

Located

Act on Poverty

Ask Ahead: a question to consider before this session

Can you think of a place that is special to you? It could be where you are now or somewhere you lived or visited in the past. Why is this place important to you?

Scripture Reading: Mark 2.13-17

Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

Reflection: Where are we called to be? Where did Jesus place himself?

Let's think together about where we are located in this moment. Where are you right now? Where do you live? What is your community like? What choices brought you here?

Some of us enjoy a degree of flexibility over where we locate ourselves. We have some freedom over where we rent or buy a home, where we regularly shop, where we travel for a break. Others among us have very little or no freedom in this respect.

In this session, we will think together about where Jesus chose to locate himself and about our experience of place and community.

Have you ever noticed how many times in the Gospels Jesus is not where he is "supposed" to be?

When Jesus is born the wise men go to King Herod's palace expecting to find a royal baby, or at least news of him. They are not anticipating that the new king will be sleeping in a stable in a Bethlehem backstreet.

Instead of returning to their home in Nazareth, Mary, Joseph and their baby are then forced to re-locate as refugees, fleeing to Egypt to escape Herod's violence.



More than 120 million people in the world today have been displaced from their homes. This number has almost doubled in the last decade.
(Source: UN High Commissioner for Refugees)

A baby boy born in one of the least deprived areas in the UK in 2020 has a life expectancy that is 10 years longer than a baby boy born in one of the most deprived areas. For girls the difference is 8 years.
(Source: The King's Fund)

As a child Jesus goes missing when his family are travelling back from Jerusalem and turns up (to everyone's surprise) teaching in the temple.

In our reading above, now an adult, Jesus shocks some people when he shares a meal in the house of a tax-collector. Similarly when he enters Zacchaeus' house: 'All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."' (Luke 19.7)

Whether the reaction is one of astonishment or criticism, there is a sense in many of these stories that **Jesus is someone who doesn't "know his place"**. There are hierarchies and expectations that he fails to abide by. Kings aren't supposed to be sleep alongside farm animals. Children do not teach with authority in the temple. A religious leader should not associate with *those people* and definitely should not be a guest in their home.

Let's look at what Jesus says when the scribes imply that he isn't where he is "supposed" to be. "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?," they ask. Jesus reflects back to them the idea that some people might be called 'sinners', whilst others might be called 'righteous'. But his answer suggests that sorting these two groups out isn't the simple task the scribes think it is. "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick." **Who would be confident enough to say that they are never 'sick'? Who is sure that have never, and will never, need a doctor to heal them?**

[Jesus] eating with tax collectors and sinners... is not an accident ... rather it is an expression of the very being of God'

James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1970

There is a connection here with the story of the woman who is brought before Jesus in John 8.7. She has been caught committing adultery and Jesus is asked what should be done to her. He replies: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." No one raises a hand. The boundaries that the scribes are trying to draw to ensure everyone knows their place are continually called into question by Jesus. Jesus disturbs the neatness of 'us' and 'them', 'insiders' and 'outsiders', places to be and places to avoid.

Of course Jesus doesn't just happen to turn up in places that are considered unsuitable for a religious leader - he seeks them out.

James H. Cone, a pioneer in connecting Christian thinking with the lived experience of black communities, underlines the importance of where Jesus chooses to place himself. Jesus associates with and places himself amongst those who have been oppressed and rejected by social and economic structures: those in poverty, those labelled 'sinners', those excluded from power. He enters into their experience, eating, drinking, and living with them. He is subject to the same unjust systems, even to the point of being condemned and sentenced to death.

Jesus' call to repentance, Cone says, is not simply a matter of individual regret for things we have done wrong. It is about willingness live as someone whose purpose is bringing about God's kingdom, here and now.

'To repent', Cone writes, 'is to affirm the reality of the kingdom ... The kingdom is the rule of God breaking in like a ray of light, usurping the powers that enslave human lives.'

When Jesus is in places he isn't "supposed" to be, it is to show us that this is where the kingdom can be found. In these places the love, light and liberation of God's work has the power to break down oppression, overturn hierarchies and heal divisions.

**Let's return to the question of where you are located today.
What freedoms do you have to choose where you place yourself?
Where do you think Jesus would place himself in your community?**



Listen In: Zanele Makombe, Act Ubumbano, South Africa

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/actonpoverty>
(7mins)

Zanele Makombe is the Programme Advisor for gender & sexual and reproductive health and rights in Act Ubumbano. Act Ubumbano is a network of European and Southern African development and faith-based organisations working for social, environmental and gender justice across a number of African countries.

Zanele speaks about the power that communities have to act for local change, with the right support. She discusses the call to serve one another as human beings and to challenge exclusion and division.

Zanele mentions the **'God moments'** when she sees her work and her faith aligning in the service of her neighbours. **Have you experienced a 'God moment' like this when you felt a sense of purpose in the service of God?**

Where do you go when you are trying to listen to what God is telling you? Are there places in your community that help you do that?

Listen In: Revd Dr Al Barrett, Rector of Hodge Hill Church Birmingham and Clare McLean, Street Connector & co-leader of FAB Church



Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/actonpoverty>
(7 mins)

Revd Dr Al Barrett and Clare McLean speak about church and community in Hodge Hill, an area of Birmingham that has experienced significant deprivation. Hear from Clare about her experiences of building connection between neighbours as a Street Connector. Al and Clare discuss the perceptions of areas where there are higher poverty levels, the ways in which communities can become empowered to speak up for change and the role of the church in community life. **What is your response to the idea Al raises of 'suppressed abundance' in communities? What helps build connection between members of your community?**



Get Inspired: South London Mission, Bermondsey

Watch our short film (4 minutes) here: <https://youtu.be/655U5mG3DHM>

Winnie and Peter Baffoe of the South London Mission show us how they use the "three R's" - Respite, Regeneration, and Revolution - with their community to develop lasting change. South London Mission is a Methodist community organisation that has been operating since 1889. Currently the mission is seeing significant and growing income inequality in their local area. This video gives an inspiring insight into how their projects and partnerships are addressing this.

Act on Poverty - What could you and your church do?



Action: Decide how you are going to share what you have been discussing in this session (and in previous sessions, if you are following the full course). This could be within your church, in your community, and/or with your local political representative.

What would be the first step for your church in sharing more widely the message that we need to act on poverty now?

You could:

- Talk to others in your church about your experience with Act on Poverty or write a piece for your church newsletter or website.
- Start planning how you will raise poverty as an issue with your local political representative(s) or other people with power. You could do this by emailing them or calling their office for an appointment. You can find out who your Member of the UK Parliament is here:
<https://members.parliament.uk/findyourmp>

You can also look ahead to parts 5 and 6 of the Act on Poverty course for more suggestions about how to communicate effectively with your MP or other political representatives.

Closing Prayer

Jesus, help us to hear your call to discipleship.
Like Levi, may we follow where you lead.
Show us, Lord, where we should place ourselves in service of you
And of our neighbours.

We thank you, Jesus, for the places that are special to us.
Thank you for the places where we hear your voice, in stillness and through the voices of others.
Be with us, Lord, as we seek a deeper connection with our communities.
Help us to bring about your kingdom, here and now.
Amen.

