple, rational and accessible to all has borne much fruit. But it has also led to the invisibility of a lot of scripture. A postmodern perspective, especially if used alongside a modern one, can help restore much of the richness which has been lost.

It is also possible to see modernist approaches to biblical interpretation, whether they rely on the magisterium of the church to hold the truth or on the literalist assumptions of fundamentalism, can act as a defence against anxiety. If we accept that the Bible is the word of God and also accept that it is full of ambiguities and contradictions, can we manage to live in a world where God speaks so paradoxically? Better, surely, to resolve the paradoxes, clear up the ambiguities, and harmonise the contradictions. Then we can be comfortable in our small certainties.

A postmodern approach, on the other hand, shakes us out of our comfort zone and propels us back into the maelstrom of Biblical confusion. But it holds out the promise that through this torrent of earthquake, wind and fire, the small voice of God will be heard more clearly and more richly.

Taking the mini-narrative seriously

A postmodern reading (see, e.g. Brueggemann 1993) would read each 'little story' with equal seriousness and let any subsequent understanding emerge from the interactions between our readings of the multiplicity of little stories. Some would argue that this is actually treating the text of Scripture with the seriousness it demands. It could be claimed that approaches such as harmonisation and letting scripture interpret scripture dishonour the text in ways which would often be alien to the writers (was the author of Chronicles embarrassed at the differences with Kings? Did Matthew blanch because his version of the entry to Jerusalem was different from Mark's?). Brueggemann offers a number of reflections on reading the little stories (1993:58ff):

- A focus on the little story requires us to try to be free of prior theological assumptions. As we saw in the case of John 5:28, earlier, prior assumptions often lead to the 'lesser text' being discounted. Brueggemann argues that we should honour the lesser text, as Paul urges us to honour the lesser members of the body.
- A focus on the little story means discarding much that modern critical scholarship takes for granted. Scholars have developed a set of rationalist tools for deciding what is authentic and what is not (the Jesus Seminar is an extreme example). But the outcome of such critical work is often to provide a text which is palatable to modern sensibilities. In the process much that is most difficult, and therefore with the most potential, is lost.
- A focus on the little text requires us to try to recover an insight into the Jewish world view which underpins it. Modern systematic approaches to the text have led us to adopt Hellenistic modes of rationality which do serious justice to these Jewish ways of thought. By denying and dismissing the oddity of the text we lose valuable insights into the nature of God and creation.

The 'little texts' approach to reading the Bible has a number of implications (1993:71ff):

- These texts do not need to be explained or justified. They only need to be told as resources for the imagination.
- Such telling, without explanation or rationalisation, is easier than the more complicated reasonableness in which we are schooled.
- Such simple expositions may enable us to handle 'difficult' texts, not because they are true but simply because they are *our* texts, and must be voiced. Having voiced them, we must then be prepared to let them transform our understanding of other texts which we think we have fully grasped.
- That as we undertake this unguarded telling we move closer to the voice of the rabbis who offered reality one text at a time. We learn to break with modernist pretensions which want large, settled, coherent truths.

Multivocalic Bible Study

Another postmodern theme is that some voices are privileged, to the detriment of the whole. So when we look at a passage of scripture, when we ask the question, "What does this passage mean?" we are expecting a single, simple answer. Yet in doing so we may be in danger of suppressing some voices and exalting others.

An alternative might be to adopt a 'multivocalic' approach to Bible study, to be open to different voices and to allow the Spirit to enable meaning to emerge from the interaction of the different perspectives. Instead of seeking *the* meaning as if it were an immutable fact locked within the words of the passage, we simply seek meaning through dialogue and prayer. In some ways this approach shares a spirit with *lectio divina* (see below), in that each seeks to discern the meaning of the text as it is revealed to us today.

For example, the story of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19 is challenging, perplexing and disturbing to us. It is usually omitted from lectionaries and so is not as well known as it might otherwise be. There seem to be a number of possible 'meanings': it might be about the contrast between too much hospitality and too little; or about gender relations in ancient Israel; or the use and abuse of power; or how local events reflect wider political tensions; and so on. Instead of focusing on just one theme, multivocalic Bible study invites people to work in small groups, each choosing one possible perspective and exploring it as if it was the only way to read the text. When engaging with the passage, they will attempt to see everything through the lens of their given perspective. The groups then share their perspectives and see what emerges as the different accounts collide. (See the notes for a fuller outline of the method.)

Lectio Divina

The practice of *lectio divina*, or holy reading, goes back to Origen in the third century. Many of the monastic orders used it as an approach to the Bible. It isn't so much Bible *study* as Bible *encounter*. In around 1150 the Carthusian monk Guigo II, wrote a book entitled "The Monk's Ladder" (*Scala Claustralium*) wherein he set out the theory of the four rungs: reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*) and contemplation (*contemplatio*). Some modern writers, such as Jan Johnson, reverse the order of the final two stages, ending in prayer. *Lectio divina* can be done as a solo spiritual discipline but it is also commonly used as a group activity. This is Guigo's introductory summary of his approach:

Reading, Lesson, is busily looking on Holy Scripture with all one's will and wit. Meditation is a studious insearching with the mind to know what was before concealed through desiring proper skill. Prayer is a devout desiring of the heart to

get what is good and avoid what is evil. Contemplation is the lifting up of the heart to God tasting somewhat of the heavenly sweetness and savour. Reading seeks, meditation finds, prayer asks, contemplation feels.

In practice this will work out something like this:

- *Reading*—a passage is selected and is then read aloud; often slowly, sometimes more than once. **Lectio** is reverential listening; listening both in a spirit of silence and of awe. We are listening for the still, small voice of God that will speak to us personally; not loudly, but intimately. In **lectio** we read slowly, attentively, gently listening to hear a word or phrase that is God's word for us this day.
- *Meditating*—once we have found a word or a passage in the Scriptures that speaks to us in a personal way, we must take it in and "ruminate" on it. Through *meditatio* we allow God's word to become His word for us, a word that touches us and affects us at our deepest levels.
- *Praying*—prayer is understood both as dialogue with God, that is, as loving conversation with the One who has invited us into His embrace; and as consecration, prayer as the priestly offering to God of parts of ourselves that we have not previously believed God wants. In this **oratio**, this consecration-prayer, we allow our real selves to be touched and changed by the word of God.
- *Contemplating*—finally, we simply rest in the presence of the One who has used His word as a means of inviting us to accept His transforming embrace. No one who has ever been in love needs to be reminded that there are moments in loving relationships when words are unnecessary. It is the same in our relationship with God. Once again we practice silence, letting go of our own words; this time simply enjoying the experience of being in the presence of God. (Adapted from Dysinger, 1990)

The classical approach to *lectio divina* is perhaps best suited to individual study. In groups the following is very effective:

Listening for the Gentle Touch of Christ the Word (*The Literal Sense*)

1. *One person reads aloud (twice) the passage of scripture, as others are attentive to some segment that is especially meaningful to them.*
2. **Silence** for 1-2 minutes. Each hears and silently repeats a word or phrase that attracts.
3. Sharing aloud: [A word or phrase that has attracted each person]. A simple statement of one or a few words. *No elaboration.*

How Christ the Word speaks to ME (*The Allegorical Sense*)

4. *Second reading of same passage by another person.*
5. **Silence** for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "Where does the content of this reading touch my life today?"
6. Sharing aloud: **Briefly:** "I hear, I see..."

What Christ the Word Invites me to DO (*The Moral Sense*)

7. *Third reading by still another person.*
8. **Silence** for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "I believe that God wants me to today/this week."

9. Sharing aloud: at somewhat greater length the results of each one's reflection. [Be especially aware of what is shared by the person to your left.]

After full sharing, pray for the person to your left.

If instead of sharing with the group you prefer to pray silently, simply state this aloud and conclude your silent prayer with *Amen*.

(Dysinger 1990)

Note: although the prayer should move clockwise around the group, during the other phases it is best to allow people to speak when they are ready, in no particular order. This relieves pressure from those who find sharing difficult. The leader must discern when all who wish to have spoken and move on to the next phase.

Ignatian Approaches to the Bible

The *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius uses an approach to the Bible which is proving effective with contemporary people even when used in isolation from the disciplined approach outlined in the book.

Ignatius invites people to use their imagination to put themselves into the Bible passage they are reading. The approach is seen most graphically in the meditation on hell:

The first point will be to see with the eyes of the imagination those great fires and the souls in bodily form in the fire.

The second point is to listen to the screamings, cries, groans and blasphemies against Christ our Lord, and against all his saints.

The third point is to smell the smoke, the sulphur, the filth and the corruption of hell.

The fourth point is to taste the bitter things, such as tears, sadness and the agony of conscience.

The fifth point is to feel with the sense of touch how those fires touch and burn the souls.

(Backhouse 1989:20)

This particular example is not likely to appeal to contemporary culture (though horror film aficionados might be an exception) but the principle of holistic engagement with scripture has potential.

Another Ignatian imaginative approach is to identify as fully as possible with a character in a story. Indeed, the passage can be 'read' a number of different times with a different character singled out each time (Mary, Martha and Jesus, for instance). However, the Exercises are intended for solo silent use, usually on retreat with a retreat director or guide. Their use in groups needs some further experiment.

Bible Study without Bibles

Janet Lees is a URC minister and a speech therapist. She encourages people to do Bible study without reference to any printed texts, relying instead on the own recollections of the text (Lees 2007). In this approach the first step is for the group to construct a remembered text. Lees recommends a variety of approaches to this task:

Flip chart outline

The leader puts the key headings on a flip chart. For instance, with the story of Jesus' baptism these might be:

- John the Baptist is at work: where? Doing what?

- Jesus arrives: what happens?
- Afterwards: how does it end?

This can lead to a rich engagement with the remembered text, as the following version, written by an eight-year-old girl at a remembered Bible study, indicates:

When Jesus was baptised it was a sunny day. There were a lot of people and his mum and dad came late. Jesus was already there because he had camped there. The man that baptised him was John. I bet it was exciting and Jesus probably told one of his stories. (Lees 2007:23)

Finishing off the sentence

This approach has a version of the story written on flash cards. The sentences are presented in order and the group complete each one. For instance, the wedding at Cana might be like this:

- Jesus went to a wedding and...
- His mother said to him...
- He replied to her...
- The he...
- Afterwards the head of the household said...

Animated method

Use toys or puppets to represent the characters in the story and invite some members of the group to move them around under direction by other members. In small groups, each group might think about the activities of a different character.

Charades

The leader acts out the story, line by line (or incident by incident) and the group have to guess what happened. Usually chaotic and great fun.

Lees offers many more creative approaches, all of which can help people to remember and engage with the text of the Bible in ways which bring it to life. What she also discovered is that people bring their own experiences into the retelling so that the living message of the Bible is renewed and refreshed in their daily life.

Sensing scripture

Luther suggested that the ear is the only organ for the Christian. This might have been true in the modernist era but it is not true for 21st century Western culture. Postmodern Bible study will invite people to use all of their senses as a way of deepening their encounter with God's word. A number of groups are already experimenting with these approaches.

Contxt describes itself as "a new gathering in the Seattle area to explore spiritual formation through ancient, modern, and postmodern approaches to the ancient texts of scripture." The members of *Contxt* use a variety of playful approaches to exploring scripture. This is what one of their members has to say, both about the approach and the difficulties of adopting it:

We are trying to explore scripture in new ways at Contxt, trying to break out of the molds that may be keeping us from seeing what we need to see as we examine the story and unfolding revelation of God. We try to come up with a new (and often seemingly bizarre) activity to give us a new perspective on the text or story we are

considering. This has had the effect of making it very difficult to set aside adequate planning time, and we are looking for a more sustainable and transferable approach.

One way to increase the sustainability of Contxt and decrease the necessary planning time is to develop a repertoire of practices that we can employ with almost any text. For example, lectio divina has been used for centuries to enter the scriptures in a deeply meaningful way. By blending this and other ancient practices with modern, postmodern, and experimental practices we develop ourselves, we hope to find ways forward in the engagement of scripture and life.

At the same time, we want to continue the experimental flavor of Contxt, so we will continue to devote a portion of our planning time to developing new ways of approaching the biblical texts.

Below we look at a number of ways of engaging with the Bible. Some of them come from Contxt, others are suggestions to be tried out.

Touch scripture

One way to engage differently with the Bible is through physical play. This could be done in a number of different ways:

- Invite people to make a paper models which symbolise something essential about the different characters in the reading.
- Use Playdough to sculpt the essence of the message as you understand it.
- Draw or paint your response to the passage you have just heard.
- Make a collage by cutting and sticking pictures and words from magazines, using bits of wool, pipe cleaners, scraps of material and so on.

Rewrite scripture

- Rewrite the passage how you'd like it to have been.
- Write what is not there, the unwritten background or the bits that the writers left out. (The apocryphal gospels did this, as well as writing what they would have liked to have been there.)
- Use the 'left hand column' exercise (Ross & Kleiner 1994:246). Draw a line down the middle of a sheet of paper. On the right hand side write down the dialogue, or the words of the narrator or author. On the left hand side write down what they were thinking as they spoke or wrote. If there a number of characters, a few people could work on each character and then see how their left hand columns work out together. If just one authorial voice as in a prophecy or epistle, do it as a group exercise.

Enact scripture

- Use role play or 'improv' techniques to act out the passage you are studying. In some ways this might work better with a non-narrative passage—you have to improvise a scene which exemplifies the message of the passage.
- Use Godly Play to enter into the story and reflect on it. Godly Play was designed for children and has a regular structure which is based on patterns of worship:

Entering the playroom is the first threshold, marked by a personal greeting at the door. Preparation both individually and collectively occurs as the children gather in

a circle around the storyteller, sharing news and settling down in expectation of the day's presentation.

Next, God's word in the form of a story is presented as something to which a special kind of attention is paid by both adults and children alike—a mysterious gift rather than as narrative entertainment or platform for a teaching point. [The story is 'enacted' using models often within a prepared space, such as a sand tray to represent desert.]

Time follows for 'collective response' as the group of children and adult(s) wonder together about the many meanings and resonances for them in the presentation.

Then time is allowed for individual response and further discovery of meaning as the children each choose for themselves ways to work/play using a wide variety of art and craft materials, or the story materials themselves 'in their own way'.

Typically this personal time ends with re-forming as a group, as a community, and a 'feast' (of juice and biscuits) is shared together to mark this period. The session ends with a word and or gesture of personal blessing for each child as they both leave behind and take with them something of their experiences.

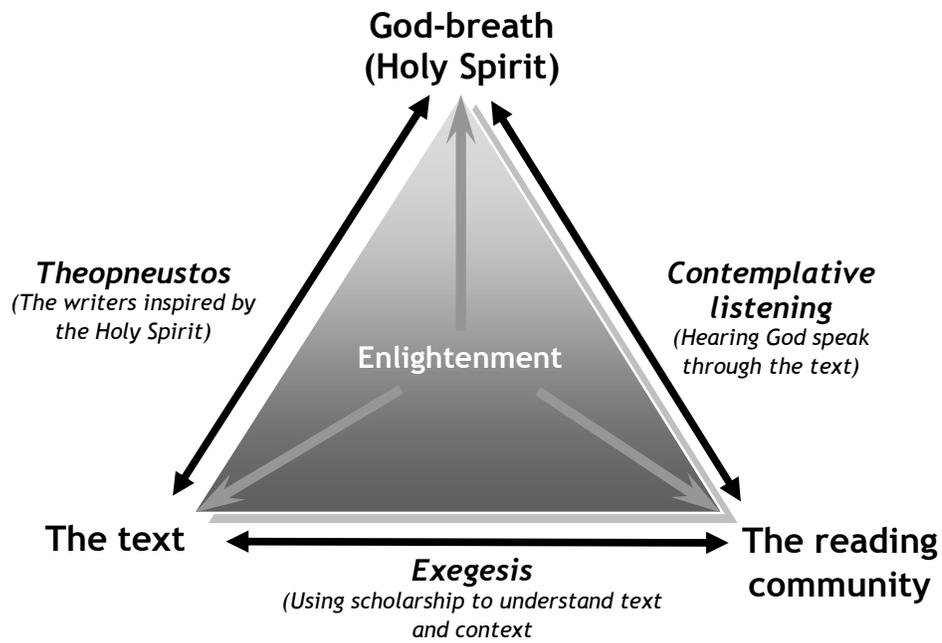
Use provocative video

YouTube is a great resource. There are lots of provocative videos which can be used to start a fresh exploration of the Bible. For instance, a search for 'Job Bible' and you'll find a number of videos which offer an often sceptical perspective. A book like Job raises many difficult questions. Using video can help people who are not very literate or who find written text hard to engage with.

Co-creative meaning making

Underpinning all these approaches to reading scripture is some sort of belief that meaning is socially constructed. In the case of the Bible it implies an approach to *theopneustos* ("God-breathed"—2Ti 3:16) which is relational and continuing. It is not that Scripture was God-breathed only when it was written or edited but that it still is a vehicle for God's breathy inspiration for us today.

On this view there are three elements: the text, the reading community, and the Holy Spirit of God himself:



Session Five Notes—A Kaleidoscope of Meaning

Sola Scriptura

Kevin Vanhoozer argues that the emergence of postmodernity offers the possibility of reinstating the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. It questions whether any single human point of view can capture universal truth.

Scripture is a polyphonic testimony to what God has done, is doing, and will do in Christ for the salvation of the world. No other story, no work of genius, communicates that. Sola scriptura means that this testimony is not only irreducible, but that Scripture should enjoy epistemic and existential primacy in the life of the church. (2003:167)

Taking the mini-narrative seriously

The Jesus Seminar was founded by the late Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan in 1985. At its inauguration Robert Funk said,

We are about to embark on a momentous enterprise. We are going to inquire simply, rigorously after the voice of Jesus, after what he really said.

In this process, we will be asking a question that borders the sacred, that even abuts blasphemy, for many in our society. As a consequence, the course we shall follow may prove hazardous. We may well provoke hostility. But we will set out, in spite of the dangers, because we are professionals and because the issue of Jesus is there to be faced, much as Mt. Everest confronts the team of climbers.

It has more than two hundred professionally trained Fellows and meets twice a year to debate technical papers that have been prepared and circulated in advance. At the close of debate on each agenda item, Fellows of the Seminar vote, using coloured beads to indicate the degree of authenticity of Jesus' words or deeds.

See http://www.westarinstitute.org/Jesus_Seminar/jesus_seminar.html for more information.

The Levite's Concubine Bible study outline

Introduction

After opening prayer, we read the passage together, noting perhaps some of the different translations available.

The leader then outlines the context of the passage. Something like this:

- Exodus—disobedience—law—disobedience—promised land—disobedience—wandering—promised land—disobedience—judges—disobedience—etc.

The aftermath of this incident also needs to be briefly outlined:

- War with Benjamin—failure—war—failure—repentance—success—marriage by capture.

Finally the Deuteronomist's homily:

- In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Jud 21:25)

Group work

The group splits into four smaller groups (I'm thinking of a group which has between 12–16 members). Each uses a filter to examine the passage: sex and gender relationships, retribution, power and hospitality. The group leader will give notes to each group to help them in their task.

Plenary

Each group will report briefly on what it has seen in the passage. General discussion will ensue.

The leader will then invite people to offer modern parallels with what they have read, either from their own lives or from what they have heard or read.

Where is God?

The groups reconvene to read the passage again, this time using God as a filter. "Where is God in this passage?" "What would God say/do if he were watching?"

Pulling it together

Coming back into plenary, the group reflects on God's role and purpose in events like the Levite's concubine as well as the modern parallels identified. This will lead naturally into intercessory prayer, which will end the study.

Lectio divina

The text of Guigo's *The Ladder of Four Rungs* can be found at:

<http://www.umilta.net/ladder.html>

If the classical approach is used in a group, there is often a fifth 'rung', action (*operatio*) in which people share their experience with others.

Ignatian approaches

A translation of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) can be found at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/ignatius/exercises.titlepage.html>

Playing scripture

The quote from Justin of Contxt can be found at <http://www.contxt.us/page/2/>

Godly Play

The quote about Godly Play comes from their website:

<http://www.godlyplay.org.uk/whatisgodlyplay.html>

Provocative video

My emerging-church (www.emerging-church.org) website has a number of examples of videos which could be used to kick off a Bible study.

Further reading

Jim Currin, *Paradox in the Gospel?*—argues that although there is a lot of paradox in the gospels and in Jesus' proclamation we tend to ignore it or downplay it. This can lead to an assumption of certainty which is offputting to those who come into contact with Christians.

An honest exploration of the paradoxes and uncertainties of Scripture may be more appropriate to today's seekers, as well as being truer to the Bible itself.

Doug Ingram, *Ecclesiastes: A Peculiarly Postmodern Piece*—looks at Ecclesiastes and argues that it has very strong resonances with a postmodern consciousness.