Introduction

Readings from the Road, a research project funded by a British Academy Small Research Grant, investigated the use of the Contextual Bible Study (CBS) model (as described by Gerald West and John Riches) with a group of homeless and vulnerably-housed people at a soup kitchen in South-West England. The project sessions took place during summer 2010.

The researchers sought to discover to what extent CBS was useful for drawing out homeless people’s reflections on biblical texts, and whether they might have a uniquely ‘homeless’ perspective. We were acutely aware of the problems associated with considering homeless people a discrete and well-defined group, and the limited extent to which our findings could be universalized. However, we were also confident of the theological value in affirming these particular ‘voices from the margin’ and hearing the contributions made to the provisional, ongoing bricolage of biblical interpretation.

Methodology

Each session began with refreshments. Roughly one-fifth of those who had come in for food and drink stayed on for the study sessions. Sessions began with an icebreaker activity, followed by reading the Bible passage. Participants were invited to respond to the
passage as a whole, and discussion was then facilitated by the lead researcher. All texts were
drawn from Luke’s gospel (4:1-24; 5:1-32; 7:36-50; 15:11-32) and chosen in advance by the
lead researcher. They were linked by the loose themes of justice and exclusion. Soup kitchen
volunteers were present during the sessions but did not contribute to leading discussion. The
sessions were recorded by two digital voice recorders, and subsequently transcribed. Thirteen
different people took part over the four study sessions; eleven agreed to their words being
used. In the transcripts and all work drawing on the data, including this paper, names and
identifying details have been changed.

Particular challenges arose from the transient nature of the homeless community in
the city. It was not possible to let all participants hear about the project in advance; no
participants attended all four sessions. Knowing participants may have low literacy levels, we
ensured that consent forms and Bible passages were read aloud (West et al 2007: 13). Participants
were invited to provide contact details so that they could approve session transcripts at a later
date, but not all did so.

We were mindful of Alison Peden’s experience with CBS sessions at Cornton Vale
women’s prison, since many regular soup kitchen users had served prison terms. Peden
comments that the prisoners feared having things written down during the session, that there
were complex group dynamics with emotions and tempers at high pitch, and that the
prisoners had limited attention spans (Peden 2005: 16). In Readings from the Road, most
information was therefore written down afterwards or taken from audio recordings. Although
group dynamics were generally good-natured, occasionally participants became frustrated,
especially when one person seemed to dominate proceedings. Although the Bible passages
used were relatively long, discussion sessions were kept short (30-40 minutes) and the
participants remained focused.

An emphasis of CBS elsewhere has been social change, with reading groups forming
action plans for changing their community contexts (West et al 2007: 13-17, Ukpong 2002:
18). This was difficult with Readings from the Road: the homeless population of the city is
transient, especially during the summer. They do not necessarily recognize themselves as a
discrete community, or feel rooted in the city. However, CBS methodology recognizes value
in the actual process of carrying out a CBS session, particularly with people unused to having
their opinions heard in a group situation. West et al comment, ‘The facilitator’s role is to
empower the group participants during the Bible study process to discover, acknowledge and
recognise their own identity, and the value and importance of their contributions’ (West et al
2007: 17). Several participants commented that they had enjoyed reading the Bible in a new way or for the first time. Riches notes,

‘What is striking for most people who encounter the [CBS] method for the first time is that it is a (largely) non-directive form of reading ... It enables the group members to make the language and the imagery of the text their own, before they proceed to make connections between it and their own experience. For many this is empowering: people who have lost confidence in their ability to talk about their faith discover that the stories, images and ideas of the Bible can help to illumine their concerns and experience.’ (Riches 2005: 23)

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For this reason, the accusations of solipsism or self-indulgence sometimes levelled at CBS (as noted in Lawrence 2009: 126) might be counteracted by the value of hearing marginalized voices.

In what follows, we draw out some project findings through consideration of three key themes: home and place; judgment and stigmatization; and the figure of Jesus. We then reflect on more general ideas surrounding counter-interpretation and our own feelings of conflict.

**Theme 1: Home and Place**

‘What if, to you, “home” is a place so identified with such broken memories of violence, neglect and abuse that it can never be a site of dwelling, inhabitation, safety, hospitality and belonging? What if the experience of home has left you deeply disoriented in the world?’ (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 2008: 66)

A strong theme emerging across the sessions was home and place. Discussing Jesus’ statement ‘A prophet is not accepted in his home town’, the participants considered why people find it difficult to return to where they grew up. Fiona said she preferred travelling around before settling down, then added, with reference to her partner: ‘I haven’t found somewhere but I have found someone’. This chimes with Bouma-Prediger and Walsh’s suggestion that homelessness entails lacking not only adequate accommodation, but also relationality (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 2008: 4-6): ‘home’ is wherever one is known and/or loved. Mark suggested that homeless people were disproportionately likely to have experienced abuse at home, ‘sexually, physically, mentally’. Danny spoke of a woman who is ‘never at home wherever she is’ because of the abuse she has suffered. Importantly, for many
participants, home was not a place of welcome, gratitude and hospitality. Nonetheless, Danny suggested that although he preferred ‘roaming around’, there were some advantages to staying put:

**DANNY:** ‘Maybe not in exactly the same place but in the near vicinity, you know. People get used to you, they know what you’re capable of ... It’s like before I left Scotland ... I could walk into building work, ... landscaping, tree surgeon, chef, ... mechanics, anything I wanted. Because I knew people that was involved in that. Coming into a new environment I know nobody involved in anything.’

However, he added that the widespread use of mobile phones and e-mail meant that not having a fixed address was no longer such a barrier to communication with friends and family as it used to be for homeless and vulnerably-housed people.

The metaphor of going home was also used during the session on the story of Jesus at the house of Simon the Pharisee. Discussing Simon’s lack of hospitality, Al said,

**AL:** ‘Say like for example I was like planning on going to see the kids in Sunderland. So I’ve travelled 400 miles ... But if I turned up and they thought “Oh, it’s only Dad”, and carried on with whatever they were doing, that’d be like a disappointment kind of thing ... It’s like four years since I’ve been there.’

Perhaps unsurprisingly, home was a focus in the session on the Prodigal Son story. However, Glenn suggested that if he were in the younger son’s situation, he would not have returned home until he could repay the wasted money:

**GLENN:** ‘He would have been too proud, he would have known he’d messed up ... The younger son would realise he’d screwed up and would take it upon himself to then correct his mistake, to get back on his feet and then go home, maybe with the same amount as or a little bit more money.’

Although several participants felt the younger son had been wrong to leave home, Danny suggested some people simply yearned to go and see the world, and it was the younger son’s bad luck that this had gone wrong:
DANNY: ‘Everybody knows how big the world is, yeah ... But some people’s got that roaming thing, you know. They’ve got to go and find out for themselves. So he’s just taking a chance ...’

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Things haven’t worked out for him. I’m sure if he had landed on his feet, he might have got something sorted.’

**Theme 2: Judgment and Stigmatization**

Another significant theme was judgement and stigmatization. Discussing the story of Levi the tax collector, participants identified present-day unpopular occupations as traffic wardens, health and safety officers, wheelclamper, and politicians. Nonetheless, some sympathized with those who did unpopular jobs; Tom said,

TOM: ‘I don’t think [tax collectors are] any different to anyone else except for the line of their job and maybe they need to sort of confront the people that they’re only there to do their job so that they can mingle with the other people ... They need to regain the respect of the people because they’re doing that for a reason.’

The participants knew from their own experience that certain groups of people were sometimes judged unfairly:

JAMES: ‘Homeless people. They’re unpopular with people. I used to hear comments by people. I don’t know what it is but I’ve had some cruel words, I suppose. Vindictiveness.’

TOM: ‘Yeah, we’re not here from choice, are we?’ [...] JAMES: ‘You can’t be envious of it, it’s nothing to do with that [...]’

FIONA: ‘It’s like a stigma ... And most people I’ve met, I mean, we’ve both had full-time jobs, but there’s a lot of mental illness out there. And I’ve met so many people that have been ... like upstanding citizens and they’ve just fallen. It’s not their fault, you know. And that’s what angers me. But you do get some horrible comments, don’t you. You just get, “Get a job”, “Scum”, “Drug addict” – and you just think, “You don’t know me” [...]’

TOM: ‘Try wearing my shoes for a day [...]’

FIONA: ‘Exactly ... We don’t choose to, you know, “I think I’ll just go and live in a tent for the summer” ... It can happen to anyone.’
The participants were therefore especially aware of the importance of multiple and marginal accounts of meaning.

**Theme 3: Jesus**

The person and character of Jesus received special (and sometimes surprising) focus. Fiona commented,

FIONA: ‘I get a picture that Jesus ... wants to go away sometimes and withdraw, doesn’t he, and just be on his own for a bit. Because you know, everyone is asking him and asking him and asking him. He needs his space as well, doesn’t he. That’s what I like about it, that’s what’s so human about him.’

Jesus was also figured as a fairground attraction, (James), a healer (Tom), and someone who is not bigheaded (Fiona). James suggested Jesus might have enjoyed the shock or surprise caused by his words and actions, but that ‘the other side then is a modest person, saying “Don’t tell anyone I’m the bogeyman, please keep it quiet. Maybe I want to do good work and good deeds. But also I am a bogeyman ... because I can change things”’. These accounts sometimes seem influenced by participants’ previous experiences of Bible study sessions presenting Jesus as Saviour and Redeemer. However, James’ reading points to a less mainstream interpretation. Before deciding to take part in the project, James expressed ambivalence about his suitability, saying he had never read the Bible and would not know how to go about it. His creative engagement with the text points to his ‘meeting’ Jesus as a fresh character within it, perhaps less constrained by prior assumptions about what it is legitimate to do with a biblical text. Importantly, this does not mean that such a reading is more ‘pure’ or ‘better’ than a reading which draws on existing knowledge or beliefs about Jesus, or appeals to historical contextual material. Nonetheless, it adds to the subtlety and complexity of interpretation, bringing an innovative voice to the conversation.

Consciously privileging the experience and knowledge of those whose narratives or reading sites are silenced or devalued by mainstream religious traditions is not unequivocally positive: when religious experience is understood as a fundamentally private category, it is easy enough to ‘allow’ marginalized persons their ‘experience’, since this does not need to be taken seriously as a source of public or communal
knowledge (Harrison 2007: 690; Jantzen 1996). Privileging this kind of knowledge is therefore a double-edged sword, for it allows formerly quashed or subdued voices to be heard and provides a ‘preferential option’ for the ‘epistemologically poor’ – but, *exactly in so doing*, repeats and reinforces these groups’ statuses as abjected, excluded and requiring special treatment.

For this reason and others, as researchers we are careful not to claim too much for the readings produced by our project participants. It would certainly be overstating the case to suggest that the participants’ contributions add up to a homeless quorum, and to do so would in any case risk caricaturing and pigeonholing them.

**Counter-Interpretations**

Indeed, and importantly, the readings made are not exhaustive or definitive: this is not CBS’s aim. ‘The readings do not claim to appropriate the totality of the meaning of the texts read ... In any given reading only *a certain aspect or certain aspects of a text* get appropriated’ (Ukpong 2002: 26). Nonetheless, homeless and vulnerably-housed people’s interpretations might rebut more legitimized readings. Both conscious counter-interpretations, and creative ‘cold’ readings, came out: when asked to imagine the fishermen’s feelings when told they would be fishing for people, James suggested that they might have taken Jesus literally:

JAMES: ‘Well ... when they’re fishing they’re fishing for food, aren’t they? So I mean, they could assume that, they could think this guy is a bit of a cannibal ... Like Ripley’s Believe It Or Not! You know, have you seen them in Blackpool, one of them ones. “Come and see a man who catches men, not fish!”’

When considering the story of Jesus’ temptations, some participants suggested that the temptation in our own society is to bolster the status quo, and that people without homes and steady jobs are avoiding the temptation to go along with this system:

NIALL: ‘People don’t want you to think for yourself in this world […]’
SC: ‘Who is it that’s saying you need to do all of these things and you’re going to get something in return?’
MARK: ‘Now you’re asking.’
FIONA: ‘The government […]’
DANNY: ‘It goes back further than the government, do you know.’
SC: ‘So where do you think it comes from? [...]’
FIONA: ‘Power [...]’
NIA: ‘It comes from greed, don’t it. Somebody wants to sit around while you go and work and pay them to sit around ... It’s the desire not to be equal, I think, innit. We want to be above somebody else [...]’
SC: ‘So almost here the devil is saying to Jesus ... if you do this you’re going to have more power than anybody else [...]’
NIA: ‘Yeah ... you are not going be the same as everybody else, you’re going to be above everybody else. And that’s what the system basically tells everybody ... To be above everybody else.’

In discussion of Luke 7:36-50, some participants were interested to hear the perspective that the host, Simon, had exhibited inhospitality by neglecting to provide water for Jesus’ feet. In this account, and the usual reading of the story, Simon has failed his duty to his guests. However, Michael suggested that when a guest visits, inviting them to help themselves – ‘If ... you’ve been coming round my house for a year, you know where the cupboard is, you know how to make yourself a cup of tea, I’m not going to offer you one. Same thing with the water and his feet, I’m guessing’ – demonstrates a closer friendship than standing on ceremony.

Some participants refuted Jesus’ assertion that those forgiven more will love more, suggesting

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that of more relevance would be the reason for borrowing money, and the borrower’s attitude:

AL: ‘Say if John has borrowed ten grand off you and I borrowed ... five hundred quid. We’re the same. But I was ashamed of asking you for five hundred quid because ... I thought “I can’t be asking her”, that kind of thing ... I wouldn’t ask somebody for something if it wasn’t necessary ... But he didn’t mind asking you for ten grand just to fritter on whatever ... If that person was ... forced to ask, because ... it was life or death time or whatever, then they’d feel more obliged than what he would just putting it on the horses or whatever.’

The group’s joint reading of the Prodigal Son story was also interesting. One participant suggested that the Prodigal’s family were like the family of Ozzy Osbourne, who
had appeared in a reality TV series. Danny described Osbourne as ‘a member of a rock band ...
Sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll is what he stood up for. Since, he’s probably given up on all of
that because of his mental state. He’s gone from illegals to pharmaceuticals. But he’s got two
kids ... and a wife. And they’re all living off [him]’. Another participant noted that Ozzy and
Sharon Osbourne had three children, not two, but that one daughter had chosen not to take
part in the television series. Danny suggested this daughter, Aimee, was like the runaway:

DANNY: ‘She’s the one who’s living off his bank account, whereas the other two are in the
spotlight, getting into it. He’s gone from music to television, yeah. And then, yeah, there’s a
daughter gone off with his bank card.’

Danny, Michael and Glenn developed this story, suggesting that Kelly and Jack, the two
children who took part in the TV series, were like the elder brother: Michael noted that both
had worked, although their father’s fame and wealth meant that they need not have earned
their own incomes. However, other participants suggested that, in the past, Kelly and Jack
had themselves exploited their father’s fame, and had only latterly ‘come home’.

The group’s creative retelling of the Prodigal Son story used the Osbournes as semi
fictional characters. It demonstrates their willingness to draw out the gist of a Bible story and
project it onto contemporary surroundings. Indeed, one researcher expressed surprise at the
fluency and articulacy with which the participants took up this idea. At other times,
participants drew parallels between the biblical texts and their own experiences of working,
going to sea, inheriting money, undergoing family conflicts, and so on. Participants referred
to issues in the news, such as the banking crisis, the MPs’ expenses scandal, and Tony Blair’s
actions in the Iraq war, suggesting that these echoed aspects of the Bible stories. In this way,
they identified non-time-specific themes and acknowledged that the texts could speak into
contemporary society. The emphasizing of links between the text and the participants’ own
experience might be understood as part of the process of ‘[making] the Bible their own’
(Riches 2005: 23). It also demonstrates that these homeless individuals, at least, did not exist
in a sphere entirely divided from mainstream ‘settled’ society, but engaged with current
affairs and their social implications.

**Researchers’ Conflicted Feelings**

‘Doing these studies may evoke great emotion in participants ... The themes may be painful
and difficult for many people. The facilitator will need to be ready for this and sensitive to the
needs of participants ... If the study opens up old wounds for an individual, it may even be necessary to offer or find future counselling or other support if he/she would find this helpful.’ (West et al 2007: 13-14)

West et al note that CBS may create an atmosphere of trust and intimacy which leads to participants making themselves vulnerable. The researchers knew that participants probably lacked adequate food, shelter, washing facilities and clothing, and that this might heighten their emotional vulnerability. Indeed, participants shared difficult experiences, such as problems with family relationships. The researchers felt emotions raised were ‘left hanging’. This was mitigated to some extent by referring participants to regular soup kitchen volunteers, helplines, and other sources of information.

Nonetheless, we knew that although we had endeavoured to ensure that participants would not be disadvantaged by the project, and however much we wished minority voices to be heard, we as researchers were benefitting (in terms of fulfilling the terms of the project grant) from the participants’ input. West et al say,

‘The facilitator recognises that in the group, he/she may have power which comes from a privileged background. It also means that the facilitator’s role is to empower the group participants during the Bible study process to discover, acknowledge and recognise their own identity, and the value and importance of their contributions.’ (West et al 2007: 17)

Robert C. Erickson comments, ‘The encounter with the stranger must be done from a position of equality, mutual sharing and shared humanity which includes vulnerability, freedom, and an attitude of discovering something larger than either person in the process’ (Erickson 1996: 34). Although CBS represented a democratic form of discussion, a power dynamic was still present in the Readings from the Road sessions. This could have been unhelpfully hierarchical, particularly since several participants had had unhappy experiences in formal education. However, a soup kitchen volunteer suggested that this was mitigated to some extent by the fact that a woman facilitated discussion, as most soup kitchen users and all regular Bible study leaders were men.

Conclusion
‘[We can find] the narrative of covenantal homecoming ... in Hebrew and Christian Scripture. That narrative – and, more importantly, the homemaking God we meet in that story – offers us a vision of homecoming that can redemptively address our socioeconomic, ecological, intellectual, and cultural homelessness.’ (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 2008: 28)

CBS does not unproblematically supersede or improve upon other kinds of Bible reading. Readings from the Road does not represent the concerns of all homeless or vulnerably-housed people, or even all users of this particular soup kitchen. The self-selecting nature of the participants likely concealed reasons why others chose not to take part. These might include: negative experiences with other Bible study sessions; an (unfounded) assumption that good literacy levels were a requirement for participating; ongoing feuds or disagreements with other participants; a need to leave the soup kitchen early, perhaps to reach a safe sleeping-place; and a reluctance to have information recorded. Nonetheless, this does not make the findings from the sessions insignificant. It simply means they should be understood as a snapshot of what these homeless individuals took from these texts at this time, rather than anything unproblematically universalizable. The readings and comments could also be interpreted in terms of what they suggest about these individuals’ understandings of broader concerns in our society and their own relationship to them.

After saying what this project was not, we would like to point to some areas of especial interest and fruitfulness. These include the broad range of imagery used to describe the person of Jesus, particularly that of the ‘fairground attraction’. This image, which chimes with the notion of Jesus as one who ‘makes things strange again’, feeds back into CBS’s capacity to reinvigorate over-familiar readings and modes of interpretation. We tentatively suggest that the homeless participants’ liminal, insider-outsider relationship to the rest of society is a significant factor in their ability to query and subvert established discourses, providing flashes of imagery which might be deemed prophetic.

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