



Synod Bible Studies 2021



Discerning the Path Home

AN EXPLORATION OF THE INTERSECTIONS OF
IDENTITY, DISABILITY, SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND HEALING

Rev Dr Kylie Crabbe



Acknowledgement

Synod Bible Studies

Many thanks to all those who helped to prepare these bible studies for the 2021 Synod meeting, and for all the further work done since in making these studies available in this format.

Sincere thanks to Rev Dr Andy Calder for his longstanding support of conversations about disability, theology, and inclusion within and beyond our Synod, and particularly for his work in preparing this resource. He has developed thoughtful prompts for further discussion arising from the study videos, and worked tirelessly in getting the materials ready for distribution.

The Moderator and her chaplains gave careful attention to the study themes in preparation for their Synod morning prayers. The Glen Waverly Uniting Church generously gave their time, dedication, and technical skills in recording the study videos (thanks especially to Warren Greenwood, Neil Leister, and Matthew Boldiston). Additional volunteers helpfully provided the subtitles, and Sarah Hellyer has worked with dedication to prepare these written materials for publication. [Australian Catholic University's Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry](#) continues to support my research into disability and impairment in the bible, as does a grant from the Australian Research Council.

Finally, I want to add a particular thanks to my friend Naomi, who shared her reflections and her own experience of impairment and disability, and allowed these to be included in the studies. Naomi's generous reflections not only help to rethink our assumptions about "ability" and "disability," but have provided wisdom on how others of us less used to being constrained to our homes might find a way through the lockdown experience, and then think differently about the community we are called to rebuild beyond the pandemic.

I hope these studies might feed further conversation in your own communities, churches, agencies, ministry teams, and homes. May they be an opportunity to consider the community we are called to be, the "norms" our biblical interpretations can fall into, and the fullness of life we share together when we all belong.

Peace,
Rev Dr Kylie Crabbe



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Moderator Letter

“Like Leaven in the Loaf”, What sort of communities are we called to be?

The changes and challenges of Covid have disrupted our lives, though not in the same ways. While we may want restrictions on our lives to come to an end, do we simply wish to get back to the way things were?

What might God be calling us to become — different to what and who we were before?

As followers of Jesus, we are always being called to join in God’s transforming work in the world ... like tiny grains of yeast working quietly in the dough, till the whole loaf is transformed into something new. Like Leaven in the Loaf.

Are we being called into something new through these shared experiences of Covid? What might we learn from the biblical texts and the call of Jesus?

Rev Dr Kylie Crabbe led our Synod 2021 bible studies, exploring precisely this. She took us on a journey through a very particular lens, bringing together human experience and biblical scholarship, inviting us to seek out what kinds of communities we are called to be.

I invite you to join in that journey.

Drawing on experiences and perspectives of disability, Kylie explores different threads in the biblical texts, from the prophets to gospel stories of the call of Jesus, to be part of God’s radical vision of flourishing life.

We hear contrasting visions of community, coming-home journeys and worshipping life. In some, those ‘with blemishes’ are excluded or left behind. In others, we hear of doors flung open and paths made smoother so all can gather and journey together.

We explore our assumptions of ‘normal’ and disabled, the differences between disability and impairment, what we mean when we say ‘us’, and the impact of exclusion.

We are invited into the radical vision of Jesus, where all are gathered together in the house of God.

All along the way, Kylie draws us into the experience of a friend who lives with an (invisible) impairment, and invites us into our own experience.

Far more expansive than just our 2021 Synod gathering, or themes of Covid or disability, these studies gather us around the Word of life. They invite us on a journey toward the kind of communities we are called to be, like leaven in the loaf, communities of transformation for flourishing life.

Denise Liersch

Denise Liersch

Moderator 2019-2022



Introduction

To Church Councils and Ministry/Institution Leadership

At Synod 2021 (26-28 February), Rev Dr Kylie Crabbe presented three Bible Studies, focussed on scriptural texts which explored the intersections of identity, disability, social exclusion and healing.

The Studies were deeply appreciated for their scholarship and accessibility. In order to further stimulate their use and engagement by our Uniting Church congregations and institutions, Kylie and I have collaborated to produce a series of questions correlating with certain sections of each Study. The questions are designed to complement the original Readings, Resources, and an Additional Note which Kylie provided for each Study. The questions and supplement for each Study are stimulated by a key biblical passage.

It is suggested that the Studies be undertaken as a 3-part series (1-3), in order to maximise the benefits. However, depending on your circumstances, a stand-alone Study could be considered.

Included with this Resource is a Facilitator's Guide, to assist with your planning.

I'm excited that these Studies are now available to our Synod and beyond.

I wish you well as you consider how best to engage with the material, and give consideration to ways and means you are called to respond.

Yours in ministry

Rev Dr Andy Calder

Disability Inclusion Advocate



Notes and Suggestions

for the Organisers/Facilitator

- ▶ Feel free to use these resources in the combination that best suits your group. You may choose to use video(s) only with some or all of the questions.
- ▶ Promote in advance and ensure an accessible space (also access into the conversation area and toilets) is part of the advertising (will you advertise beyond your own congregation?)
- ▶ Use Assembly Guidelines to assist [Guidelines For Disability Access](#)
- ▶ Request people inform organiser(s) of any support needs and if so, liaise as to how to best respond.
- ▶ Decide in advance if it will be a one-session study only, or a 3-part study (noting a potential advantage in meeting more than once, for any follow up).
- ▶ Determine optimal time for each study, bearing in mind the need to encourage the contributions of all participants, and that people take varying times in communication (suggest 2 hours max in length with necessary break)
- ▶ You may wish to offer it during particular times of the Christian calendar.
- ▶ Facilitator with advance preparation to become familiar with content by listening to Kylie's study, and read both her Study Notes and the supplementary questions (linked to times in the video). Depending on time, make a choice about which texts and questions/topics you will focus on. You might well get to discuss all of them!
- ▶ Recommend participants listen to the video in advance, and read the specific Study Notes, including the scriptures. Encourage people to come with curiosity and questions. The facilitator may also recommend a focus on certain areas.
- ▶ Also leave plenty of time for people to explore and discuss the issues rather than trying to attend to all the questions offered for the Study.
- ▶ The aim is to encourage people's curiosity and conversation, rather than arriving at any preconceived answer or outcome.

Links to Synod resources and mentions in the Studies

- ▶ [The Gift of Being | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
- ▶ [Assembly Disability Access Guidelines \[PDF download\]](#)
- ▶ [Called to be a Church for all \(uca.org.au\)](#)
- ▶ [Disability Action Plan 2019-2022 \[PDF download\]](#)
- ▶ [Easy English Disability Action Plan summary \[PDF download\]](#)
- ▶ [Disability Inclusion - Uniting Church in Australia. Synod of Victoria and Tasmania \(uca.org.au\)](#)



Bible Study 1

Friday 26
February 2021

[Click here](#) to view Bible study 1 video or visit <https://vimeo.com/542903093>

From Musa Dube, “Boundaries and Bridges: Journeys of a Postcolonial Feminist in Biblical Studies”:

Arguing that ‘the biblical story itself invites its readers to identify with it and to act it out in history’, I have argued that the biblical story is an unfinished story: it invites its own continuation in history, it resists the covers of our Bibles and writes itself on the pages of the earth. On these grounds, it is legitimate to hold that various biblical reader-actors from different moments in history should illumine the meaning and implications of the text for us. (p. 142).

Jeremiah 31.1-14

¹ At that time, says the LORD, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. ² Thus says the LORD:

The people who survived the sword
found grace in the wilderness;

when Israel sought for rest,

³ the LORD appeared to him from far away.

I have loved you with an everlasting love;

therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

⁴ Again I will build you, and you shall be built,

O virgin Israel!

Again you shall take your tambourines,

and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.

⁵ Again you shall plant vineyards

on the mountains of Samaria;

the planters shall plant,

and shall enjoy the fruit.

⁶ For there shall be a day when sentinels will call

in the hill country of Ephraim:

“Come, let us go up to Zion,

to the LORD our God.”



⁷ For thus says the LORD:

Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,

and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;

proclaim, give praise, and say,

“Save, O LORD, your people,

the remnant of Israel.”

⁸ See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,

and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,

among them the blind and the lame,

those with child and those in labour, together;

a great company, they shall return here.

⁹ With weeping they shall come,

and with consolations I will lead them back,

I will let them walk by brooks of water,

in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;

for I have become a father to Israel,

and Ephraim is my firstborn.

¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,

and declare it in the coastlands far away;

say, “He who scattered Israel will gather him,

and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.”

¹¹ For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,

and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.

¹² They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,

and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD,

over the grain, the wine, and the oil,

and over the young of the flock and the herd;

their life shall become like a watered garden,

and they shall never languish again.

¹³ Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,

and the young men and the old shall be merry.

I will turn their mourning into joy,

I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.

¹⁴ I will give the priests their fill of fatness,

and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.



Lockdown experiences:

- ▶ From the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN) of the World Council of Churches, from:
 - Rev Helen Setyoputri (Gereja Kristen Indonesia)
 - Gertrude Fefoame (Presbyterian Church of Ghana)
- ▶ Media stories closer to home
- ▶ Your own stories
- ▶ And my friend, Naomi

Isaiah 35

¹ The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;

like the crocus

² it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.”

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

⁸ A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.

⁹ No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.

¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isaiah 29.17-18

¹⁷ Shall not Lebanon in a very little while
become a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field be regarded as a forest?

¹⁸ On that day the deaf shall hear
the words of a scroll,
and out of their gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind shall see.

¹⁹ The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD,
and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.

Some questions to consider | Bible Study 1 (Jeremiah 31:1-14)

- ▶ Are there people in our community who self-identify as 'blind, deaf or lame?'
- ▶ What do they say/feel about these passages which are used to illustrate a promised future? "But **they** are not altered to make the journey possible...." (20:45)
- ▶ How did you respond to the idea from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson about the "normate"? (The idea that we tend to read texts with an assumption that characters in those texts, and the text's author and intended readers are all "normal" in the way we think of "normal" — without disabilities, maybe white, male, not elderly, and so on (13:00 – 16:20))
- ▶ How does Naomi's story and experience inform us about this idea of the "normate" and what we assume is "normal"? (8.20 – 12.00)?
- ▶ "It's the road which YHWH changes not the people" (21:10). What does this say our community is called to be?



Bible Study 2

Saturday 27
February 2021

[Click here to view Bible study 2 video](https://vimeo.com/542903475) or visit <https://vimeo.com/542903475>

Leviticus 21.16-23

¹⁶ The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ¹⁷ Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. ¹⁸ For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, ¹⁹ or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, ²⁰ or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. ²¹ No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD'S offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. ²² He may eat the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy. ²³ But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the LORD; I sanctify them.

2 Samuel 5.6-8

⁶ The king and his men marched to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, who said to David, "You will not come in here, even the blind and the lame will turn you back" — thinking, "David cannot come in here."⁷ Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion, which is now the city of David. ⁸ David had said on that day, "Whoever would strike down the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack the lame and the blind, those whom David hates." Therefore it is said, "The blind and the lame shall not come into the house."

From Rebecca Raphael, "Disability, Identity, and Otherness in Persian-Period Israelite Thought": "Disability is not mapped onto gentiles but onto non-compliant Israelites ... Thus it does not signify the cultural other, but rather the other inside—most intimately inside" (p. 296).

From Saul Olyan, *Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult*:

“To be cut off from the sanctuary means to lose access to the primary context of meat consumption, the major locus for the shaping of social relations, the place of prostration and prayer, where vows are fulfilled, and where transgressions are expiated.” Olyan goes on to note the cumulative effect over time, “to the point where some texts cast persons suffering from skin disease as symbolically dead because of their separation from sanctuary and community” (p. 62).

Counter voices in the Hebrew Bible, including:

- ▶ 1 Samuel 3.2; cf. 4.15
- ▶ Isaiah 56.3-7
- ▶ Leviticus 19.14
- ▶ Deuteronomy 17.18

Selections from the Dead Sea Scrolls

And no one who is stupid [or de]ranged should enter; and anyone feeble-minded and insane, those with eyes too weak to see, [and] the lame or one who stumbles, or a deaf person, or an under-age boy, none [of] these [shall enter] the congregation, for the ho[ly] angels ... (Damascus Document (CD) 15.15-17)

No man, defiled by any of the impurities of a man, shall enter the assembly of these; and no one who is defiled by these should be established in his office amongst the congregation: everyone who is defiled in his flesh, paralysed in his feet or in his hands, lame, blind, deaf, dumb or defiled in his flesh with a blemish visible to the eyes, or the tottering old man who cannot keep upright in the midst of the assembly; these shall not en[ter] to take their place [a]mong the congregation of the men of renown, for the angels of holiness are among their [congre]gation. (Rule of the Congregation at the End of Days (1QSa) 2.3-9)

No blind person shall enter it all their days, and they shall not defile the city in whose midst I dwell because I, YHWH, dwell in the midst of the children of Israel forever and always (Temple Scroll a (11QT^a) 14.12- 14).

The needy and poor, and to the elder who [is ben]t, and to the afflic]ted, and to the prisoner of a foreign people, and to the girl who has [n]o re[dee]mer, [and] to the youth [w]ho has no one looking after him; everything is the task of the association, and [the house of the association shall] not [be deprived of] its [means]. (Damascus Document (CD) 14.14-17)

'And if [one of] these has something to say to the holy council, they shall question [him] in private, but the man shall [n]ot enter in the midst of [the congregation,] because [h]e is defiled' (Rule of the Congregation at the End of Days (1QSa), 2.9-10).

Matthew 21.8-17

⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹ The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” ¹² Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. ¹³ He said to them, “It is written,

‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’;
but you are making it a den of robbers.”

¹⁴ The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry ¹⁶ and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,

‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies
you have prepared praise for yourself?’”

¹⁷ He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.



Some questions to consider | Bible Study 2 (Matthew 21:8-17)

- ▶ Blemishes: for some people they are apparent, whilst for others they are hidden. Have a conversation about 'blemishes' and reactions you recognise in yourself. Why do you think that was so?
- ▶ Social exclusion passages – imagine how these might feel to people reading them? (6:00 – 10:00)
- ▶ Are there people in our community who self-identify as 'blind, deaf or lame?' How might their experience/story of inclusion/exclusion shape our response?
- ▶ Saul Olyan (11:27 – 12:01), in being denied access to the sanctuary: “You'd have no meat, community, prayer or access to rituals for forgiveness or faithful practices.” Can you imagine how that would affect you and your life of faith?
- ▶ Refer to: <https://thevcs.org/christs-triumphal-entry>
- ▶ Read Matthew 21: 8:17. Ulrich Luz suggests: “...the blind and the lame who approach Jesus in the temple represent the “the true people of God”” (18.35). What do you think is meant by this statement? What would it mean to identify with these characters?
- ▶ How do we discern who we are called to be? What might it mean to identify a renewed community with people with visual and mobility impairments rightfully there at the centre of social and religious life? (21.50)



Bible Study 3

Sunday 28
February 2021

[Click here to view Bible study 3 video](#) or visit <https://vimeo.com/542902773>

Selections from World Council of Churches, *The Gift of Being: Called to Be a Church of All and for All*

- ▶ “Many faithful persons with impairments have testified that the healing narratives and their interpretations have been a reason to turn away from the church” (para 111).
- ▶ “My blindness is not a condition that I have. I am a blind person, and that’s who I am.” (para 58)
- ▶ “Something similar can be said with regard to conditions such as Down syndrome. One cannot separate the person from the syndrome, because without it, that person would cease to exist as who they are: they would lose their identity.” (para 58)
- ▶ “Even when I have fully accepted that my cerebral palsy is part of me, it doesn’t mean I see it as a gift. Certain things that are important to me remain quite difficult because of my impairment, such as adequate speech.” (para 59)
- ▶ The affirmation of limitation as part of the world that God created does not deny that the experience of limitation shares in the ambiguity that is part of our existence. But it is to deny that it is peculiar to the existence of only some human beings. (para 41)
- ▶ Vulnerability is inherent to the human condition. Human beings as such are vulnerable. To ascribe vulnerability to persons with impairments serves the false belief that people without impairments are strong and self-sufficient. (para 85)

Luke 7.18-23

¹⁸ The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples ¹⁹ and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ²⁰ When the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’” ²¹ Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. ²² And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. ²³ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”



Luke 14.7-24

⁷ When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. ⁸ “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.

¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

¹⁵ One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” ¹⁶ Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. ¹⁷ At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ ¹⁸ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ ¹⁹ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ ²⁰ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ ²¹ So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ ²² And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ ²³ Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. ²⁴ For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’”

Some questions to consider | Bible Study 3 (Luke 14: 7- 24)

- ▶ Listen to the opening session (0.19 to 4.18)
- ▶ In light of the personal quotes (Para 58/59) discuss the relationship between impairment and identity
- ▶ How does Sharon Betcher's phrase, the "terror of the miracle tradition", speak to you?
- ▶ Do you know people who have turned away from the church because of the healing narratives and their interpretation? (refer 2.19 quote from WCC Gift of Being)? Discuss possible responses to that person(s)
- ▶ The WCC document 'Gift of Being' describes the 'shared experience of human limitation' (Para 41 (6.58) and 'vulnerability being ascribed to people with impairment serving the false belief that people without impairments are strong and self-sufficient' (Para 85 (7.26). What are the implications for the Body of Christ? Might this be the very message of the Incarnation?
- ▶ Characters in the biblical healing stories sometimes become literary 'devices' or metaphors to illustrate Jesus' power, or point to an eschatological outcome. Does this matter for how we read the Bible? (9.59 – 14.22)
- ▶ Re the story of the Great Banquet in Luke 14:7-24 (14.38 – 19.15) What insights does it provide in who we are called to be in our current times? What challenges for our discipleship does it provoke?



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