

Bible study and prayer reflection

The following short studies could be used as part of a Bible study meeting, allowing people in groups of 3 or 4 to consider different aspects of caste discrimination and how it is challenged by an understanding of the Kingdom of God as a Kingdom of love, peace, joy and justice, and praying for those who are oppressed and wounded today, before coming back together and sharing findings.

They could also be used in a church service, with different people preparing a short address or some thoughts on each story and posing the questions to the congregation.

Alternatively, they could be used on a prayer station, where people spend time alone reading, reflecting, thinking and praying.

Newspaper cuttings telling of current stories of injustice and discrimination could also be used in parallel with these studies. Jill Baker

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“Dalit” means “broken”, “crushed” or “ground down”

Read Isaiah 42:1-4

(also quoted by Jesus in Matthew 12)

This is one of the passages describing a character often known as the “suffering servant”, a figure who represents both God and humanity in being the bringer of justice, not by triumphing through might or violence, but by bearing in himself the sufferings and brokenness of the oppressed.

Here God proclaims through the prophet Isaiah that those who are weak, oppressed and crushed will not be completely broken, but will be tenderly cared for by God.

Does this relate to your experience or to that of those for who you pray?

Pray that those who are bruised and smouldering today will know God’s restoring compassion

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Untouchability is still rife in India and other Asian countries today

Read Matthew 8:1-4

We know that leprosy was effectively a death sentence for sufferers in the time of Jesus, spelling not only an end to life, but an end to any form of social contact, especially touch. It was considered to be so contagious a disease that sufferers were expelled from normal human society and considered to be outcasts.

Although Jesus does not always use touch when he heals, it is very significant that he does so in this story from Matthew. Jesus never shrank from touching a person who was considered unclean.

Think or talk about the people who touch you.

What is it like not to be touched?

Are there people you would not touch?

In our prayers and our actions, how can we “touch” Dalit people today?

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Many Dalit people live in fear every day

Matthew 17:1-8

In this story from Matthew's gospel, Peter, James and John are on the mountain with Jesus when he is transfigured before them and they are terrified, falling to the ground in their fear.

Jesus' touch releases the disciples from their fear as he tells them to get up and not to be afraid.

When have you been really frightened?

Has the presence of God ever filled you with fear?

Can you begin to identify with Dalit women who live in fear every day – fear of attack, of rape, of humiliation, of poverty and fear for their families, especially daughters.

How can "perfect love cast out fear" for Dalit women and girls?

Pray for Dalit women who are fearful today of attack, humiliation and rape

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Touch is such a precious means of communication

Read Luke 18:15-17

In this small, but well-known, incident from the life of Jesus, we find parents (maybe other family members and friends too) are bringing young children to Jesus in order that he might touch them.

There is no suggestion that the children were sick and in need of healing, maybe they were too young to understand the words of Jesus, so touch was seen as a different way for Jesus to communicate his message to them.

Have there been times in your life when touch has spoken although words could not?

Are there people with whom you communicate through touch – what message do you communicate in this way?

Pray today for Dalit children, that in their awareness of untouchability, they may know the touch of Jesus.

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Touching makes us face up to reality

Read Luke 24:36-39

After the Resurrection of Jesus, he appears suddenly to a group of disciples in Jerusalem. Although he offers "Peace", they are terrified, thinking he is a ghost.

Jesus invites the disciples to touch him, to be reassured of his real presence among them, and not to be afraid any more.

Is there a sense in which Christ speaks to the human race from the position of the Dalits and says, "Touch me and see" – "Face the reality of my existence and the ways in which my life can make a difference to your life"?

Are we afraid of discovering the depths of inhumanity and injustice in the world?
Are we afraid of accepting the difference the presence of Christ must make to our fears, prejudices and oppressive lifestyles?

Pray for the whole human race, for caste discrimination disgraces us all.

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