

Pamoja Reading – In Community And In Context

Reflections of the East Africa Regional Group

(Background: The members of the East African Regional Group hail from Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. They came together twice over the period of the project to explore what the Bible had to say in relation to the Fifth and then Fourth Marks of Mission).

What emerged was the impact that reading the Bible together in community and within our own contexts can have.

Following the first study the group concluded that:

“The Bible in the Life of the Church Project is earth-shaking. It has the potential to revitalize the way in which the World-wide Anglican Church reads the Bible in engaging all its five marks of mission. In particular, the East African Regional Group engagement with the fifth mark of mission in the concluded contextual bible study proved beneficial to the understanding of the relationship that is needed between the Creator and the creation as well as between all the creatures. It was a wakeup call that raised several questions especially on the extent to which Christians have used the Bible to safeguard the creation and to renew the life of the earth and the extent to which theological institutions have integrated environmental and ecological issues in their curricula.”

The methodology used by the group was that of Contextual Bible Study [CBS] which is described in this way:

“CBS is an interactive study of biblical texts that brings the context of the reader and the context of the Bible into dialogue, for the sake of transformation. The participants were introduced to the 4Cs of CBS. These were enumerated as outlined below.

- 1. Context:** This refers to the real life situation of the readers and their real life experiences. This becomes very prominent in choosing themes of the Bible study. For instance if the theme chosen is HIV and AIDs, the lead question is *“what does the Bible say on the same?”*
- 2. Community:** The emphasis here is that the Bible is read in community rather than individually. This process requires that the voices of all are listened to and engaged with critically. This makes CBS a process of engagement rather than ‘teaching’. It is a process of sharing knowledge and resources from the side of the facilitator and the participants
- 3. Criticality:** This is the ability to use tools of biblical studies to understand the text, despite the sacred nature of the Bible. This is because human beings wrote the Bible, translated it and interpreted it in times and contexts different from our own. The emphasis here is not just knowing the answers, but also asking the **‘right’** questions.
- 4. Change:** The inevitable question that the above 3 Cs begs is, *“so what?”* This is a relevant question because CBS always has transformation as its end-goal. In other words, CBS challenges people to a point of wanting to make a difference in their churches and communities. A plan of action therefore is the culmination of CBS.

The influence on the way we read the Bible when we ensure that context is taken seriously led the group to recognise that *“insights from the East African primal religion and worldview were very instrumental in the task of understanding and interpreting the texts.”* The point that came out very strongly was that in primal societies, creation was approached and treated with awe and reverence, devoid of exploitation. Before cutting a tree, the spirits of a tree had to be appeased lest they could get angry and revenge. The same applied to hunting and fishing expeditions. The implication is that if one cuts a tree then there is need to plant more. If human beings eat animals, birds or fish, they must not put their existence to jeopardy since the future generation equally needs them.

This idea is widely held in other primal societies outside East Africa. Immediately after the first CBS workshop, the coordinator attended an international research seminar on Christian scholarship whose theme was *“primal religion as the substructure of Christianity”* in Samoa. In one of the outings to the great Island of Savai, we were informed that the Samoa people do not eat pigeons messily. According to a Samoan delegate, Samoans eat pigeons only between October and January, despite the pigeon being a delicacy. The reason for this is that they should not have the pigeons de-populated so that the future generation may not be at loss. This is a valuable tool from primal religion that could beneficially help the pursuit to safeguard the creation and to revive and sustain the life of the earth.

Having read the texts, the participants noted a longing to return to the primal days. This was especially enthused by Romans 8: 18-23 where setting the creation free from bondage was interpreted as returning creation to the former glory it enjoyed in Genesis 1 where the beauty of creation is eulogized. The general consensus was that there were ample tools in the primal religion and worldview that can give a better understanding of biblical texts, especially with regard to the relationship between the Creator and the creation and between different creations. This means therefore that insights from the primal worldview and religion may help us to focus on the work we are undertaking. As a result, it is critical that we begin to dialogue with primal religion and worldview, which has untapped resources that are radically helpful in engaging the Fifth Mark of Mission.

At the end of the second workshop the group reflected on the way East African Anglicans handle the Bible bringing out the following points:

- The participants appreciated the way they had done the work; the way the questions guided them in examining and looking at the texts and appreciated the need to introduce the CBS approach to their individual contexts.
- They also noted that the way the Bible in their individual local settings is contrary to how it was used in CBS Workshop where they read and gained deeper meanings of the scriptures. They appreciated the ways in which they had spoken to the text rather than having the Bible speak to them, reading and re-reading the text to see if the questions they were asking were the concerns the text was addressing.
- They also noted that critical questions helped them to give a close, careful, examination of the text, saying that they were able to challenge the text and also the text challenged them.
- They appreciated the fact that when everyone is an interpreter and when full participation occurs, they were able to hear the meanings being made by another.
- Those who always preach were challenged with regard to the view that that the interpretation of scripture is the way one sees it because from interactions of the CBS scripture means different things to different people. They recognized that the lens through which they read the Bible is their experience but the group participation made them hear the scriptures through the lens and experiences of others.
- They appreciated the nature and function of questions in the CBS since some moved them to more deeply explore the text while other questions led them to analyse the text or the personal and social contexts from which our voices come. Critical questions do have particular functions in the creation of meanings.

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