

# texts of **land, sea** and **hope**



South West Ministry  
Training Course

Louise J.  
Lawrence

**discerning the word in your place**



Our day-to-day lives all happen somewhere, *some place*. The 'Texts of Land, Sea and Hope' project, a three year venture sponsored by the South West Ministry Training Course, aims to help diverse Christian groups think about their relationships to particular 'places' and read selected biblical texts from these perspectives. The incarnation conceives of the divine 'moving into the neighbourhood' (as a recent popular translation of John 1:14 puts it) and in so doing invites Christians to discover the word in their own place.

A 'place' is somewhere involving shared histories, shared narratives and embodied interaction. Recent theology has taken 'place' and 'place-making' as a priority for reflection not least because people are increasingly 'dislocated' in the Western industrialised world and that Christians are called to embody the Kingdom of God, *here* on earth.

In researching this project I have had the privilege to work with remarkable people in a variety of places across the South West region. From craftspeople and artists in a Cornish fishing village to churches in inner city re-development areas, from deaf communities interpreting the bible in sign language to inhabitants of a Dartmoor rural village, from an intentional Christian community to clergy from all denominations. All have generously and

openly shared experiences and stories with me in response to biblical narratives in the 'contextual bible study' process.

Groups have opted either to cover the place-related contextual bible studies over four separate sessions or alternatively a single workshop day. Centred on four narratives drawn from the Gospel of Luke themes covered are as follows:

- (a) *Home and Journeying* (Luke 15): What are our different stories, memories and representations of place?
- (b) *Those Out of Place* (Luke 2:41-52): Who are we and who do we want to be? How do we map our place?
- (c) *Sustainability* (Luke 8:22-39): Is our place's life sustainable? What action can we take?
- (d) *The Call to be Displaced* (Luke 9:46-52): How can we work towards a vision for the future of this place?

Rowan Williams, writing at the turn of the millennium, urged Christians to concern themselves 'as best as they can in those enterprises in their culture that seek to create or recover a sense of shared discourse and common purpose in human society'. 'Texts of Land, Sea and Hope' which initiates reflection by Christian communities on local culture, context and place seems one particularly promising response to this plea.

If you would like to know more about the project, please visit the links below:

<http://www.swmtc.org.uk/research.html>

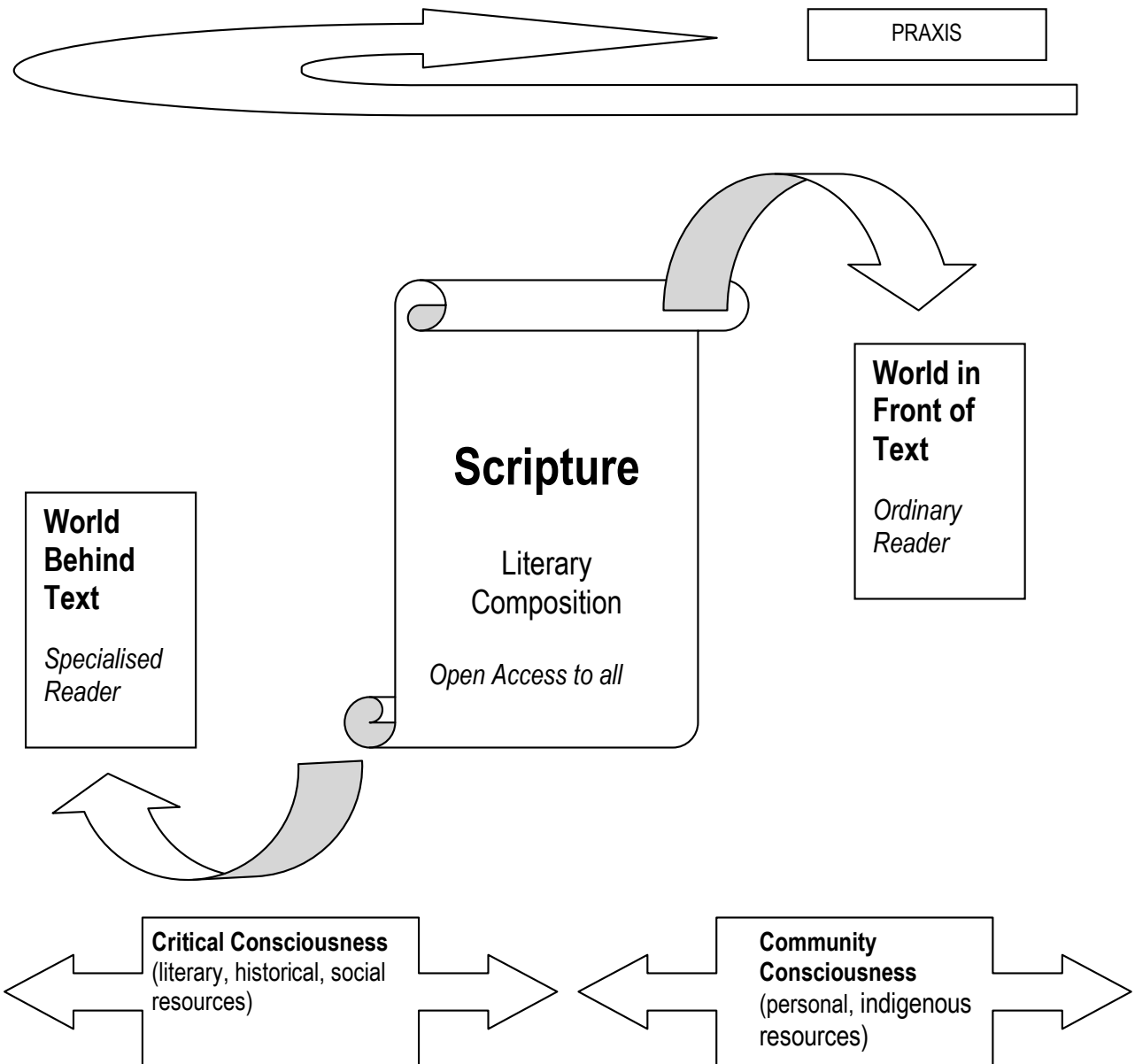
<http://www.huss.ex.ac.uk/theology/research/tlsh.htm>

Alternatively please contact me direct on

[L.J.Lawrence@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:L.J.Lawrence@exeter.ac.uk)

## Contextual Bible Study

Contexts do not themselves speak.  
What we have to do is to discern God in the context  
—Tim Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment*



## Story 1: Home and Journeying

Activity: Experience, Story: ABC of Place

Share together your diverse experiences of place. Spell out the name of your place (e.g. DREWSTEIGNTON) and for each letter think up all aspects of the place that you value these can be animal, mineral, vegetable or tradition, story, history etc.

There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later, the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'

Then he became very angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes you kill the fatted calf for him!'

Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'

### Questions for Consideration

- (a) What immediately jumps off the page at you? This can be anything from an observation to a question.

- (b) How do home and journeying feature in this story? Do any connections occur to you with life in your place?
- (c) What parts do property and wealth represent in this story? Do they find any resonance in your context?

## Story 2: Those 'Out of Place'

### Activity: What is Our Communal Identity? Mapping

Get a number of copies of maps of your place (anything from ordinance survey maps to tourist maps will be fine). Maps are themselves tools of power, some people's stories are represented other people's are not. In one colour pen make every individual trace on the map the places they go on a day to day level; in a different colour make them mark places which they feel are sacred; in another colour again mark places of contest, conflict or dispute. Share and discuss the maps and markings together as a group. Another good activity is to actually collectively make a map together (this need not be to scale or even follow conventional map-making tools, you may for example make it in the shape of a being or building). The map would seek to illustrate and tell the story of communal identity.

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished; and his mother said to him,  
 "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."  
 He said to them,  
 "Why were you searching for me? Did you not you know that I must be in my Father's house?"  
 But they did not understand what he said to them.  
 Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

### Questions for Consideration

- (a) What are your first reactions to this story?
- (b) The story presents the family going to the city of Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. What rituals/celebrations/activities are celebrated in your place? Have these changed over the years, if so why?
- (c) In this story Jesus turns up in an unexpected place. Who is, or is treated, as 'out of place' in your context and who brings the unexpected?

## Story 3: Sustainability and Place

### Activity: SWOT

On a flipchart list 'strengths', 'weaknesses', 'opportunities' and 'threats' for the church and local community in your area.

One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go over to the other side of the lake." So they put out, and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. They went to him and woke him up shouting, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. He said to them, "Where is your faith?" They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, "Who then is this that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?" Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me!" For Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him, he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demons into the wilds). Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion" for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go into the abyss. Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

### Questions for Consideration

- (a) What are your first reactions to this story?

- (b) In these stories various elements are stirred up (the sea; people etc.) How do people in this place react to being stirred up? Do things/people get healed or do things/people get driven out?
- (c) Legion is often said to represent a land occupied by a foreign/colonial power (Rome). What threatens your place and land?
- (d) What action can be taken to liberate your place from the threats you have identified?

### **Story 4: The Call to be 'Displaced'**

#### **Activity: Age Game; Heroes/Heroines**

If the group is of varying ages, make the youngest people put themselves into the shoes of the elderly and consider the three priorities they think the latter would want for community change. Vice-versa let the elderly identify three priorities for change which they imagine young people would want.

As a group identify heroes and heroines of the community (these can be historical, living, fictional etc.). What was it about them, their story and their accomplishments which were so impressive for community building? What can we learn from them today?

An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them,

"Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."

John answered,

"Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us."

But Jesus said to him,

"Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you."

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said,

"Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village. As they were walking along the road, a man said to him,

"I will follow you wherever you go."

And Jesus said to him,

"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

To another he said,

"Follow me."

But he said,

"Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

But Jesus said to him,

"Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Another said,

"I will follow you, Lord; but first let me first say farewell to those at my home."

Jesus said to him,

"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

### Questions for Consideration

- (a) What are your first impressions of this narrative?
- (b) What do you make of the saying 'foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head? . . . Is it good or bad to have a strong sense of home or place?
- (c) 'Following' is a key theme in the context of this narrative. Who or what is 'followed' in your context?
- (d) What is the urgent concern for the future of your place? What demands 'hands to the plow' there?

### On Group Activities

Many of the activities reproduced in this booklet were inspired by *Common Ground*. Their website is worth consulting for more 'place-making' group tasks and ideas.

<http://www.commonground.org.uk/>

### Further Reading

#### Theology of Place

Brown, D., *God and the Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

Gorringe, T., *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

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Lawrence, L. J., 'Being Hefted: Reflections on Place, Stories and Contextual Bible Study' *Expository Times* 118 (2007) 530-535.

Lawrence, L. J., 'On Cliff's Edge: Actualizing Luke 8:22-239 in an Intentional Christian Community of the North Devon Coast' *Expository Times* 119 (2007) 111-115.

Sheldrake, P., *Spaces for the Sacred: Places, Memory and Identity* (London: SCM Press, 2001)

#### Contextual Bible Study

Dietrich, W. and U. Luz, (eds), *The Bible in A World Context: An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002)

Ekblad, B., *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005)

Patte, D. (ed), *The Global Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004)

West, G., *The Academy of the Poor: Toward a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999)