

THE PROPHETIC VOICE OF THE CHURCH

A study course looking at
the radical nature of the
gospel, with a special
focus on the church in India

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THE PROPHETIC VOICE OF THE WORLD CHURCH

The prophetic voice arises in the heart of God and flows out into all of Creation, urging us to become all we can be.

The prophetic voice calls us to change for the better – to change our attitudes, our lifestyle, even our beliefs – and this can feel scary because change brings with it uncertainty and the unknown.

The Old Testament prophets were often unpopular because they challenged people to step outside their comfort zones. They challenged the people to

remember justice and mercy and walk humbly with God.

Sometimes the prophets were 'foretelling' in the sense of predicting the future. However, at other times they were 'telling forth', which means challenging injustice and standing up for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the alien – and this is the definition of prophecy that we will be concentrating on in this study (eg Amos 5:21-24).

The ultimate expression of this



prophetic voice is found in Jesus, who reveals to us the heart of God. And it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to tune into the prophetic heart of God.

Today, many prophets can be found throughout the world church. These voices are challenging because they alert us to issues we might want to ignore. But these voices cannot be silenced – they call us to be like Jesus, who stood on the margins, comforting the oppressed and challenging those who are comfortable.

This study course explores what the prophetic voice of the world church might mean, with a particular focus on the church in India. So let us open our ears and be open to change. And may we be inspired to find our own prophetic voice. ■

This edition published 2019.

Cover: A member of the Tagar self-help group, Kalinagar village, near Kolkata.

Left: Sanatan Mandi, community leader in Bhalukchira village, Durgapur.

Above: Church of Hope, Asrapur village, North India.

Bible passages taken from the NRSV

All photographs in booklet: USPG/Leah Gordon

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SNAPSHOTS OF INDIA

FACTFILE

Population: 1.3 billion

Languages: Hindi, English, more than 20 other official languages

Religions: Hinduism (80%), Islam (14%), Christianity (2.3%), Sikhism (1.7%), Buddhism/other (2%)

Life expectancy: 67 years (men), 70 years (women)



ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY

- The name 'India' is derived from the river Indus, which runs through India, Pakistan and China.
- India's geography is extremely varied. In the north there are the Himalayas, coniferous forests and the floodplains of the Ganga and Indus river systems; there is desert in the north-east and tropical rainforest on the Andaman Islands in the south.
- Natural hazards in India include monsoon floods, flash floods, earthquakes, droughts and landslides.
- The mango is India's national fruit. India grows nearly 40 per cent of

the world's mangoes, with several hundred varieties.

DEMOGRAPHY

- India is the world's seventh largest country and second most populous country, and the world's largest democracy.
- More than 1,000 languages are spoken in India. The main languages are Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil and Urdu. Hindi and English are considered the 'official' languages.
- Despite Islam being a minority religion (14% of the population), different sources suggest India has the second or third highest population of Muslims in the world - with almost the same number of Muslims in India as there are in Pakistan.
- India's caste system is one of the world's oldest surviving forms of social stratification. The system divides Hindus into four main categories: Brahmins (teachers and intellectuals), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (traders) and the Shudras (menial workers). Outside the system are the Dalits, or so-called untouchables (BBC).

ECONOMY AND CULTURE

- India is one of the world's fastest growing economies. Agriculture provides jobs for over half the population. The industry sector includes mining, construction and energy. Services, including IT, is the fastest growing sector.

- India has nuclear power and nuclear weapons.
- India sends satellites into space.
- India is one of the world's largest producers of renewable energy.
- The Taj Mahal, built in Agra between 1631 and 1648 by order of Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his wife, is one of the seven wonders of the modern world.
- India has the world's largest film industry, with more than 1,100 films produced each year on average, which is twice as many as America.
- Cricket is by far the most popular sport in India. Football is the second most watched game by Indian sports fans. Field hockey is also popular; India has won more medals at the Olympics than any other team in this sport.

CHALLENGES

- India struggles with an ever-widening gap between rich and poor. It is the country with the fourth highest number of billionaires, yet an estimated two-thirds of the population is living below the poverty line.
- India is shaped by many conflicts, including religious and caste-related violence, various insurgent and separatist movements, and unresolved territorial disputes with China and Pakistan.
- 300 million Indians have no access to power and millions more live with sporadic supplies of electricity.
- Environmental concerns in India include air pollution, energy conservation, waste management, oil and gas conservation, and forest conservation.
- South Asia, with India at its centre, is one of the fastest-growing regions for human



trafficking in the world. Many victims are from poor rural areas and are lured by traffickers with promises of good jobs, only to find themselves or their children forced to work in fields or brick kilns, enslaved in homes as domestic workers, or sold to brothels.

FAMILY AND CHILDREN

- Family values are important in the Indian tradition. Multi-generational patriarchal joint families have been the norm, though nuclear families are becoming common in urban areas.
- Child marriages are common, especially in rural areas; many women wed before reaching 18, which is the legal marriageable age. Female infanticide and female foeticide have caused a discrepancy in the sex ratio, with an estimated 37 million more males than females in 2011. ■

(Sources: BBC, CIA World Factbook, jagranjosh.com, knowindia.gov.in, Reuters, Sportology, Washington Post, Wikipedia)

Above: Hindu temple in Delhi.

Left: Jyothi at the Kurnool Skills Training Centre, Nandyal.

ANGLICANS IN INDIA



churches, including Baptist, Brethren, Anglican, Methodist and other protestant denominations. Its motto is 'Unity, Witness, Service' and its mission priorities include evangelism, renewal, restructuring, education, reconciliation and the protection of livelihoods.

FACTFILE: CHURCH OF NORTH INDIA

Dioceses: 27
Members: 1.5 million
Churches: 4,500
Clergy: 2,204
Schools/colleges: 564
Theological colleges: 7
Hospitals/nursing schools: 65/9
Website: new.cnisynod.org

The Church of South India was founded in 1947 following Indian Independence. It brought together a number of Anglican and Protestant denominations in India, including the Church of England, the Methodist Church and the Church of Scotland. The church's motto draws on the words of Jesus in John 17:21: 'That they all may be one.'

FACTFILE: CHURCH OF SOUTH INDIA

Dioceses: 24
Members: 3.8 million
Churches: 14,000
Clergy: 11,214
Schools/colleges: 2,450
Affiliated theological colleges: 12
Hospitals: 104
Website: www.csisynod.com

Christians are in a tiny minority in India – and Anglicans are a minority within this minority. They operate with a space for religious freedom that is currently shrinking amid a rise in Hindu nationalism.

Two churches in India are members of the Anglican Communion: the Church of North India and the Church of South India. Both are United Churches, meaning they are comprised of a range of protestant denominations, not just Anglicans.

In outlook, these churches are prophetic and radical, with a heart for Indian marginalised communities, particular the Dalit and tribal peoples, who are the so-called untouchables.

The Church of North India was established in 1970, bringing together six

MAKING THE MOST OF THIS STUDY COURSE

You are invited to use this course as an opportunity to develop your skills in listening and empathy.

1. Commit to attend all five sessions. The more you are able to attend, holding the continuity of the group, the more you will benefit. Give yourself permission to refuse any other engagements or invitations that might arise at your regular study time.
2. Begin each study with prayer to help centre the group.
3. Commit to sharing honestly and to listening without judgement or trying to 'fix' someone else's life for them. Seek to create a safe atmosphere in which people feel able to share openly. Remember that none of us are perfect; our aim is to be real, authentic and whole – not perfect!
4. Acknowledge that everyone's experience of life and faith is unique and valuable. Seek to accept one another just as we truly are, just as God accepts each one of us.
5. Give space for everyone to speak, though no-one need feel obliged to speak. If you are someone who tends to share a lot, remember to leave space for others who find it harder to share.
6. Read the material in advance and spend time allowing the content to sink in – not necessarily needing to find the answers. It's ok not to know!
7. Remember that religious and theological words can mean different things to different people. Share your perspective and allow others to hold different perspectives.
8. Remember the Bible contains different genres of literature – history, poetry, wisdom, letters, etc – so it can be read in many ways. We can listen to its poetry. We can consider the contextual and cultural meaning. We can simply reflect on how the passage impacts on us emotionally. There is no one way.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

We have tried something a little different with the prayers in this study course by including a series of contemplative exercises. They require someone in the group to lead – speaking slowly and clearly – and leaving silent gaps between phrases to give time for the words to sink in. In following this method, we invite you not so much to 'think' about what you're praying, but rather to rest in God's presence, allowing yourself to embrace God's love and acceptance so that you might better receive the prophetic voice.

STUDY 1: COMMUNITY

In this study we explore our understanding of the church and the prophetic voice



GETTING STARTED

What is your understanding of 'the prophetic voice' from your reading of the scriptures? You might like to consider the difference between 'foretelling' and 'telling forth'. Share an example.

STORY FROM THE CHURCH OF SOUTH INDIA

The Revd Asir Ebenezer, a director within the diaconal wing of the Church of South India (CSI), explains: 'The Church of South India is called to be a prophetic public witness in our nation, towns and villages. This is an expression of Christian faith and commitment, and building the capacities of our pastors is a vital part of this.'

To help support this mission, CSI set up the Institute of Pastoral Management (IPM) which is helping church leaders to minister to a society undergoing constant change, in which traditions are being challenged and the poverty gap is increasing.

After taking part in IPM training, the Revd Dr Bethel Victor told USP: 'This programme has been extremely useful for my ministry among four village congregations. I benefited in particular from studying human resource management, which emphasised that local congregations have energies, talents and capacities. The training showed me how to make the most of these human talents.'

She continued: 'I am based in Nagaram, a remote village in Karimnagar Diocese. The congregation consists of 40 families. Their ambition for a long time was to build a church. Construction work began but stopped after about eight months due to a lack of money. It was at this point that I attended the IPM training.'

'After the training, I shared my learning. I tried to inspire an inquisitive attitude and motivate the congregation to not only look for outside help, but also to look at themselves and at their own capacity. This approach yielded results.'

'Building work recommenced with the whole congregation - men, women and children - doing their part so that, despite a lack of money, we were able to build the church ourselves. The congregation offered their labour wholeheartedly and free of charge.'

'Our beautiful new church building was finally dedicated. We had all experienced the joy of working together for God's mission.' ■

Questions

- What strikes you most about this story?
- In what ways could you describe the church in the story as being prophetic or having a prophetic voice.
- The Revd Bethel showed her congregation that they were rich in talents and resources. What is her prophetic voice saying to your community about your engagement in local and global mission?

Photo: Workshop run by the Institute of Pastoral Management, Chennai.

BIBLE READING

Luke 4:16-21

- ¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,
- ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:
- ¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'
- ¹⁹ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.
- ²⁰ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Questions

- What is your immediate response to these verses – what in particular stood out for you? What do you think God is saying to you?
- How does this passage fit in with your understanding of the prophetic voice?
- What aspects of society would you like to challenge?

PRAYER

These prayers have been designed for one person in the group to lead, speaking slowly and pausing between phrases to give time for the words to sink in. We invite you to abide in God's presence.

Take a moment to settle.

Adjust your posture so that you feel relaxed but alert.

Close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do so.

Give yourself permission to be still and open to God's presence.

Try to let go of the 'chattering mind' – it may help to focus your attention on your breath and the sensation of air flowing in and out of your nostrils – knowing God is with you.

Know that your life is in God and God's life is in you.

Continue to abide in God's presence.

Know in your heart that you are loved and accepted by God exactly as you are.

God understands your hopes and your struggles – and delights in you.

Be aware that God's love and acceptance is available for all people.

Give yourself permission to become a vessel for God's love to flow through you.

Allow this radical love to flow through you.

Know that this love is for you and for all people:

for our family – despite any difficulties we may experience;

for our friends – even when there are misunderstandings;

for our church community – even when there are disagreements;

for our nation – despite differences in opinions and ways of living;

for all nations – despite differences in culture, religion or politics.

Spend a moment knowing that God's love is radical because it is extended to all people.

Spoken together:

Holy God, we thank you for your prophetic voice,

bringing good news, release, freedom and proclamation

in word and action. Draw us daily closer to your love

that we may faithfully respond to and live out your prophetic will.

You can directly support community health outreach in India through our *Partners In Mission* scheme. www.uspg.org.uk/pim

STUDY 2: INJUSTICE

In this study we look at human trafficking as one example of the many injustices that the church can speak into prophetically



GETTING STARTED

The first Christians were a minority group, known as the 'people of the Way', who represented a different way of life from the norm; at other times, the church has been the dominant group in some cultures. How do you understand the role of the church in our society today?

STORY FROM THE CHURCH OF NORTH INDIA

Daud Mardi, from Balashpore village, in the Diocese of Durgapur, told USPG how his 13-year-old grandson Prakash was tricked into child labour.

When Prakash's father died, his mother remarried, and it was decided that Prakash should come to live with me and my wife.

After a short while, we were visited by Prakash's new uncle-in-law who said he wanted to take Prakash to his home in Haryana, near Delhi. I was happy because the uncle said he would give Prakash a good education so he could get a good job.

When I phoned to ask about Prakash, the uncle always said he was happy and doing well at school. But one day I heard Prakash crying in the background. So I talked to him and he told me he was not going to school but working on a tea stall and was often beaten.

I immediately went to Haryana but the uncle and another man played games with me, telling me Prakash would be in this place or that, but I could never find him. So I came home empty-handed.

Then I met Turlu, from the Anti Human Trafficking (AHT) programme. I explained the situation and Turlu arranged for us to return to Haryana with a letter of support from our local police inspector.

But in Haryana we received the same treatment as before. However, we got the name of the man I had seen with the uncle and we realised he was a trafficker who was under investigation.

We talked to the police, but they said they couldn't take action unless we involved the police from Prakash's village. So we're trying to arrange that but the process is very slow, and I believe that by now Prakash will have been sold on. ■

Questions

- You may have found this story painful to read because there is no resolution: the family of Prakash must live with not knowing their grandson's whereabouts. What are your reactions to this story?
- Today we're hearing increasingly about slavery in every country. Share some of what you know about modern day slavery in your nation and community.
- Consider how the church - locally and nationally - could respond prophetically to trafficking and slavery in our own society.

Photo: Sushila Soren (left) and Daud Mardi, grandparents of Prakash.

BIBLE READING

Micah 6:6-8

- 6 “With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
- 7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
- 8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Questions

- What is this passage saying about religious practice and worship?
- What does it mean today in practical terms to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God?
- What would be the prophetic words of Micah to the church today?

PRAYER

Take a moment to settle.

Adjust your posture so that you feel relaxed but alert.

Close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do so.

Give yourself permission to be still and open to God's presence.

Try to let go of the 'chattering mind' – it may help to focus your attention on your breath and the sensation of air flowing in and out of your nostrils – knowing God is with you.

Know that your life is in God and God's life is in you.

Continue to abide in God's presence.

Know in your heart that you are loved and accepted by God exactly as you are.

God understands your hopes and your struggles – and delights in you.

We each have much to be grateful for.

Let your spirit give wordless thanks to God for all blessings you have received.

If you are struggling to think of something – be thankful for the air you breathe.

While thankful, we also know that life brings many challenges.

There are times when we feel vulnerable or afraid.

Some of us are afflicted in horrific ways:

losing freedom or dignity;

suffering physical or emotional wounding;

lacking food or security.

But God is with us in our pain.

Be aware of God's concern for all of our suffering.

As we close this study, spend a few moments praying for Prakash, then close with the following prayer, spoken together:

Holy God, thank you that you call us into the family of your church.

Increase our awareness of our sisters and brothers in distress.

Empower our voice to tell forth alongside them against

trafficking, oppression, and violence, that your will may be done.

Host a USPG Big Curry Lunch to raise awareness and funds for the work of churches in India and around the world. Fundraising ideas at www.uspg.org.uk/fundraising

STUDY 3: GENDER

In this study we explore what it could mean for the church to have a prophetic voice on matters relating to gender



GETTING STARTED

We tend to feel comfortable when we mix with people who are like us, perhaps because it means our beliefs will not be challenged. But what are the benefits of having people in our community who are different to us (in belief, temperament, practice, etc)?

STORY FROM THE CHURCH OF SOUTH INDIA

The Women's Skills Training Centre, in Kurnool, was founded by the Diocese of Nandyal, part of the Church of South India. The centre offers girls a 10-month training course that provides them with vital skills to help them find work in a predominantly patriarchal society.

My name is Tharani. My father died when I was 13 years old. I have a younger brother and a younger sister who were very small when he died. So my mother took on her own shoulders to bring us up.

My mother is called Apush and she earns only a small salary as a teacher at a mission school. So when I finished school I was very keen to come to this training centre to learn English and computing.

Spoken English and computers are very important in our society today. I want to become a teacher and with these skills I can work in any government school because knowing the computer and English is the way to earn more money. Then I will be able to help my mother.

At the centre, we also learn about the Bible. Bible knowledge is very important. Having spiritual knowledge will help me in my life. I like learning about powerful women in the Bible.

My favourite is Jael; she is the strongest woman of all because she killed the king's army commander. By God's grace and power she gained strength to do this. And we can gain strength through prayer so we can solve all of our problems, big and small. I want to share my bible knowledge so I will also teach in Sunday school.

I am very thankful to USPG for helping us and so many girls in our society who are getting this opportunity to be allowed be pushed themselves. ■

Questions

- What are your reactions to this story?
- Compare Tharani's experience with what you know about the challenges facing girls in your community.
- How can the church encourage and support all people in their Christian vocation?

Photo: Tharani (far left) studies English at the Kurnool Skills Training Centre.

BIBLE READING

Judges 4:18-23

For this study you will need to read the whole of chapter 4. Here is a summary of verses 1-17. For 20 years, the Israelites had been oppressed by King Jabin of Hazor, whose army commander was Sisera. The Israelites cried to God for help and the prophetess Deborah summoned Barak, explaining that God had ordered him to gather up 10,000 men to go and fight Sisera. The battle took place. Sisera's army were put to the sword and Sisera fled on foot.

- ¹⁷ Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite.
- ¹⁸ Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear." So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug.
- ¹⁹ Then he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty." So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him.
- ²⁰ He said to her, "Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say, 'No.'"
- ²¹ But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died.
- ²² Then, as Barak came in pursuit of Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." So he went into her tent; and there was Sisera lying dead, with the tent peg in his temple.
- ²³ So on that day God subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites.

Questions

- Tharani said Jael is her favourite woman in the Bible because of her strength. What do you think of Jael?
- Jael's act helped to bring about the deliverance of Israel. We are used to bible stories in which men deliver Israel, often with violence, but not women. How does this story challenge gender stereotypes?
- Which women in the Bible inspire you and why?

PRAYER

Take a moment to settle.

Adjust your posture so that you feel relaxed but alert.

Close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do so.

Give yourself permission to be still and open to God's presence.

Try to let go of the 'chattering mind' – it may help to focus your attention on your breath and the sensation of air flowing in and out of your nostrils – knowing God is with you.

Know that your life is in God and God's life is in you.

Continue to abide in God's presence.

Know in your heart that you are loved and accepted by God exactly as you are.

God understands your hopes and your struggles – and delights in you.

For some people, knowing the exact meaning of my gender is important and empowering.

For others, these same descriptions are limiting and disempowering.

Become aware of what your gender means to you.

However you may describe it – whatever this may mean to you – know that you are accepted by God exactly as you are.

Not all men are the same. Not all women are the same.

There are many men and women who defy stereotypes. Indeed, each of us is unique.

Know that the essence of who you are in God is unique – beyond all roles, words and labels.

Know that your true identity is in God.

Know that however we see ourselves, we are safe in God and accepted by God.

Spoken together:

Holy God, we thank you that in Christ we are one,

Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free.

Help us to recognise your image in all around us,

and to work together for the dignity and fulfilment of all.

You can spend up to a year experiencing the life and mission of the church in another culture through our *Journey With Us* placement programme. www.uspg.org.uk/travel

STUDY 4: CLIMATE

What might the prophetic voice of the church be telling us about our responsibility to the environment



GETTING STARTED

What experience have you had of being in nature – whether as a child or adult? Share with the group one joyful moment and one moment where you were shocked by environmental neglect.

STORY FROM THE CHURCH OF SOUTH INDIA

The Green Schools Programme was set up by the Church of South India to inspire a new generation about the importance of safeguarding the environment.

As well as learning the theory, pupils and staff are encouraged to put what they are learning into practice by carrying out a 'green audit' of their school.

Hermani, aged 16, gave USPG a tour of her school – St Hilda's School, Ooty, in the Diocese of Coimbatore – and offered this commentary as she walked around the compound.

'I'm going to show you the rainwater harvesting system. Not a drop of water is wasted in our school. Rainwater is collected from the roofs of all the buildings then stored in these tanks, then it can be used for the toilets, gardening, and cleaning the school and the school buses. It rains a lot so we have a lot of water.

'This is our kitchen. It runs with gas from the school's bio-gas plant. These are the cookies our school makes – we enjoy them so much!

'And over there are our solar panels. We use solar energy to heat six water heaters which heat all the water for our school.'

Hermani said the school uses palm leaves or stainless steel plates, not plastic or paper. Computers and lights are switched off when not in use. And the school garden uses organic fertiliser.

She explained: 'People live in this world as though they had another planet to go to when our resources run out! But the Green Schools Programme has taught me to how to save electricity and water, how to plant trees, and how to be environmentally-minded. I think it's good for us to learn that it's our duty to protect the environment.' ■

Questions

- Give space for everyone to share something that stood out for them from what Hermani is saying.
- Here is an exercise in listening. The environment and climate change are potentially controversial topics so, for this question, create a safe space in which there are no right or wrong answers. Share in the group something about your understanding of what is currently happening with the climate and the environment. Then, without judgement, comment on any new ideas you have heard and your response to other people's understandings.

BIBLE READING

Luke 15:1-7

This alternative version of the parable of the lost sheep was conceived by presbyter Charlie Shanthakumar, whose original version appears in the book Green Parables, published by the Church of South India.

The politicians, industrialists and religious leaders gathered around to hear the Lord. And Jesus said to them, 'Suppose there were 100 ponds in a village used for cultivation.

'Due to bad planning, one of the ponds was used as a dump. All kinds of waste and plastic were thrown into this pond, which quickly became dirty and smelly and a breeding ground for mosquitoes.

'But because the remaining 99 ponds met all the villagers' needs for fresh water and fish, the people decided they could live with the pond that had become an eyesore.

'One day, an environmentalist visited the town and when he saw the pond he was shocked and called together all the local politicians to discuss what to do.

'Though all 99 other ponds required ongoing maintenance, the environmentalist and the politicians gathered all the villagers to help revive the dead pond. They worked together joyfully and cleaned up the pond.

'Then the rains came. Fish flourished in the revived pond. Birds came and sang their songs. And the land around the pond became green and thrived - so the whole village rejoiced.'

Then the Lord said, 'I tell you, in the same way, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over this one pond saved than in having the other 99 useful ponds.'

Questions

- Share your responses to this alternative parable. What strikes you most?
- The fifth of the Anglican Communion's Five Marks of Mission challenges us to safeguard Creation. As a church and as individuals, how can we be more prophetic in our words and actions to protect the environment? As a group try writing a 'Ten Commandments' for the environment.

PRAYER

Take a moment to settle.

Adjust your posture so that you feel relaxed but alert.

Close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do so.

Give yourself permission to be still and open to God's presence.

Try to let go of the 'chattering mind' - it may help to focus your attention on your breath and the sensation of air flowing in and out of your lungs - knowing God is with you.

Know that your life is in God and God's life is in you.

Continue to abide in God's presence.

Know in your heart that you are loved and accepted by God exactly as you are.

God understands your hopes and your struggles - and delights in you.

Become aware of the physical world - our planet - in all of its wonderful diversity and variety:

deserts, mountains, green fields;

seas, rivers, lakes;

sunshine, wind, rain;

animals and plants of all kinds.

Sense your appreciation for the world we live in.

Sense your appreciation for the hospitality of the planet which shares its bounty with us.

Know that the planet needs our care.

Human disregard has polluted the air, land, seas and rivers, poisoning plants and wildlife.

Take a moment to imagine the pain of the planet - and feel your compassion...

For the planet which is our host;

For the planet which is our friend;

For the planet which is our home.

Spoken together:

Holy God, thank you for the world you have entrusted to our care:

for the beauty and inter-connectedness of all life.

Help us to be responsible stewards of Creation,

and work together for the preservation of the earth.

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STUDY 5: HOPE

In this study we look at the prophetic nature of the resurrection



GETTING STARTED

Some people in our modern secular society have written off the church as irrelevant. What do you think the church has to offer?

STORY FROM THE CHURCH OF NORTH INDIA

The *Let My People Go* programme was set up by the Church of North India to support marginalised Dalit and tribal communities. It receives support from USPG.

India's Dalit and tribal peoples – the so-called untouchables – face many hardships due to extreme poverty.

Opportunities for employment and education are scarce and the places they live are prone to flooding and drought, which it seems are becoming more frequent.

Little wonder many of these people fall victim to unscrupulous landlords, businessmen and money-lenders. As a result, whole communities have become debt slaves, working in appalling conditions as farm labourer, domestic help or brick kiln labourers.

The *Let My People Go* (LMPG) programme is focused on releasing people from the soul-destroying plight of bonded labour.

Baljinder and her husband, in Dhanua village in Punjab, were working for their landlord as a domestic help and a farm labourer respectively. They were paid very

little and had little hope of freedom because they owed their landlord a great deal in rent and loans taken out to buy food.

The last straw came when the landlord suggested taking her eldest son out of school so he could work for him to help repay the family debt. Baljinder was determined her children should have a better future.

Happily, she learned there was a LMPG self-help group in her village. After joining, she learned many things, including how to grow and process date palm fruit as a snack, which she did as a small business.

The business took off and, one year later, Baljinder and her husband were able to pay off their debts. They had also saved up enough to buy an auto-rickshaw to start a taxi service. With their increased income, they have been able to keep their children in school.

Baljinder said: 'I am thankful to God for this opportunity that was provided to me.' ■

Questions

- What are your reactions to this story? What was it that enabled Baljinder to realise her unfulfilled potential?
- Share about a time when you discovered your own unrealised potential. Or share something that presently you would like to do or achieve.
- How might your church become better at harnessing people's gifts and nurturing people's talents – whether in the congregation or local community.

Photo: Baljinder (centre) and her self-help group prepare dates for sale at market, Dhanowa Kalan village, Amritsar.

BIBLE READING

Mark: 8:22-26

- ²² They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him.
- ²³ He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?"
- ²⁴ And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking."
- ²⁵ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.
- ²⁶ Then he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even go into the village."

Questions

- In apparent fulfilment of the passage we looked at in Study 1 (Luke 4:16-21), the blind man is given his sight and released from captivity. Reflect on this passage and share what it is saying to you about the prophetic power of God.
- The resurrection of Jesus speaks of our ultimate hope. Identify some of the different groups of people in our society that might be lacking in hope. What can the church do to offer hope?
- Looking back over the whole course, give some time for each person to share a particular thought or insight they have had concerning the prophetic voice.
- How would you like these learnings and insights to have an impact on your faith journey - individually and collectively as the local church?

PRAYER

Take a moment to settle.

Adjust your posture so that you feel relaxed but alert.

Close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do so.

Give yourself permission to be still and open to God's presence.

Try to let go of the 'chattering mind' - it may help to focus your attention on your breath and the sensation of air flowing in and out of your nostrils - knowing God is with you.

Know that your life is in God and God's life is in you.

Continue to abide in God's presence.

Know in your heart that you are loved and accepted by God exactly as you are.

God understands your hopes and your struggles - and delights in you.

There is always hope.

The resurrection is testimony that...

no matter our circumstances,

no matter how rejected, neglected or misunderstood,

whatever we have said or done to ourselves or others,

there is always hope.

Allow the following truths to sink into the deepest part of your being:

We are afflicted, but hope reminds us we need never be crushed;

We are perplexed, but hope reminds us we need never give in to despair;

We are persecuted, but hope reminds us we need never feel forsaken;

We are struck down, but hope reminds us we can never be destroyed.

Spoken together:

Holy God, thank you that your prophetic voice brings resurrection

to people, churches, communities, even Creation itself.

Stir up in us your prophetic voice, that we may go out

and proclaim your good news to the world around us.

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