

# COVID 19: AN UNPRECEDENTED CRISIS?

CREATING A SAFE SPACE FOR FAITH, REFLECTION AND HOPE  
FOR SMALL GROUPS AND CONGREGATIONS



CREATIVE MINISTRIES NETWORK CONGREGATION  
2020

# **COVID19: AN UNPRECEDENTED CRISIS?**

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## INTRODUCTION

These studies are a gift from a small Uniting Church congregation in Melbourne Australia. We regularly meet in homes for faith conversations, study and reflection. The lockdowns following the pandemic forced us to reconsider our regular program and turned our attention towards how each of us was experiencing this crisis and what it might mean to us as individuals, our congregation and nation. Where was God in this crisis? We started with readings from the Hebrew Scriptures (or Old Testament) where, over 2,500 years ago, Israelites and Judeans were struggling with similar questions.

It was an unprecedented crisis for the nation of Judah when the forces of the Babylonian Emperor swept into their land in 597/8 BCE, captured their king, and transported the king and members of the ruling elite into exile in Babylon. Perhaps even more unprecedented was the second wave in 587/6 BCE that repeated the devastation of deportations and destroyed the Jerusalem Temple.

In the faith experience of the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel, it was unprecedented that their God – who had delivered them from Egyptian god's and Pharaoh' slavery – could be defeated by Babylonian gods and that Yahweh's people could be bundled off into captivity under the ruler of another foreign power. It was unprecedented and beyond belief that their God, Yahweh, could abandon them to suffer in a foreign land. For Judah believed that Yahweh's power and presence was tied to their capital, their Temple, and their land.

We may hear the word 'unprecedented' as a word that tries to explain unparalleled devastation, violence, death, trauma and grief. But sadly, it explains nothing while brushing over the chaos.

Trying to make sense of acts of violence and devastation begins with truth-telling. When the state and Federal governments announced a lock-down as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic sweeping the globe, our members decided to depart from our usual study program to talk about and reflect on how each of us was coping with the emerging dramatic news. The truth was, we all felt overwhelmed and isolated in the early days of the pandemic. Two members quickly drafted a program outline for our next scheduled gathering, to be held on Zoom. At the end of our first conversation about the pandemic, we agreed to scrap the remainder of our set study program and commit to four further studies on topics canvassed by the gathering.

Our truth-telling about our initial feelings of fear and confusion helped to transform the buried energy of our painful feelings into new creativity and commitment. This booklet is the fruit of that truth-telling.

## STRUCTURE OF THE FIVE STUDIES

### Welcome to Country

Each study begins with a welcome to country. The name of the traditional custodians where you gather can be found at your local government council, or online. Our 2019 Lenten study was guided by Indigenous Australian theologian Garry Deverell's book. Garry's writing informed our understanding of the holistic nature of Indigenous spirituality, as well as the institutionalised 'forgetting' of the injustices of colonial invasion. We offer some small steps to incorporate these truths into our reflection on COVID19.

### Prologue

Using the word 'unprecedented' can imply that this infectious disease is a modern problem, with no history or precedents. This is not the case, which the prologue to each study addresses. The prologues are not discussion points but rather serve as a reminder that there is a history which has been conveniently forgotten or ignored. The larger unanswered question for our ongoing reflection is to better understand our culture's persistent forgetting the injustice of historic pain and our failure to learn from it.

### Member participation

Each study includes a topic suggested by a congregation member. Members suggested topics that arose from our initial shared reflection on how we experienced the devastating impact of the pandemic, and suggestions on how the study may be best developed.

### Scripture Texts

The texts for our reflection on our pandemic experience come from the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophetic literature was forged in the 'unprecedented' times of the Babylonian colonisation of Judah and the captivity in exile of Judah's king, establishment leaders, and a sizeable portion of the population. Everyone in the Judean nation was traumatised by this devastation. The prophets were truth-tellers par excellence. They:

- Drew attention to the failed policies of the Judean monarchy before disaster struck.
- Exposed the corruption that weakened the fabric of the nation.
- Lamented the trauma of violated and suffering people.
- Deconstructed traditional beliefs about God and national exceptionalism that fostered spiritual blindness.
- Voiced poetic images of a transformed and hopeful future.

We turned to the prophetic literature because their hard-won wisdom might guide meaning-making for communities devastated and debilitated by an 'unprecedented' crisis.

### Silence and Reflection

The fifth element is making time for silence and a space for non-judgmental participation. The gift of this time can help grow community solidarity, which we trust is faithful to the Spirit's leading us into a deeper understanding and acceptance of the painful reality of this global crisis. Learning to engage in truth-telling seems to us a necessary element for facing the challenges of the future.

<sup>1</sup> Garry Deverell, *Gondwana Theology: a Tawoolway man reflects on Christian Faith* (Reservoir: Morning Star Publishing, 2018)

## **Prayer**

Our final element was a closing prayer from the psalms which was often congruent with the poetry of the prophets. In a secular society where claiming a relationship with God can be seen as a symptom of mental illness, reciting a psalm to conclude is quite counter-cultural, even a little defiant. If COVID19 symbolises the death or dying of both the church as we have known it, and global order shaped by the past few centuries of the spirituality of modernity, then our small gesture of turning to God in a closing prayer may reflect courage to reimagine spiritual truths for too long held in captivity by the powers that be.

## **Our Gift**

We trust that these five studies on COVID19: An Unprecedented Crisis? may help small groups and congregations consider and share their experiences and reactions to the pandemic in these troubling times for families and communities across the world. We trust that you will find these studies support your group to enter into the void created by the pandemic. We would love to hear your responses to these studies. Just as we found the comfort of renewed solidarity with God, neighbour and our individual selves, so we hope that we may enter into a larger community of solidarity with others who share a similar journey.

Please feel welcome to email or program co-ordinator to share your experience. He is John Bottomley, johnbottomley@netspace.net.au

## **How to Conduct these Studies**

We suggest up to 12 people could be involved in a group, either in person or on Zoom. Bring a pen.

Choose a leader for each study who will:

- Review the study guide at the beginning of each study. Note if you need to inform participants of any preparation each person needs to do for the next study.
- Ensure everyone gets an opportunity to share in the discussion.
- Be the time-keeper
- Ask for volunteers to share the reading
- Guide participants in times of silence and sharing their thoughts and feelings on the issues raised
- Gently steer participants towards reflection and sharing of personal experiences, rather than allowing the group to distract itself with 'commentary' on political or media issues.

- Ask a member to prepare a case study on an environmental issue for the final study. The purpose of the case study is to help participants feel and understand the complexity of environmental matters. It will not be helpful in the time suggested (10 minutes) for the presentation to propose a 'quick fix' for the issue being presented.



# WHAT DOES IT MEAN, THIS DEVASTATION AND CHAOS?

## Study guide

The first known epidemics of deadly infectious disease to come to our shores came from overseas. The health impact of this early colonial history on Aboriginal people was truly unprecedented for the Indigenous population. The study registers this history as background for deconstructing the belief COVID-19 is unprecedented, and so encourages participants to consider how what has been made over the centuries to have an impact in the present can be unmade for the future.

## Welcome

We acknowledge the (*insert the name of the local Indigenous custodians*), the first inhabitants of this place. We honour them for their custodianship of the land on which we gather today.

## Prologue

*Leader: ask two readers to read alternate paragraphs edited from P. J. Dowling, 1997 PhD thesis 'A Great Deal of Sickness: Introduced diseases among the Aboriginal People of Colonial Southeast Australia 1788-1900.'*

Dowling's PhD thesis examines the diseases that were introduced into Australian Aboriginal populations during the process of European colonisation. Specific attention is given to infectious and respiratory diseases that were responsible for causing major epidemics of morbidity and mortality.

A medical model for the contact period in the late 18th and 19th centuries looks at three major stages in the diseases faced by Aboriginal populations in Southeast Australia following European contact. First, there was a pre-contact stage with endemic pathogens causing chronic diseases and limited epidemics, then an early contact stage where introduced exotic human diseases cause severe epidemics of infectious and respiratory diseases among Aboriginal populations, and a third stage where remaining Aboriginal populations were institutionalised on government and mission settlements and subjected to a very high level of mortality from the introduced diseases.

The major epidemic diseases during the early contact stage were smallpox, syphilis, tuberculosis, influenza, and measles. Each of these diseases was responsible for excessive morbidity and mortality. During the period of institutionalisation, infectious and respiratory diseases were responsible for over 50% of recorded deaths on 8 separate Aboriginal settlements in Southeast Australia.

The major diseases recorded as causes of death were tuberculosis, bronchitis, pneumonia, diarrhoea and dysentery.

## Reflections

*The leader now invites the group members to have three minutes of silent reflection.*

What has been the most difficult aspect of the COVID19 pandemic for you personally?

*Participants then share their individual reflection without interruption from others in the group.*

*When all have shared their response, the leader invites further reflection on these questions:*

Was there anything that another person shared that touched you specifically?

What has been shared that is common to two or more people?

### **A prophetic word**

*A group member reads this note:*

The Book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) was written over a period of 200 years from three different periods, by a community in Judah with an apparently continuous tradition that was preoccupied with the crisis of Babylonian colonialism, its threat, devastating disruption and meaning. The first chapter functions as an introduction to the theme of crisis and its meaning for the nation of Judah: the crisis is a consequence of 'forsaking the Lord', for being 'utterly estranged' from their God. Yet there are 'people' who heap 'evil' and 'corruption' on their nation, until it implodes under the weight of its sickness. All that is left 'lies desolate'. The disruption is devastating.

*A group member reads the text:*

Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity,  
offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly,  
who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel,  
who are utterly estranged!

Why do you seek further beatings? Why do you continue to rebel?

The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.

From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it,  
but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds;

they have not been drained, or bound up, or softened with oil.

Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire;

in your very presence aliens devour your land

it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.

*(Isaiah 1:4-7)*

### **Reflections**

*The leader invites group members to reflect silently on these two questions:*

Which images or metaphors claim your attention? Why?

*Individuals share their reflections.*

*When all have shared, the leader asks group members to consider:*

Are there any images or metaphors that are congruent with our earlier reflection on the pandemic crisis?

Is the pandemic a crisis of prophetic proportions? To what extent does Isaiah's prophetic imagination relate to our current circumstance?

### **Where to from here?**

When preparing for these studies on the pandemic, our planning team made a list of areas of concern that could be explored further.

Consider our list, and add your own concerns or questions.

Creative Ministries Network congregation chose five topics for study from our list.

You are invited to follow our path, and/or develop further studies to share with us.

*Take five minutes to review this list and add your own concerns for future study.*

1. Where is comfort to be found?
2. Justice for the poor and marginalised.
3. What does it mean for our international order and the role/future of nations?
4. How may we understand God's judgment and mercy?
5. What other biblical texts may inform our response?
6. What gifts do we discern emerging from the crisis?
7. Environment, ecology, nature.

### **Closing prayer**

*Two readers read alternate paragraphs*

The Psalmist was not aware of Augustine's doctrine of original sin from the 4th century CE, and so we may easily misread the verse 'I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me' if we read it through that lens. While this is a view that many of us were brought up with, it is theologically misleading.

Here is another way to think about 'original sin'. Read this verse in terms of the prologue offered for the study, that is, because of the way colonialism caused death and devastation in our Aboriginal populations, we who are 'Anglo' do not come to the study of the current pandemic as innocents. Rather, we are born into a history of injustice that made us 'sinners' before our birth.

The psalmist provides a prayer for those Israelites born in exile in Babylon that confessed they are in this dilemma and so they face suffering because of what was done before they were born. It invites us to reflect on our present plight through the lens of all the ways colonialism has offended against God's justice. What happened with the epidemics that decimated Indigenous populations 'was evil in your (God's) sight', and if we can embrace that truth it may help us to address the causes and also the meaning of our present crisis.

*A reader and group members read the verses responsively.*

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

**Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.**

**For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.**

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgement.

**Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.**

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

**Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.**

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

**Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.**

*All.*

**Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.**

**Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.**

**Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.**

*(Psalm 51: 1-12)*



# CARE IN A CRISIS

## Study guide

Everyone will need a hard copy of the study, and a pen to write with. The leader will need a whiteboard and marker, or butchers paper.

The leader will need access to a laptop and wifi to play the Youtube video 'Babylon'.

## Welcome

We acknowledge the (*insert the name of the local Indigenous custodians*), the first inhabitants of this place. We honour them for their custodianship of the land, on which we gather today.

## Prologue

*Two readers read alternate paragraphs*

The 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh with 1200 Protestant delegates from Europe, the UK and USA, declared that the 20th century would be the Christian century, where the missionary impulse of the 19th century, fuelled by industrialisation, capitalism and scientific progress, would lead to the Christianisation of the world and a the reign of God's peace on earth by the end of the 20th century.

However, two world wars shattered the hubris of the Christian west, and further devastation at Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Bopahl, and Chernobyl, countless regional conflicts and civil wars across the globe, ecological disasters, a worldwide pandemic, and countless automobile and work-related deaths have left that grand vision of western Christianity in tatters.

## Reflection

The leader invites the group members to three minutes of silent reflection on the question:

What is the most painful grief and/or loss you have experienced because of the current COVID19 pandemic?

*Participants share their individual reflection without interruption from others in the group.*

*When all have shared their response, the leader invites further reflection on the question:*

Was there anything another person shared that touched you specifically?

## Social and cultural factors

The leader invites the group members to three minutes of silent reflection on the question:

Can you discern any of the powers, forces or spirits that have contributed to the pain and/or loss you have experienced because of the COVID19 pandemic?

*Participants share their individual reflection without interruption from others in the group. The leader may make a list on a whiteboard or butcher paper as discernments are offered, without commenting.*

*When all have shared their response, the leader invites further reflection on the following questions:*

Was there any power, force or spirit that another person observed that connected with your experience?

Which of the factors identified could be described as the root cause of the pain or loss participants have experienced?

### **A prophetic word**

*A group member reads this background note:*

The Book of Isaiah was written over a period of 200 years by a community in Judah preoccupied with the devastating crisis of Babylonian colonialism. When the Babylonians defeated the Israelites and took their leaders and elites into captivity, it shattered the Israelite belief that their God would always protect them. Perhaps even worse, they believed God was tied to the land of Israel, and had abandoned them, and worse again, it showed the Babylonian gods were stronger than their God. For 70 years, the Israelites languished in Babylon, overwhelmed with despair and hopeless.

Listen to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdVzas7dpY0>

In Isaiah Chapter 40, the poets of the Isaiah school/tradition are beginning to voice their hope to the captives in Babylon. These poets express their hope that God had finished punishing the exiles for their arrogant sin. Their sin in Judah was their belief in powers, forces and spirits other than Yahweh – that is, they put their faith in idols to provide them with the good life - and they paid no attention to those harmed by the unjust and corrupt behaviour that flowed from their idolatry.

The poetry addresses Israel's deepest wounds in their Babylonian captivity. For now, the voice of their God could be heard beyond the land of Israel, in this foreign context of captivity. By finally liberating them, their God's love for them would prove to be stronger than the Babylonian gods of war and oppression. The Isaian poetry insists that now God wants to tenderly comfort them and powerfully return them home to Jerusalem.

*A group member reads the text:*

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

*(Isaiah 40:1-5)*

**For reflection**

Imagine you have lived under a foreign power for 70 years. Everything you had been taught as a child and grown up with believing in has fallen apart and turned to dust. How do you feel? Write how you feel here. *(Take 3 minutes)*

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Now imagine you are at a gathering at a friend's house.

A poet in the group reads from her laptop:

'God is saddened by the pain we have suffered. But God thinks we have had double the time we need to understand and be sorry for our sin, and wants to restore us to full relationship with God's reign of justice and peace. God will make the way ahead for us straight-forward. Who would have thought God's voice would be heard in Babylon? Who would have thought God's love for us was stronger than the military and economic power of Babylon?'

Listen! I am telling you what God has told me. I trust that voice. Will you?

How do you feel as you listen to your friend's poetry? Write how you feel here. *(Take 3 minutes)*

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*Participants share their reflections on the Isaiah text.*

*After all have shared their reflection, a leader invites group members to consider:*

What does the text add to your understanding of the painful grief and/or loss you have experienced due to the pandemic?  
And how does the text suggest we may look for comfort, be comforting, and be a comforted community?

*In your discussion, take time to go around the group so that everybody contributes first and then let the discussion follow.*

### Closing prayer

*Group response is in bold type. One person reads the words in ordinary type.*

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

**You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.**

You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

**Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.**

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

**Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.**

*(All together)*

**For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.**

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

**Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.**

*(All)*

**How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.**

*(Psalm 139: 1-6, 13 - 18)*

### Preparing for the next study: Justice for a time of crisis

Draw participants' attention to the next study and the reflection Explore your personal context with this ancient text. Ask participants to write their own story to bring to the next study to share with the group. Make sure everybody has a copy of the study 'Justice for a time of crisis' to help them prepare their story.



# JUSTICE FOR A TIME OF CRISIS

## Study guide

A couple of days before the group meets, the leader could send a reminder for participants about writing their story and bringing it with them.

Note also, the closing prayer has a space for members to pray in silence for each other. The leader invites participants to hold each person in their mind's eye, recalling their story, when they pray for the person.

## Welcome

We acknowledge the (*insert the name of the local Indigenous custodians*), the first inhabitants of this place. We honour them for their custodianship of the land, on which we gather today.

## Prologue

*Two readers read alternate paragraphs*

Today there is a deeper understanding of the impact of global health crises on us all. And though anyone may become sick and anyone may die as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, very little else is equal. We may be all in this together, but we start from very different places. In fact, the pandemic brings into view the scale and depth of injustice that blights our world. Disparities between the privileged and the oppressed are magnified during a disaster, and perhaps this pandemic more than other disasters illustrates the glaring different levels of injustice between the haves and the have nots.

One US Christian website declares: 'The components have been here for so very long: rampant economic inequality, valuing profit over people, disaster capitalism, transforming healthcare into business opportunities rather than a human right, racism and ethnic hatred, white supremacy, rabid nationalism, and governing for profit.' <https://www.uusc.org/world-health-day-covid-19-pandemic-reveals-systemic-injustice-calls-us-to-act/>

Another website adds: 'The unfolding pandemic has shown that patriarchal principles of inequality and injustice render all societies and governments ineffectual in attempting to curb the crisis and secure the basic right to health care and health services to all.'

Their Feminist Policy on COVID-19 highlights nine key focus areas of concern:

- Food security
- Health care
- Education
- Social inequality
- Water and sanitation
- Economic inequality
- Violence against women/domestic violence/intimate partner violence
- Access to information
- Abuse of power

*Lina Abou Habib, Senior Policy Fellow at IFI, advisor for the Global Fund for Women, and member of the Gender at Work Board.*

The Director General of Healthcare in Puglia, Italy, adds their concern for 'risks of mental ill-health, which will be exacerbated by isolation, fear, and insecurity.'

### **A prophetic word: the poetry of Isaiah 42:1-4**

*A group member reads the text:*

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

### **Comments**

*A group member reads this background note:*

Through the poetic imagination of God's voice, Isaiah's poetry here addresses the long-suffering Israelite exiles captive to the foreign rule of Babylon. These verses introduce God's servant to the captives, reassuring them the servant is filled with God's spirit, which is the spirit of justice for all. The poetry promises God's servant will not speak loudly/angrily to the captives for being seduced by Babylon's gods (consumerism, patriarchy, capitalism, violence?).

God's servant will speak tenderly to those bruised and broken by the dehumanising violent oppression of false gods, and support those whose spirit has been almost extinguished by the injustices they have suffered at the hands of agents of a corrupt empire. Isaiah promises God's servant is not daunted by the 'shock and awe' of Babylonian power.

Rather, God's justice means the servant stands in solidarity with those oppressed by violence ('crushed') and weighed down by abuse ('grow faint') until God's justice is firmly established.

**Explore your personal context with this ancient text** (*taking about five minutes for this reflection*):

Recall a time when you felt bruised and broken by a dehumanising violent incident.

Now recall a time when you felt your spirit almost extinguished by injustices you suffered at the hands of a human agent.

Now imagine hearing a voice that speaks with you about receiving a power (alive in creation) that embodies justice. Imagine what justice means for your wounded body and soul. Recall a time when you had a glimpse of such justice.

### **Now share your story**

You will have prepared in no more than 400 words, your account of the memories that came to mind, your experience of a taste of justice, and your hope for a fuller experience of the gift of God's justice, for your own sake and the sake of the world.

**When you bring your story to read at this study group, make sure that the sentence that concludes your story expresses your hope for God's justice.**

### Group reflection

Take it in turns for each group member to read their story. When everyone has read their story, a leader says:

*Reflect for two or three minutes on the forces the stories identify that crush and weigh people down, and how you may be in solidarity with each other and those who are similarly burdened. Share in turn as you are led by the Spirit of God's justice.*

### Closing prayer

*Group response is in bold type.*

In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor - let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.

**For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart, those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord.**

In their pride ... the wicked say, 'God will not seek it (justice) out'; all their thoughts are, 'There is no God.' They think in their heart, 'God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it.'

**Why do the wicked renounce God, and say in their hearts, 'You will not call us to account'?**

But you do see! Indeed, you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands; the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan.

**Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers; seek out their wickedness until you find none.**

The Lord is king for ever and ever; the nations shall perish from his land.

**You will listen, O Lord, to the prayers of the lowly; you will give them courage.**

*(Let us pray for a few minutes in silence for each member of our group, aware of the suffering from injustice they have shared. We hold each one individually in our hearts.)*

*(Together)*

**You will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more.**

*Psalms 10: 2-4, 13-18*

### Preparing for the next study: Religious hypocrisy.

Ask participants to prepare for the study 'Religious hypocrisy' by reading the reflection Explore our personal context with this ancient text. Before you leave this study pair each participant with another member to explore their personal context by Zoom, telephone or in person. Each person will report to the next study on religious hypocrisy on what the person they paired with had to say, so do take some notes and check with your partner that your notes are accurate.



# RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY - ITS NEGATIVE IMPACT ON CHRISTIAN FAITH & SOCIETY

## Study guide

The Leader will need a laptop to play the Youtube video clip. Also, appoint three members of the group to prepare to read the Jeremiah text, taking the parts of a narrator, Hannaniah, and Jeremiah.

## Welcome

We acknowledge the (*insert the name of the local Indigenous custodians*), the first inhabitants of this place. We honour them for their custodianship of the land, on which we gather today.

## Prologue

*Two readers read alternate paragraphs.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer became a member of a failed attempt to kill Adolf Hitler, when four members of his immediate family were executed: two brothers (Dietrich and Klaus) and two brothers-in-law (Hans von Dohnanyi and Rüdiger Schleicher).

At the time of Hitler's ascent to power in 1933, Bonhoeffer's church - the German Evangelical Church (the main Protestant church in Germany) was influenced by traditions of nationalism and obedience to state authority. Relieved that a strong new leader had emerged from the chaos of the Weimar years, many Protestants welcomed the rise of Nazism. In particular, a group called the Deutsche Christen ("German Christians") became the voice of Nazi ideology within the Evangelical Church. Citing the state Aryan laws that barred all "non-Aryans" from the civil service, the Deutsche Christen proposed a church "Aryan paragraph" to prevent "non-Aryans" from becoming ministers or religious teachers. The ensuing controversy almost split the German Evangelical Church. The Deutsche Christen claimed that Jews, as a "separate race," could not become members of an "Aryan" German church even through baptism - a clear repudiation of the validity of Gospel teachings.

In the initial battle to retain church independence, most church leaders avoided the deeper issue that the civil rights of all German Jews had been attacked. Indeed, many who opposed the church Aryan paragraph otherwise supported the regime's restrictions on German Jews. Bonhoeffer bitterly opposed the Aryan paragraph, arguing that its ratification surrendered Christian precepts to political ideology. If "non-Aryans" were banned from the ministry, he argued, then their colleagues should resign in solidarity, and establish a new church — a "confessing" church free of Nazi influence. But most German bishops wanted to avoid antagonizing the Nazi regime and to keep their regional churches together.

The strongest opponents of Nazi interference in the churches, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, eventually did form the "Confessing Church." But, while some Confessing Christians moved toward open resistance against the regime, more moderate Protestants (inside and outside the Confessing Church) made what they saw as necessary compromises. As the Nazi dictatorship tightened its hold, the Confessing Church itself became paralysed. (Victoria Barnett: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

Ironically, a Uniting Church faction opposed to the ordination of gay and lesbian ministers established themselves as a 'Confessing Church' (but like the German bishops, are not prepared to give up their property, stipends, or superannuation for their beliefs.)

### **A prophetic word: the story of Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jeremiah 28:1-17)**

*Three members read the text, a narrator, Hananiah, and Jeremiah:*

**Narrator:** At the beginning of the reign of King Zedekiah of Judah... the prophet Hananiah son of Azzur, from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the Lord, in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying,

**Hananiah:** 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'

**Narrator:** Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord; and the prophet Jeremiah said,

**Jeremiah:** 'Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfil the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the exiles. But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.'

**Narrator:** Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, and broke it. And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying,

**Hananiah:** 'Thus says the Lord: This is how I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years.'

**Narrator:** At this, the prophet Jeremiah went his way.

Some time after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: 'Go, tell Hananiah, "Thus says the Lord: You have broken wooden bars only to forge iron bars in place of them! For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put an iron yoke on the neck of all these nations so that they may serve King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and they shall indeed serve him; I have even given him the wild animals.'" And the prophet Jeremiah said to the prophet Hananiah,

**Jeremiah:** 'Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord: I am going to send you off the face of the earth. Within this year you will be dead, because you have spoken rebellion against the Lord.'

**Narrator:** In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died.

### Comments

*A group member reads this background note:*

Jeremiah often refers to hypocrites as false prophets, and Hananiah is the most prominent. Hananiah reveals the subtlety that is necessary to curry favour. He does not present as a charlatan or a quack, or an immoral individual, or a person who is obviously deceptive. The portrayal of Hananiah, whose name means “Yahweh is gracious,” is presented as a model of prophetic propriety. He uses all the right language, including the typical “Thus says the Lord” (28:2) and the use of the divine “I.” He also performs symbolic acts (28:10), as does Jeremiah (for example, 13:1-11). His identity compares well with the prophet Jeremiah.

Moreover, the text identifies Hananiah simply as “the prophet”. In other words, the only possible clue to any “hypocrisy” by Hananiah is through his preaching. The words he speaks are hollow and self-serving, designed to maintain his privileged position in the king’s court. But they are false words that suggest that everything will soon be alright when it palpably is not. Many a hearer/reader would be led to think that he is even more believable than Jeremiah himself. For he preaches so clearly! God is about to act to save Israel from Babylonian military power. Jeremiah even hesitates for some time before he sees through what Hananiah has to say. Jeremiah finally responds – but only after he has heard from Yahweh. When Jeremiah speaks his words can in truth only come through his attention to God’s word of judgment. Only the prophetic word of truth exposes Hananiah’s hypocrisy for all to see.

### A contemporary reflection on our theme

Song by Johnny Cash: ‘Personal Jesus’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpYW3qng78E>

**Explore our personal context with this ancient text** (*you will have taken about 15-20 minutes to explore your concerns with another member of the study program. Your 2-person group may speak by Zoom, telephone or in person to have a paired conversation. Be ready to report to the gathering on what the person you paired with had to say.*)

- How do you decide what is religious hypocrisy? Which of Jesus’ teaching below or Jeremiah above fits your views on religious hypocrisy?
- How do you feel when you see/hear hypocrisy from Christians?
- How do you feel when you see/hear a person getting away with their hypocrisy?
- How do you defend our faith when faced by the words and actions of hypocrites?
- How do we as individuals and/or a congregation call these hypocrites to account?

### Other resources from Jesus’ teaching in the gospels on hypocrisy

- Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you? (Luke 6:46)
- He said to them, ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.” You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’ (Mark 7:6-8)

- Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. 28 So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Matthew 23: 27-28)

### Reporting back

We will take turns for each pair to report back to our gathering on their conversation. After all have spoken, we wish to discuss the responses, and explore any insights in what this means for us individually and as a congregation.

### Closing prayer

Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering.

**Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind.**

For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you.

**I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites; I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.**

I wash my hands in innocence, and go around your altar, O Lord, singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and telling all your wondrous deeds.

**O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell, and the place where your glory abides.**

*(Psalm 26:1-8)*



# ENVIRONMENT, ECOLOGY, NATURE

## Study guide

A member of the group was to be asked to research and prepare a case study of their own interest. Presentation time is up to ten minutes.

**Welcome:** We acknowledge the (*insert the name of the local Indigenous custodians*) people, the first inhabitants of the land and waters which focus our gathering. We honour them for their custodianship of the land and water on which we join in spirit today.

## Prologue

Indigenous Australian theologian Garry Deverell says 'For us, spirituality is all about the most basic building blocks of life: country, kin, and the practise of a ritual storytelling that weaves past, present and future living together in a web sometimes referred to as 'the dreaming' (p.10). This 'spirituality', defined as that which integrates the materiality of life (country, kin) lived out over time (past, present, and future) through ritual storytelling of a master narrative or myth (the dreaming) represents a holistic view of life and the human person. Deverell corrects the misunderstanding of modernity that the Dreaming is a series of mythological stories from the distant past, emphasising the Dreaming as a current reality within which First Peoples live and have their being. Importantly, the Dreaming is kept alive in First Peoples lives by ritual story-telling.

The importance of Indigenous spirituality to the environment is to understand its contemporary relationship to the policies, procedures and values of Australia's capitalist economy. Deverell describes his Indigeneity as 'a colonial Indigeneity' (p.19). In other words, his theology will never escape its European roots or imagination. The impact of contemporary capitalism on his Indigenous identity and life purpose is pervasive. Inescapably, he must work under the crushing weight of this legacy, while enduring the further stifling hazard caused by Australian's 'continuing to exercise a strange forgetting' (p.22) about the genocide at the nation's foundation. The doctrine of discovery and *terra nullius* manifests total denial of Indigenous Australians' ecological worldview.

Yet there is an inner resilience sustaining Indigenous people's relationship with their environment. Garry Deverell writes: 'Because we believe that our country is still filled with the presence of the ancestor-creators who formed it a long time ago, we also regard all that is alive in that land as our kin, our family. For we are descendants of these ancestor-creators. We are their offspring. That is why, whenever we approach a new place that is not familiar to us, we talk to the spiritual presences in the land, the ancestor-creators, asking for their permission to cross that country and for their protection while we are there. For unlike the children of modernity, we do not take the country and its resources for granted.' (p.14)

Garry Deverell, *Gondwana Theology: a Tawoolway man reflects on Christian Faith* (Reservoir: Morning Star Publishing, 2018).

## **Environment, ecology, nature: a case study of the Murray-Darling Basin**

*A member of the group presents a case study prepared from their own interest (10 minutes).*

### **For reflection**

*Take three minutes to reflect on the following:*

- How do you feel when you hear about the complexity of the issues in nature, the environment and ecology of the case study?
- Compare how you feel when you reflect on the issues that arise with your own particular concerns for nature, the environment and ecology?
- How does the way you feel affect your thinking and acting about your concerns for nature, the environment and ecology?
- Share what you know of what the Indigenous custodians of the area believe about the issue, and their connection with the spiritual wisdom of their Dreaming? How does your connection to Christian spirituality inform your concerns for nature, the environment and ecology?

*Take it in turns to share members' reflections without interruption or comment.*

- After all have reported to the gathering, what are the threads or themes that shape our personal responses to our concerns for nature, the environment and ecology?

### **A prophetic word (Isaiah 24: 1, 3-6, 10-13a)**

*A group member reads this background note:*

This text may have been written to address a local famine, a national disaster, or end-of-the-world fears from the political realities of a Babylonian invasion. Isaiah follows a pattern from earlier Biblical writing in Deuteronomy 28, which in the book of Deuteronomy has a basic framework of God's blessings and in this case (ch. 28) curses for behaviour that breaks the nation's covenant relationship with God to obey the dictates of justice and mercy. Isaiah draws on this tradition to explain that it is Israel's disobedience to the requirements of the people's relationship (or covenant) with God that has led to the devastating consequences for both the natural and social order.

*A group member reads the text:*

Now the Lord is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.

The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled; for the Lord has spoken this word.

The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left.

The city of chaos is broken down, every house is shut up so that no one can enter. There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine; all joy has reached its eventide; the gladness of the earth is banished. Desolation is left in the city, the gates are battered into ruins. For thus it shall be on the earth and among the nations.

## Further reflection

- Imagine we are gathered as custodians of Isaiah's prophetic wisdom. What would you emphasise in this text that may speak to a post-pandemic Australia or a post-pandemic world? (Underline the phrases that may resonate today. Members then share the portions of the text they underlined and the reasons for choosing that portion.)
- How did you feel about the experience of sharing Isaiah's prophetic wisdom in relation to each member's concerns?
- Is God still speaking to us today through natural, environmental and ecological crises? Report back and discussion.

### Psalm 104: 1-2a, 5, 24-31

*A reader and group members read the verses responsively.*

Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honour and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment.

**You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.**

Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan\* that you formed to sport in it.

**These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.**

When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.

*All:*

**May the glory of the Lord endure for ever; may the Lord rejoice in his works.**

\*Leviathan is a creature with the form of a sea serpent from the underworld of death in Jewish belief.

