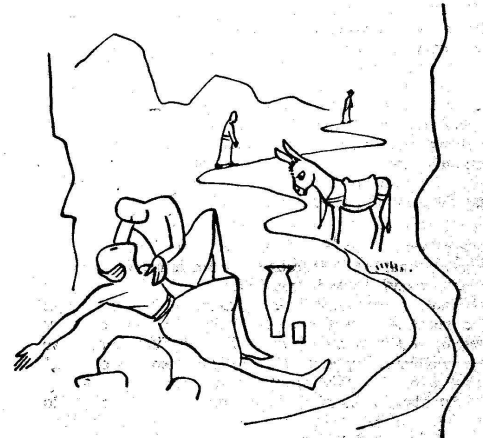


A Short Course in Liberation Theology

As first held at the GalGael Trust in Govan, Glasgow, Scotland

Theology is the study of “God” – the ground of all being. *Spirituality* is the inner life that releases the flow of the divine into our daily lives. *Religion*, at its best, is the collective celebration of spirituality. But too often it has all got stuck, hijacked, and even twisted into spiritual abuse. This blocks the opening of the way. Such theology fails us, the poor, whether we are so materially, or in spirit. But *liberation theology* seeks to liberate theology to liberate our lives.

This course is rooted in but not tied to the Christian tradition. You can take the same approach with any faith based on love. It uses the Bible not for thumping, but to seek wisdom from ancient stories for modern living. This pack is what a small group of us first used in Govan in May 2010. I compiled it for folks who couldn't come. Enjoy it, like in the Good Samaritan story (pictured, from Luke 10), with a critical head, an open heart, and an actively helping hand. It's a trip!



Contents

1. **A one-page outline of the 3-session course** (p. 2). This is also for use in self-study.
2. **For use in Session 1**, Mark's account of the Gadarene demoniac story. I use this version (as well as the version in Luke 8:26-39) because it draws out the idea that this guy, haunted by his “demons”, was self-harming (p. 3).
3. **For use in Session 2**, an icon of the raising of Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:40-56). This was painted in the Russian style and is about the importance of entering into these stories imaginatively (p. 4).
4. **For use in Session 3**, the story from John 15:1-17 of the Vine (or tree) of Life (p.5) and an image of the Ship and Tree of Life from the stones on the Isle of Iona (p.15).
5. **A short commentary on Luke's Gospel** – to help with your reading of Luke (pp.6-7). I recommend reading the Gospel of Luke. It provides a simple way in to what it's all about. For the course I give out little paperbacks in the New International Version. You can also read it online and compare translations at www.biblegateway.com.
6. **For general background on liberation theology**, a letter to Ella and the folks at the Doon of May that explains what the course is about – for self-study (pp.8-13).
7. **Epistle from the Doon of May** – at least, that's what I'm cheekily calling Ella's wonderful response, highlights from which are given here with her permission (p.14).
8. **For further study** I recommend [Introducing Liberation Theology](#) by Leonardo Boff. For gutsy “tough love” spirituality, Alice Walker's novel [The Colour Purple](#). For the theology of social activism read [Engaging the Powers](#) by Walter Wink. For interfaith spiritual exercises, [Sadhana: A Way to God](#) by Anthony de Mello. And for the inner essence of world faiths, [Mysticism](#) by F.C. Hoppold – out-of-print but get it 2nd hand.

A Short Course in Liberation Theology

with Alastair McIntosh @ GalGael, 15 Fairley St, Ibrox

Hello folks ... often at the GalGael the word “spirituality” comes up in our discussions. But what does it mean? Is it relevant to our lives? And if so, how can we make a start with exploring it?

Theology is the study of these questions. Liberation theology and the spirituality that flows from it is a way of exploring life that uses Christian stories to try and make more sense of our lives today.

You do not have to be or become a “Christian”. You can be of any religion or none. What matters is finding things that can help our lives. You decide.

The course is free and will run for 3 one-hour sessions in the Woolcraft Room. It is not an “official” part of the GalGael programme – it’s just a space in which I’ll share a few thoughts, and you can share your experience too if you want to.

1. Wednesday 12th May, 3pm: What Harms our Lives? This sharing will explore what causes people’s lives to be broken. Here’s an example of a story we will use. *“This man ... lived among the graves. Nobody could keep him tied with chains any more; many times his feet and hands had been tied, but every time he broke the chains, and smashed the irons on his feet. He was too strong for anyone to stop him! Day and night he wandered among the graves and through the hills, screaming and cutting himself with stones.”* **Does that sound familiar in Govan?**

2. Wednesday 19th May, 3pm: What Heals our Lives? This sharing will explore what can start to put our lives right. Here’s an example of a story we will use. *“He took the child's father and mother ... and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her ... "Little girl, I say to you, get up!" Immediately the girl stood up and walked around ... and he told them to give her something to eat.”* **What kind of “food” do we need to bring us fully to life?**



3. Wednesday 26th May, 3pm: What Are our Lives? This sharing will explore what it can mean to become ever more fully human in community with one another. Here’s an example of a story we will use. *“I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him or her, will bear much fruit.”* **Have you ever wondered about the Tree (or vine) of Life from Iona that’s on the GalGael T-shirts?**

The Story of the Gadarene (or Gerasene) Demoniac

Mark's Version – the earliest gospel

Mark 5:1-20 (New International Version) – For use

The Healing of a Demon-possessed Man

¹They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes.^[a] ²When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil^[b] spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. ⁴For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

⁶When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. ⁷He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" ⁸For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!"

⁹Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." ¹⁰And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

¹¹A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. ¹²The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." ¹³He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

¹⁴Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. ¹⁵When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. ¹⁶Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. ¹⁷Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

¹⁸As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. ¹⁹Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." ²⁰So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis^[c] how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

Footnotes:

- a. [Mark 5:1](#) Some manuscripts Gadarenes; other manuscripts Gergesenes
- b. [Mark 5:2](#) Greek unclean; also in verses 8 and 13
- c. [Mark 5:20](#) That is, the Ten Cities

La résurrection de la fille de Jairus



Ne crains point, crois seulement...

The Story of the Vine (or Tree) of Life

From John – the last-written gospel

John 15:1-17 (New International Version)

The Vine and the Branches

¹"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes^[a] so that it will be even more fruitful. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

⁹"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷This is my command: Love each other.



Footnotes:

- a. [John 15:2](#) The Greek for prunes also means cleans.

A Short Commentary on The Gospel According to Luke

(Below is a great little introduction that comes from the Jerusalem Bible translation (CTS) of Luke's gospel. The Jerusalem translation is usually what Roman Catholic churches use, while the New International Version (the one I've been using here) is more common amongst Protestants. What might we make of all this Catholic/Protestant stuff, or for that matter, Pagan/Christian/Islam/Hindu or whatever differences? My view is that all of our traditions, including my own one of Quakerism, have their downsides as well as their upsides. Perhaps we might listen to them less "as" the word of God, and more "for" the word of God, and celebrate whatever gives life as love made manifest. These different Bible translations reflect a rich diversity of scholarship and traditions. That is why, in teaching this course on liberation theology, I take delight in using a "Protestant" version of Luke but a "Catholic" commentary. In my work I also make a lot of use of the New Revised Standard Version which is considered the most scholarly translation, but when I want sheer poetry I go to the King James Authorised Version of 1611 which gave the English language so many of its well-loved phrases like "powers that Be" or "lilies of the field." I think there's much to be said for keeping one foot in our own traditions and the other in sacred writings of the whole world. With your heart set on love your inner sense of Truth will keep you right.)

A Cosmopolitan Writer

In the ancient world around the time of Jesus there was a high standard of culture in the Roman Empire (allied to, and in some sense built on, serious physical cruelty). Literature of all kinds was widely diffused and widely read, including short treatises on such subjects as navigation, arms manufacture, medicine, as well as romantic novels. The first few verses of Luke's gospel set it firmly among such works, for biographies of religious figures are included among these works. His Greek style, more sophisticated than Mark's rough language, puts him at home in this grander world. His vocabulary is wide and his use of the language exploits the flexibility of its syntax. Luke's delightful skill as a story-teller (little scenes with entry, dialogue and exit; parables with lively and complex characters, who do the right thing for the wrong reason, who vividly express their joys and worries) would have made his two volumes highly acceptable among such literature. He is a master at conveying a theological message through visual scenes such as the Annunciation (1:26-38) or the Journey to Emmaus (24:13-35), a talent which makes gripping reading in his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the earliest Christian communities.

Luke moves easily in this cosmopolitan world. He situates Jesus' birth and the beginning of his ministry in the context of world history by the roll-call of world rulers of the time (2:1-3; 3:1-2). He uses larger sums of money than Mark, silver instead of copper (9:3 contrasting with Mk 6:8), and imagery from the business world, banking and rates of interest, debtors, creditors, swindlers, in a way which would have been unintelligible to Mark's audience. Not surprisingly in this context Luke is eager to show Christianity to be no threat to the stability of the Roman world; accordingly he stresses that Pilate had nothing against Jesus, but three times declares him innocent (23:4, 14, 22), tries to shift the responsibility by handing Jesus over to Herod, and finally, instead of condemning him, merely hands him over to the Jews (23:25).

Another indication of Luke's cosmopolitan background is his attention to women, who played a more open and forceful part in the Greco-Roman than in the Semitic world. So Luke indicates that Jesus was accompanied and supported in his proclamation by a group of women as well as the Twelve (8:2-3). He regularly pairs women with men (Zechariah and Mary - each receives an annunciation, 1:5, 27; Simeon and Anna, 2:25, 36; the owners of the lost sheep and of the lost coin, (15:4-10), showing them as the beneficiaries of miracles no less than men (the Widow of Nain and Jairus). Mary is the first and prime example of the disciple, in that she first hears the word of God and keeps it (1:38; 8:21; 11:28).

Luke, the Critic of Worldliness

At the same time, however, Luke does not scruple to show his criticism of this richer world, pointing out the dangers of wealth (the parable of the Rich Fool, 12:16-20, or of the Rich Man and Lazarus, 16:19-31), the need to use wealth and position for good ends (14:7-11; 16:8), and insisting that salvation comes first to the poor (hireling shepherds, 2:8, compare 7:21-22), the unfortunate (the barren couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth) and the outcast (lepers, sinners, tax-collectors). While Matthew's eight Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-10) concentrate on attitudes of spirit, the poor in heart who hunger for righteousness, Luke's four Beatitudes (Lk 6:20-23) bless with stark realism those who are actually poor and hungry, and are balanced with four Woes on the rich and comfortable. It is perhaps through the consciousness of the dangers of such a lifestyle that Jesus ceaselessly proclaims the need for conversion and repentance. Acknowledgement of sin is an essential prerequisite of being called to follow Jesus. This is the case with Peter (5:8), the Woman who was a Sinner (7:36-50), Zacchaeus (19:1-10), the Good Thief (23:40-43), and the crowds at the Crucifixion (23:48). Conversion, a complete reversal of standards and way of life is demanded from beginning to end of the gospel (3:7-13; 5:32; 10:13; 24:47). Correspondingly, the welcome awaiting repentance and the joy in heaven at the conversion of a sinner is repeatedly illustrated (15:1-32).

A Gospel for the Gentiles

Consonant with his own Hellenistic, non-Jewish position, Luke shows Jesus from the first envisaging the gentiles in his mission, whose outlines are set out at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, in the great programmatic speech in the synagogue at Nazareth (4:16-30). Perhaps especially favoured are the Samaritans, those hated neighbours of the Jews, as the prime example of response to the values of the gospel in the persons of the Good Samaritan (10:29-37) and the Samaritan leper (17:11-19). It might even seem that the Jews themselves are excluded from the salvation originally promised to them. In the Acts of the Apostles there is almost uniform opposition from the Jews to the Christian message, and three times Paul is forced to turn from the Jews to the gentiles (Acts 13:46-47; 17:5-7; 28:25-28). Luke, however, leaves no doubt that the 'light to enlighten the gentiles', as Simeon says, is also 'the glory of your people Israel' (2:32), for the stories of Jesus' infancy are suffused with the atmosphere of devotion to the Law and the humble piety of the poor of Israel. Nowhere is this clearer than in the three Canticles of Zechariah, Mary and Simeon, which have been adopted into the Church's liturgy (1:46-55, 67-79; 2:29-32). They could almost form part of the Old Testament. In fact the opposition to Jesus comes overwhelmingly from the leaders of the Jews, while the ordinary people almost uniformly support him (23:10, 27).

The whole gospel is centred on Jerusalem, for there it begins and ends. The second half of the gospel consists of Jesus' resolute journey to his death at Jerusalem (9:51-19:27). Jesus' own devotion to the Holy City is shown by his laments over it at both beginning and end of his ministry there (19:41-44; 23:28-32); during his time in Jerusalem he teaches daily in the Temple (19:47). The appearances of the Risen Christ are in Jerusalem rather than Galilee (24:13-43), and after the Ascension from the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem (24:50-53), the gospel will spread from Jerusalem to all nations (Acts 1:8).

The Jesus of Luke's Gospel

Jesus himself is presented as a prophet after the model of the Old Testament prophets, though right from the beginning the elaborate contrast with his cousin John the Baptist shows that he is greater than the last and greatest of the prophets. At Nazareth he takes Elijah and Elisha as his models in his mission to the gentiles. By the people of Nain he is hailed as a prophet (7:16). The Transfiguration shows him as a prophet discussing his approaching death with the other great prophets, Moses and Elijah (9:30-31). Like all the prophets he must die in Jerusalem (13:33), and his Ascension to heaven is modelled on the ascension of Elijah in a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2:11). Like the ancient prophets Jesus is filled with the Spirit (4:1, 14, 18), thus preparing the way for the Spirit who will guide every movement of the early Church. As the mission of the Church begins with the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), so the mission of Jesus himself begins with the descent of the Spirit at his baptism (Lk 3:22). He is fully conscious both of his destiny, particularly to fulfil the scriptures, and of the destiny of his followers, for whom he is the primary role-model. Especially in the great journey up to Jerusalem they are carefully instructed in their duties, in the need for perseverance under persecution, for poverty and for prayer. At the Agony on the Mount of Olives Jesus prepares them by giving them a noble and dignified example of fervent prayer in time of trial ('Pray that you enter not into temptation', 22:40,46), for prayer is a special feature of Jesus' life, especially at its turning-points (3:21; 11:1; 22:41). This same gentle dignity characterises also the scene of the crucifixion: it is a display of conversion and repentance, where Jesus continues his mission of forgiveness until finally he consciously yields up his spirit to his Father (23:34,43,46).

Who was Luke?

The presentation, style and emphases of the Acts of the Apostles leave no doubt that both volumes stem from the same hand. Some passages in the second volume present the author as sharing in Paul's missionary journeys; he is certainly very conversant with the cities of the eastern Mediterranean and their constitutions. Paul's letter to Philemon (v. 24) mentions a certain Luke as being with him, and Colossians 4:14 describes Luke as a doctor. The name was common in the Roman world, but traditionally the two volumes are ascribed to the authorship of this Luke the doctor. In writing his gospel Luke certainly used that of Mark. For his extensive range of the teachings of Jesus, scholars are divided whether he used the same collection of the 'Sayings of Jesus' (now lost) as Matthew, or whether he drew directly on Matthew's own gospel. Such decisions could well affect the dating of the gospel, so that it is difficult to be more precise than to say that the gospel was written towards the end of the first century.

Reading Luke

In reading Luke in a comfortable world be aware of Jesus' call to conversion and to his absolute demands. At the same time wonder at his delicacy, gentleness and love for the sinner. In reading the parables especially (where Luke is composing more freely) enjoy the wit and sparkle of Luke's imaginative writing. He was writing in a world where many such works existed, but for him Jesus was the climax of history, to whom all previous history pointed, and with whom all later history began.

26 Luss Road
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20 May 2010

To Ella & Jeff Colhoun and
the folks at the *Doon of May*
South Mochrum Loch
Port William
Newton Stewart
Galloway
DG8 9RR

Background: *This letter was to Ella and others who live in the forest at Doon of May in Galloway. Thanks to her for letting me share it with others. In the course of email sharings after their Beltane festival at which I was a speaker, I had told them about our liberation theology course in Govan, and wrote this to describe what it's all about. During the Beltane event there was dancing around the maypole. I'd never done this before, and as we interwove with the ribbons to music I was profoundly struck by it as a celebration of community. Ella's mother told how in her village near Blackburn, and in others like it in England, the maypoles were mostly replaced by war memorials. The next morning I went to the Church of Scotland service in a nearby Borders village where a friend was preaching as the visiting minister. I was struck to see the war memorial at the heart of the village square. What has become of us that we have had to replace the celebration of life with memorials to death?*

Dear Ella

The Short Course in Liberation Theology

In the light of the email sharing we've had following the wonderful Doon of May Beltane event with the Maypole ceremony that you and Jeff asked me to speak at, I'm sending you the enclosed materials that I've been using with a small group of the GalGael folks as an introduction to liberation theology.

I stress that this is an informal group that I run personally and not an official GalGael programme. It's just that people sometimes ask me what it is that fires me up, and as liberation theology is central to that I'm up for sharing it on request but not by pushing.

It is also a very small group – just three of us last week and four yesterday, but with others who can't make the timing asking to be kept posted in the background, which brings it up to about seven, and you make it eight. So far it's Tam, Keith, Mick and myself, and in the background Gehan, Alison and Issy.

In writing you this letter I want to set out what you'll be missing by not being at the gatherings, and therefore, how you might use the core material on the A4 single sheet enclosed in self study and, if you want, in discussion at the Doon. And can I ask: would you be OK if I share this letter with others who can't make the meetings ... either just as it is, or rendered anonymous? I'd like also to use it to fill them in more on what they've missed in our discussions. Please drop me an email on that point.

As you know, I draw from many different spiritual traditions from Hinduism to neopaganism. So long as they are grounded in the meanings of love, I see the differences as only being outer and they offer both complementary and diverse insights. Right now, for example, I'm studying ancient Chinese Taoist philosophy in the Wilhelm/Jung translation of 'The Secret of the Golden Flower'. It opens with the words, "Master Lü-tsu said, That which exists through itself is called the Way (Tao). Tao has neither name nor shape. It is the one essence, the one primal spirit. Essence and life cannot be seen. They are contained in the light of heaven.... Today I will be your guide and will reveal to you the secret of the Golden Flower of the great One."

To me, that speaks to the same underlying reality of life as does the fantastic opening chapter of St John's gospel in the Bible. Some Christians would get upset at this suggestion, but I would ask them to consider that they perhaps make the light of Christ, and the Holy Spirit, too small; in the same way as I'd say to a Taoist who might get upset that perhaps are forgetting that "the Tao that can be spoken" – i.e. tied down into concepts and dogmas – "is not the true Tao."

As well as drawing from other traditions like this as is fitting to an era when we live in "one world" (in the John Martyn sense of that), I think it's also fitting to be rooted fast in our own traditions. My feeling is that it is not for nothing that a humble nature-based and community-rich form of Christianity was accepted so profoundly in the Celtic lands that our Pictish menhirs will show the clan totems on one side and the Cross on the other. These things are different faces of the same underlying expression of life. What we need to understand today is what has happened to our various traditions. Why and how they have been lost or perverted, and how they can be called back.. It's like Big Andy said at the Halloween celebration we had at your place when I asked him how he can still be a Catholic in the light of the depth of the child sexual abuse that's been going on, and he replied, "That was the Devil's work, and if we abandon the church now we complete it for him."

I've quoted that statement several times since then – including in Ireland recently when speaking at the Military Academy (on nonviolence) and at the education faculty in the university at Maynooth. Some people found it very challenging and you could feel a gasp go through the room. Such is what comes out of the hearth of the fire that's kept at the likes of the Doon and GalGael. And I cite that story because it is the essence of what liberation theology is all about.

Theology is the study of "God" or whatever we want to call the deep grounding of life, and so, it is about opening the doors of spirituality. As such, it has to be study (or reflection) and action, both together. You act and see what happens in reflection, and that works on you and others in ways that shape future action and reflection.

Liberation theology developed in Latin America in the late 1960s out of the recognition that the church of the poor had been colonised and distorted by the rich and powerful. Simple as that. As Leonardo Boff, a famous liberation theologian who was silenced by the Vatican because he was too full on in speaking truth as it is said that liberation theology is "theology with the people ... theology from the people." The "poor" in question are not just the materially poor, but above all, "the poor in spirit", and so it's all who recognise that there must be more to us than just egos on legs and that we need to act in going beyond our egotism. The right-on Latin American bishops at Puebla in Mexico in 1979 recognised liberation theology as the "clear and prophetic option expressing preference for, and solidarity with, the poor." This is "God's preferential option for the poor." As Boff puts it, "They are preferred by God and by Christ not because they are good, but because they are poor and wronged. God does not will the poverty they suffer."

In speaking this simple truth liberation theology is therefore the liberation of theology itself. Theology needs to be liberated because it has been colonised and dragged down by selfish interests. The liberation theologians are very clear on this. What they are saying is not a new fangled theology. It is a call to restore what has become degraded, corrupted or been lost. It is for our liberation, our setting free of the spirit of life abundant.

Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru says it is at three levels: 1) "Liberation from social situations of oppression and marginalisation that force many (and indeed all in one or another way) to live in conditions contrary to God's will for their life," 2) "Personal transformation by which we live with profound inner freedom in the face of every kind of servitude," and 3), Liberation

from “the deepest root of all servitude” – from that which is “the breaking of friendship with God and with other human beings”. This latter is what has traditionally called “sin”. What I like about Gutiérrez’s definition is that it is not about “badness” in a narrow sense, but about losing something because the gain you think you’re making is a false gain. Gutiérrez therefore sees this as the level of liberation which “gets to the very source of social injustice and other forms of human oppression and reconciles us with God and our fellow human beings.”

In other words, the work of outer liberation – that of social and political circumstances, including land reform which is a huge concern of Latin American theologians like for us in Scotland too – cannot be separated from the inner work of who we are. That inner work is the work and realm of “faith”. Faith must not be confused, as it so often is, with blind dogmatic belief. As Boff says, “to see in the light of faith” is to see “in the light of the word of God” – and “word” here, like the Hindu “Om” or “Aum”, has a meaning far beyond mere words, but is to do with the resonant poetic structure of reality.

To see in this way “forgiveness” becomes so central. It is about being able to shake off our baggage and make a fresh start no matter what we might have done or even, what we still do. It is about allowing others a fresh start by “forgiving” or “giving for” them, and is therefore the fulcrum of building community in membership with one another. In that interview with Martin Prechtel that I sent you he talks about doing and making acts of beauty to spiritually repay the debt for what we take from the Earth. This is the “giving for” in question. This sheds light on that old petition in its Scottish form, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” ... because we all screw one another up.

OK ... that long preamble is all the background to what liberation theology is, or a little bit of it. What I want to do now for you and others like Jeff and Andy who aren’t able to come to the GalGael sessions we’ve been having is to summarise how we’ve been going about exploring all this.

Liberation theology does a lot of what’s called “contextual theology”. This means re-setting ancient spiritual stories taken from the Bible in modern context. If you refer to the single page A4 sheet on which I outlined this short course, you’ll see that for each of the three Wednesday sessions I’m running I’m taking a story and then we’re asking, in our discussion, “what can we see in this that speaks to us today?” In other words, we don’t try and read these texts literally. We read them imaginatively, like interpreting the fragments of a dream, or trying to get our heads around a poem that we only partly understand and, worse still, that we suspect may be partly rubbish!

I think that latter point about the rubbish is terribly important if we today are to be able even to begin to take seriously some of these ancient spiritual texts such as what’s in the Bible. There is some very brutal stuff there that’s supposedly done in the name of God. It earns God a bad reputation. Liberation theology teaches that we must understand what’s in the Bible as an historical unfolding of a people’s spiritual awareness. So, it starts off with the tribal patriarchal war God song and dance, but it progressively evolves to the point where, for example, Jesus identifies himself with the femininity of wisdom (Sophia) in Luke 7:35, and elsewhere the bottom line is that “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

In the wee paperback copy of Luke’s gospel that I’m sending you, you’ll see time and time again that old man Jesus is saying that the old way has passed, and the new has come, so you don’t try to repair an old garment with a patch torn from a new one. I’m using Luke because he’s a great storyteller and I think the metaphor of things like Jesus’ birth are just great. What do I mean by “metaphor”? Well, I don’t take this stuff literally. It may or may not be literally true, but that is only the small question. The big question is *what does it mean* as poetry which is spiritual language reaching to our hearts and exploding deep inside like an armour-

piercing missile. In this we have to pick and choose what is meaningful to us, not being afraid to reject some parts like we don't have to chew the pips in the apple, but at the same time, allowing such parts to challenge us because you never know whether they're just reflecting some antiquated mindset, or might be a bit that somebody's added in later (the scholars reckon there's plenty of that), or whether they might be teaching us an insight we'd rather not take on board because it's too challenging.

Not only is Luke a great storyteller, but he's also the best of the gospels for drawing out Jesus' rich relationship with women. You have to remember that he was living in a society that was so patriarchal that even to be touched by a woman outside of the family would have rendered him ritually impure in the eyes of his critics. Yet he allowed such things in a way that the churches since then have too often tried to close the door, and not allow them. To me, this re-shapes a figure such as Mary – especially when you read what her politics were in the “Magnificat” of Luke 1. These are stories of women who Jesus saw as having status. Indeed, they were the ones who supported him financially. This was liberation for all people, and not just for the “good and the great” amongst males. That's the sort of thing that, for me, makes reading this a bit of a tripout.

Let me now fill out on what's on that A4 sheet headed “A Short Course in Liberation Theology”.

Session 1: What Harms our Lives?

The story here is of the Gadarene (or Gerasene in this translation) demoniac. It's at Luke 8:26-39 and I also use the version in Mark 5:1-20 because it makes clear that the “demoniac” - the “demon” possessed man – was bound in chains not because he was a danger to others, but because he was self-harming, cutting himself with stones. The relevance to many folks in a place like Govan quickly becomes clear! What's not so clear without a bit of theological reflection is what's encoded in the story that suggests to us why he was half dead – as depicted by his living in the graveyard amongst the tombs. Jesus elsewhere uses the expression “whitened sepulchres” to describe the hypocritical rich and powerful. In other words, they're like tombs painted white to conceal the dark reality of their inner deadness. So, this man being forced in his madness to live amongst the tombs can be seen as a victim of power. And this is confirmed by two further points. At the time Israel was colonised by the Romans. The name of the “demon” is “Legion ... because we are many”. And they get cast out into a herd of pigs. Who was it that kept pigs in that society? Not the Jews. They didn't eat pork. The pigs were probably being kept to feed the oppressing Roman legions, so “Legion” was sent back from whence he came.

You see what's going on here? You read the story imaginatively like this, and it opens up whole new vistas of symbolic meaning, and then you set that in the context of our lives today – a place like Govan, or rural poverty under landed power – and you start to get a new take on what can be meant by “demons” and “possession”, and therefore the “exorcism” that can be part of liberation. This is liberation theology. And notice, by the way, how the people afterwards were afraid, and told Jesus to clear off. They were happy enough with the madness of the demoniac, but the prospect of his sanity and the power to cut through what has blinded us to deeper realities ... that was too much for them. There's so much to be learned from that, and about the kind of courage we need if we're to engage with the work of deep cultural and personal healing.

Session 2: What Heals our Lives

Here we seek to absorb the meanings that can be discerned in the passage that follows on immediately from the demoniac story, Luke 8:40-56. There are two women: the mature one, who has bled for 12 years, and the 12 year old Jairus' daughter, who Jesus was called to heal but she's died while waiting for him to come. The age 12 is a pivotal age in a young woman's sexual development, so the fact that the older woman had been bleeding for that time can be read as a hint to us that her bleeding is sexual. What did blood mean in that culture? It meant life, and so her life has been seeping away. As such, when she touches Jesus with intent amidst the jostling crowd he stops, and says he felt the power going out of him.

Many women who have been sexually violated will describe a sense of "emptiness" and theft of soul. The power that goes out from Jesus as a God-centred person restores life. That is the "faith" – the ability to see by the light of God – that heals the woman.

Old man Jesus (as I like to call him – he was only in his early 30's but it was 2,000 years ago) then moves on to Jairus's house where the daughter is dead. What does he do? He calls back her soul. And then what does he tell her parents: to feed her. And so the question for us, whether we are women or men, is "What kind of food do we need to call back and deepen the soul?"

Notice, again, how this is an imaginative interpretation. There is nothing in the text that says explicitly that the woman's bleeding was gynaecological or that sexual violence may have been the cause. The literal facts of the story are not our concern here. What matters are the images and insights that it can open up in the mind. Fr Gerry Hughes, the Edinburgh-based Jesuit spiritual teacher urges reading these stories and then imagining them in our minds, or as a guided visualisation with one another. Let yourself enter into the picture and hear the sounds, smell the smells, be touched by those all around. This is doing liberation theology.

In the pack of study resources I'm sending you there's an icon, painted in the Russian style by Vèrene's mother, Joelle Nicolas, of the raising of Jairus' daughter. The words in French say at the top, "The resurrection of Jairus's daughter" and at the bottom, "Don't fear – just have faith."

Session 3: What Are our Lives

This is the session we've got scheduled for next Wednesday so what I say here is not enriched by the sharing with the GalGael group. But you'll see on the A4 sheet a sketch from the Good News Bible of the feeding of the five thousand, and I've quoted from the Vine of Life which is in John 15:1-17 which is in full on a separate sheet.

This is the heart of what liberation theology is all about – the mystical – the spirituality of profound interconnection, hence why this passage from John ends with the words, to use The Beatle's translation, "All you need is love."

I'm a bit wary of John's gospel because although it is the most mystical and theological one, it was written last, at a time when the early church was getting its dogmas together and I think that these are projected back onto Jesus. At the same time, they're good dogmas depending on how you see and use them. For example, all the focus on Christ and the Father is profoundly problematic in terms of its gendering. You have to remember that in Genesis the idea is that both female and male are the image of God, in Job God has a womb

metaphorically speaking, elsewhere God's wisdom is personified as a woman (Sophia), and Paul says that in Christ there is neither male nor female. The trouble is, most of the time all that gets overlooked and so we end up, along with the Spirit being symbolised as a dove, with this notion of "two blokes and a pigeon"!

I'm also wary of the way that John gets used by literal fundamentalists to push the idea that only their version of churchianity does the trick. They will demand, "Do you believe that Christ is the way, the truth and the life?" as if that's the one and only way to those things, thereby ruling out all other spiritual paths. My view is that they make their Christ too small. They fail to consider that the same divine Spirit we see in Jesus as Christ is also present in Buddha nature, indeed, in wild nature, and in so many ways.

This misunderstanding comes about partly through bigotry and the power it gives people over others, but also due to a lack of mystical insight and experience. The true mystic knows that all is one as life in love, but what Pink Floyd in *The Final Cut* called "the cold and religious" don't get it, so they try to push on us inadequate forms of religion that oppress, and exclude others. To me, this is the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Pharisees. It is the very narrowness that, as you'll see so often in Luke and the other gospels, he was trying to get them away from.

Also in Session 3 we'll be looking at the story of the feeding of the five thousand (Luke 9:10-17). To me, what's interesting here is that Jesus was always concerned to see that the people had been fed physically, and not just spiritually. He understood the importance of food in making community. In the Last Supper story he also understood food as part of the mystical interconnection of all things. What happened in the feeding of the 5,000? Was it an act of magic, like a literal fundamentalist reading would make out? Or do we miss the point if we think of it as magic? Is it more a teaching about the power of love when it comes to sharing? The little boy with his loaves and fishes shared, and so everybody else was shamed (or inspired) into following suit? You see what has most meaning for you. For me, I note with interest that he divided them up into groups of about 50 people. That's a good number as a base to start building community from – not so few that it can't absorb and temper the odd person who might be loud and pushy; not so many that the quieter and more gentle folks get lost. But just right for cultivating meaningful networks of human relations.

I could say a lot more about all that's here but I've already gone on much longer than I'd intended. So, just suck and see, and if what I've sent you doesn't feed the fire in the heart, at least use it to feed the one in the hearth.

Wildly Be,

Alastair McIntosh

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Reflection: "Sometimes when I walk the streets of Glasgow I see old women passing by, bowed down with shopping bags, and I ask myself: 'What force made this woman what she is? What is her history?' It is the holiness of the person we have lost, the holiness of life itself, the inexplicable mystery and wonder of it, its strangeness, its tenderness." - Iain Crichton Smith, [*Real People in a Real Place*](#).

Epistle from the Doon of May - Emailed by Ella 26 May 2010

Here is Ella's response to my letter above. She texted it for sharing in our final group session held later that day and is happy for me to post highlights here. I reckon it ranks as an epistle! Andy McCarron from the Doon of May was also one of the 9 people plus 2 dogs who turned up for our last session. The people got on great but the dogs had a snarl-up - which just shows how rabidly sectarian they remain. In discussing whether religion is "the opium of the people" Andy said, "Round here opium's the opium of the people!" Folks described these 3 sessions as "a revelation" ... plus plenty laughs which cuts the heavy stuff. We'll hold more later this year.

Hello again, I have been reading away between business and bouncy children and I must say the bible is slow goin 4 me. I hope that this can make sense ... cos its still fragmented in my mind. Hoping that I can get some input to u b4 your group discussion tomorrow. ...

There's so much to take in, plus its so old and I think a lot is lost in translation. So much is obviously outdated beyond relevance or understanding for us today.... This for me is where faith comes in.... Reading the gospel u sent me I find that jesus really speaks a language I understand.... he points out what the supposedly wise don't want to see, or makes em feel pretty stupid for not gettin wot even the uneducated peasants can grasp. I like this quote in luke 10:21: "for u hav hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children". Children see so much more clearly what the adult world complicates....

As I mentioned I am not more familiar with christianity than other religions. I went to a c of e primary school and hated having it rammed down my throat in assembly etc but didn't differentiate between that and being forced to line up and wait for no apparent reason. Its only well after school and once I'd really developed spiritually and had many profound insights, revelations or whatever u would call em. I became, purely of my own choice (CHOICE being a big catalyst of transformation. Or turning point) very spiritual with a deep rooted conscience that has governed my life since. Then on actually reading christian scripture I find it speaks of what I already know. Of what has been inside me since childhood. What no one needed to tell me only I needed to pay heed....

With regards to the story of the self harming man, yes, I do see also the relevance today. It reminds me of so much. The very society we live in is still based on protecting us from ourselves or is it something else protecting themselves from us in our full power and awareness: more like it! So this to me is where this stuff is relevant in healing our lives today. Its interesting but very out of date but the very fact that its still so relevant says a lot. No wonder jesus was so pissed off. Most of us still haven't got it yet and jus like in the gospel its especially the ones who are sure that THEY have!

The girl who is resurrected is an interesting one and my immediate answer to your question on what to feed her is the food of love. However I suspect there may be deeper symbolism in the story.... I anticipate that this may stretch into more than a small discussion group as it ricochets out sparking off fires in many a heart....

Re women and wisdom or the female aspect of god ... I found a good quote luke 7:35 "wisdom is proved right by all her children." Female wisdom is somewhat neglected in this world and even women who r powerful become so by behaving like men. True feminism is being empowered as a female and comfortable in being. If female wisdom were heeded we would not war so much in this world. (I'm being reminded of Lisistrata now). Men have their strengths and qualities also and we women must heed these thus creating balance and harmony, yin and yang. So I liked the use of the feminine in relation to wisdom there....

Also I found another lovely bit re the kingdom of heaven - luke 13:21: "it is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough." Well what does the yeast do to bread? Isn't that a nice way of describing heaven. U could say its something that makes u feel "swell"!

Sent from my BlackBerry® wireless device

