

Pavement Encounters For Justice

Doing Transformative Missiology with
homeless people in the City of Tshwane

Edited by:
TD Mashau (Managing Editor)
JNJ Kritzinger (Guest Editor)

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PO Box 15918
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Tel: +27 21 839 1139
Fax: +27 86 544 4622
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CHAPTER 4

“...no longer invisible...” Justice and healing for the individual in the City of Tshwane

RW Nel and C. Mangayi

Abstract

The urban community participating in this Bible study can indeed not only open the eyes of the “trained reader”, but can also expose the (spiritual) blindness that often besets the elite when reading and preaching the text. These readings can be exercises in dulling the senses of the readers, as well as those who are supposedly trained to be able to discern. However, unless our “contemplative gaze” leads to the invisible becoming concrete in order to see God in concrete ways, it would seem that the power and presence of God, in the human incarnation of Jesus Christ, has been missed. The signs, even where political organisation, hard skills, transformation or education becomes a necessary reality, remains pointers to the God who became human, the Son of Man, the light of the world – the city healed and transformed, a pointer to the heavenly Jerusalem, where justice and peace dwell (2 Peter 3:13).

Introduction

We need to look at our cities with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares. God’s presence accompanies the sincere efforts of individuals and groups to find encouragement and meaning in their lives. He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered. God does not hide himself from those who seek him with a sincere heart (Pope Francis, 24 November 2013).

This challenge of Pope Francis is daring and inspirational. Even though his immediate context is to challenge his own Roman Catholic Church, this calling “to look at our cities with a contemplative gaze” is for all of us. This is a calling towards discernment of God’s presence, and at the same time, for the Pope, discernment towards “fostering solidarity, fraternity ... goodness, truth and justice.”

Even though the notion of “justice” is used quite often in the context of structural realities and the urban poor, the calling is also deeper. In this particular chapter, we do not focus merely on the notion of justice, as such (other chapters do that in more detail and with more eloquence) but here we aim to shed light on it in relation to the very important notion of healing for the individual. Vinay Samuel seems to point towards this critical (deep) perspective. In an outline of the concluding session of the Global Mission

Issues moderated by Samuel, participants identified among the challenges the lack of an informed theological reflection in the areas of 1) production of written theological reflection on dying, death, nature of hope, eternal life and suffering; 2) engagement with pastoral issues of caring for the unlovable, forgiveness and stigma; 3) a theology of healing: physical, spiritual, relational and eternal (Samuel 2003:249-250). In these key areas one can hear the emphasis on the struggles of the individual and also the need for caring and healing. We therefore ask the question as to what insights will emerge from the Scripture reading of a particular urban and homeless community in the City of Tshwane, in relation to justice and healing for the individual.

In this particular project, as indicated already in previous chapters, we worked with the proposals of Gerald West (1993) to facilitate contextual Bible study. For us, in terms of the contextual Bible study (CBS) paradigm of West, this particular urban community represents “ordinary readers” (West 1993:8-10; 2001:171) and we chose the biblical passage of John 9:1-9, to compare their reading with the broader ideas from scholars in urban missiology and Biblical Studies who are considered to be the “trained readers” (West 1993:8-10). In allowing ourselves, as Missiology scholars or “trained readers,” to be challenged in this way, we agree with Kritzinger (2008:770) that mission is indeed a transformative encounter and that perhaps our scholarly (missiological) reflection here can best be called “encounterology.”

In this chapter, then, we firstly focus on how justice and healing, and their interrelations, more particularly for the individual, are understood in the literature. In this respect, as already indicated, our focus is on the particular pericope of John 9:1-41. Secondly, we give an overview of the particular case study, and describe how the particular Bible study was conducted and what the responses of the group were. This is followed by an analysis of the data emerging from the participants after which, thirdly, the current understanding in the first section (that of the “trained readers”) will be compared to that emerging from this analysis. We conclude this chapter with some reflections on the insights gained. But let us first say something more about the methodology that guided this project.

Research Methodology: Contextual Bible Study

This study is part of a community-engaged action research project, aimed at “doing justice in the context of homelessness” in the inner City of Tshwane. This particular Bible study attracted about twenty-six (i.e. 11 men and 15 women) homeless people who agreed to participate voluntarily in this project. They were divided into four small groups and were involved in discussing John 9:1-41, using West’s contextual Bible study method. The discussion took place on 25 June 2013 from 08:45 am to 13:30 pm. It was

facilitated by the researchers from the University of South Africa. The process started with a short “praise and worship”¹ item, then a short prayer by one of the researchers. It was followed by a self-introduction of both the group and the facilitators.

In terms of the process, John 9:1–41 was read to get a first impression about what the text was about, in relation to justice and healing for the individual. Through this interaction the group tried to understand the issues associated with this topic. All the inputs were captured on newsprint and not much discussion was allowed at this stage. Secondly, this text was read in community with others of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The interaction was guided by a set of statements and questions:

- Jesus engages with the man born blind in a number of ways: Jesus saw him (v1), touched him (v6), spoke to him (v7), found him (v35) and had a conversation with him (v35).
- What characterises each of these encounters?
- What do these encounters say about Jesus and the man born blind?
- Five other groups of people also interact with the man born blind: the disciples (v2), his neighbours and acquaintances (v8), the Pharisees (v13), the Jews/leaders of the Jews (v18, 24) and his parents (v20).
- What characterises each of these encounters?
- What do these encounters say about each of these groups and the man born blind?

Inputs generated by each small group were tabled and discussed. Participants were allowed to comment on inputs from the groups, to add or seek clarification. Thirdly, the same text was read in such a way that the issue of justice and healing for the individual was interrogated to extract meaning in relation to our contemporary context. The following questions and request guided this interaction:

- What stages of transformation does the man born blind go through? Draw a diagram illustrating his transformation.
- This person is nearly invisible in his society. Who are the nearly invisible in your society? What kind of healing do these people in your society/community need?

Finally, the text was read in such a way that clues for transformation were singled out as a plan of action to address the issue of justice and healing for the individual by wrestling with the question: How can we respond to their needs in concrete ways?

¹ See West (1993:11) on what praise and worship is.

Reading and preaching justice and healing

The choice of the pericope is of interest. Whilst Bosch starts his ground-breaking magnum opus, *Transforming Mission*, with what he calls, “New Testament models of mission” (1991:15-180), he never explicitly refers to a Johannine missionary paradigm. The engagement or encounter in this chapter is, however, not with a Johannine missionary paradigm as such, but focused on a local and more limited encounter. However, one cannot read this pericope without also setting it against the bigger canvas of a Johannine community and therefore also missionary paradigm.

For du Rand, it would seem compelling that there was a specific group of first readers, in terms of the narrative, language usage and social history (1990:16, 17; Swanson 2002:14; Dube 2002:61). The Johannine community struggled on the one hand against the all-pervasive Roman Empire (Dube 2002:61), but also on the other hand, with various different interpretations of the Jesus tradition (Du Rand 1991:17) and specifically in defiance of a form of Judaism that tried to restrict the small Christian community towards its own imperialistic religious systems (ibid). The question is then how to read the text with a focus on justice and healing for, and more importantly, with these communities. In this respect we now turn to two key scholars who influenced the study of Biblical hermeneutics, and therefore the reading and preaching of the Bible, during the last 20 years or so in South Africa.

When the Biblical scholar from KwaZulu-Natal, Gerald West, introduced his Contextual Bible Study (1993:11-25), he explained that the choice of reading the Bible in a new way, i.e. from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, comes from “our readings of the Bible and our concern for justice and righteousness” (:14). In another reflection on Contextual Bible Study (West 2001:169-184), he explains that CBS “embraces and advocates context” and is a “commitment to context”, in particular “the context of the poor and marginalised” (:169). For West (1993:14), “justice and righteousness will only come in South Africa when the needs of the poor and oppressed are addressed” and for him, this particular method of studying the Bible actually comes from the (poor and marginalised) communities themselves (West 2001:170). This shift in method became one of the key moments in what was known as Contextual Theology in South Africa.

Dirk Smit, a Reformed systematic theologian from the Western Cape, introduced a new edition of “*Woord teen die Lig*”² [“Word against the Light”] in the same year, by pointing to the critical relevance of matters

² This book appeared in a *Woord teen die Lig* series, which started in 1984, and presents a collation of exegetical material as well as outlines and guidelines of possible sermons based on selected Scripture passages. The various books in this series had different themes for preaching in the different seasons such as Advent and Lent, but also themes for the prophets, eschatology, peace etc. This particular book was about preaching for justice and righteousness.

of justification, guilt and forgiveness, but then also matters of what he calls “reg en geregtigheid” [“justice and righteousness”] (Smit 1993:1). In respect to justice and righteousness, he refers specifically to the possibility of a first and democratic election, preparing voters and negotiating a vision for the social, political and judicial order in South Africa (Smit 1993:1). He shows that there is a perception amongst members of faith communities (and pastors!) that the matters of justice and righteousness are simply about “politics” (:2).

These publications (and their authors) have played a key role in various faith communities since their release, with the explicit emphasis on this central notion of justice. For West, on the one hand, the concern for justice determines the way the Bible is read, with the “poor and marginalised”, which are two concepts he always uses together. For him, justice is about “meeting the needs” of the poor and oppressed. For Smit, justice refers to political and judicial matters and there is the perception that it is only about “politics.” We want to go further.

When Gerald West introduces his book on Contextual Bible Study (1993), as indicated earlier, he makes a distinction between the “ordinary reader” and the “trained reader,” but also between “Bible study” and “Biblical studies.” It is important to keep these distinctions in mind. It would seem that, for West, the “ordinary reader” can technically be described as “the people” or “the masses” (West 1993:9). However, one needs to be critical of an essentialisation of these categories or a hierarchy, where the “ordinary reader” is presented or perceived to be on a lower (less intelligent) level. West himself is aware of this danger. He therefore introduces two guiding assumptions in his work: namely, that both the trained readers and the ordinary readers “have something significant to offer” (West 1993:9) in reading the Bible.

It would seem that, in the work of Smit and others involved in the *Woord teen die Lig* series, only the trained reader has something to offer. The process in the development of those guidelines for preaching seems to be that highly educated (mostly white and male!) ministers and academics craft their guidelines, based on a serious study of commentaries and homilies by other Biblical scholars (mostly from the West), and the study then concludes with guidelines for a sermon. The conscious link between justice and healing for the individual, however, suggests and calls for something more. Here, we are not merely looking at “politics” or condescendingly meeting the needs of the poor, denying their agency. A fresh (deeper) perspective is needed, emerging from the pavements – a deeper, mutually transformative encounter.

Encounterological Reflections

Twenty years after the publication of West's and Smit's works, as well as the democratic transition in South Africa, justice remains a critical concept, not just for the Pope, globally (Stiglitz 2012; Rieger and Pui-Lan 2012), but also in our engagement with the poor in South Africa. In the particular case in this chapter, the poor and marginalised are found on the pavements, streets and shelters in the City of Tshwane. In our current engagement, therefore, we want to link this more concretely to the challenges of the individual, in relation to caring and healing. How would this specific community, as ordinary readers of the Bible in 2013, twenty years after the release of the books of West and Smit and ten years after the summation of Samuel, reflect on and understand a particular pericope, i.e. John 9:1-9? How could this encounter challenge and transform, not merely our understanding of the text, but also our understanding of their understanding, and their "under-standing" (being oppressed in a new context)? In our Bible studies with the homeless in the City of Tshwane, we consciously aimed at hearing both the voices of ordinary readers and of trained readers. In these encounters, we will show that new insights can emerge.

Reading through "trained eyes"

For Biblical scholars, the miracles of healing in John's Gospel are not only mighty works [dynamis] but also signs [sēmeia] (Douglas et al. 1962). They demonstrate that "Christ's miracles of healing have not only an individual, local, contemporary physical significance but a general, eternal and spiritual meaning also" (Douglas et al. 1962:317). For example, in this narrative of the man born blind, the point is made that individual sickness is not necessarily attributable to individual sin; it is rather an opportunity for the manifestation of God's power.

According to the New Bible Commentary Revised (NBCR), the healing incident provides a specific example of Jesus as the light of the world. In view of this, it states that "it is not impossible that John sees in the incident a symbolic significance" (Guthrie et al. 1967:949). Furthermore, Muderhwa (2008:1) adds that its significance is associated with many important issues arising from this text: "characterised by its richness of meaning, for example the issue of discipleship and the relationship between 'sign' and 'faith', 'seeing' and 'hearing', and 'disciples of Moses' versus the 'disciples of Jesus'." Insights from the NBCR and the Open Teacher's Commentary (OTC) (2008) as well as from Muderhwa (2008) highlight a number of issues for the trained reader.

Firstly, it is apparent that the disciples shared the belief common among the Jews of the time that suffering and calamity (like the blindness of the man) were invariably evidence of sin, even though Jesus rejected this belief (Luke 13:2-5), as well as in the opening part of John 9:3.

Furthermore, he declares that “I am the light of the world”, spoken here with reference to the opening of the eyes of the man born blind. Yet, the OTC highlights that “Jesus does not affirm that they were sinless, but that their sins were not the cause of the calamity” (OTC 2008). Muderhwa highlights in this respect that “all the classical commentators on John 9 are more interested in the issue of sin than in the issue of the disciples” (Muderhwa 2008:157). This perhaps explains the overemphasis on the issue of sin, when the trained reader deals with this text, which we argue could sometimes inhibit the choice for practical action.

Secondly, it would seem that the miracle is an “object lesson” of the truth that Jesus is the light of the world (v.3-5). Muderhwa in the OTC suggests that “the means (of healing) here described were to assist the man's faith. They were ordinary remedies in popular belief (:6)” (OTC 2008). Furthermore, the blind man's faith was strengthened in that he took a more active part (as an agent), as he went to wash his eyes in the pool of Siloam. Thirdly, these commentaries emphasise that he washed them and then came back seeing (:7). The NBCR adds that he “apparently went among his own people. Evidently he did not recognise who his Divine Healer was; otherwise he would have spoken of him as in John 9:11” (NBCR 1967:949). Nonetheless, the miracle healing and the joy of being able to see made such a difference to his appearance that some of his neighbours did not recognise him, until he assured them that it was he whom they had formerly known as blind (v.8–9).

Fourthly, there is significance in the fact that the neighbours and friends brought the blind man to the Pharisees (v.10-13). The NBCR comments that “they wanted the wonder of the man's healing explained by those who were supposed to know” (NBCR 1967:949), as notably (and controversially!) Jesus did not keep the Sabbath (v.16). In this respect, the NBCR further elaborates how the “narrow-minded among the Pharisees seized upon the manner of performing the miracle as an excuse for charging Jesus with breaking the law of the Sabbath”(NBCR 1967:949). According to this emphasis, this tense encounter opens the possibility of changing the way the adherence to the Sabbath was taught and practised by the Pharisees, and indirectly called for a transformative praxis, or at least to show a growing dissonance with the existing tradition. However, and adding to the tension, there were those among them who were awed by the miracle, and who could not think of Jesus as a transgressor (1v.4-16) but rather said: “He is a prophet.”

Fifthly, the man to whom sight was given showed more courage and insight than any of the Pharisees. The OTC explains that “it was a challenge to them to hear Jesus called a prophet. To admit that would have nullified the charge against him of Sabbath-breaking, as a prophet was above the Sabbath law (v.17)” (OTC 2008). This encounter with Jesus, by a man born

blind, was a transformative and progressive process for this man in that, whilst a little while before he had said that "a man called Jesus" (John 9:11) healed him, now he declares that "he is a prophet" and a little later he is prepared to receive (confess) him as the Son of God (John 9:38). His convictions were constantly deepening.

Finally, there is also emphasis on the actions of the Pharisees, who counteracted the convictions of this man by appealing to his feelings. This is shown when they state in the narrative: "We know that this man is a sinner. That is, they not only said they knew, but implied that they had the right to decide that Jesus was a sinner" (23 – 24). Yet the man replied with a sure conviction, "I don't know whether he is a sinner ... but I know I was blind, and now I can see" (v.25). The NBRC says that "this baffling reply rebuked the threats and anger of the Pharisees and put them back upon a consideration of the evidence" (NBRC 1967: 950). Nevertheless, this man saw through the deceit of the Pharisees and was willing to oppose them on behalf of Jesus (v.26–27). They were defeated, although they attempted to cover their own defeat by denouncing the blind man (v.28) and stating that there is a dispensation and authority established by God through Moses and by which the Jews still regulate their lives (v.29).

In contrast to the Pharisees' behaviour, the NBRC (1967:950) states that "the sovereign compassion of the Divine Healer went much further than opening the physical eyes of the blind one, whose spiritual eyes also were opened to the light." We will add from these trained readers that it seems that, in order to prepare the healed one to answer the question "Do you believe in the Son of God?" in the affirmative, Jesus showed such tender solicitude (v.30-35). Hence, we find the emphasis of the confession of this man, as the crowning result. It would seem possible that Jesus sought to illuminate this man's soul, through the gift of vision to sightless eyes of the flesh. The same view is highlighted by the NBCR and the OTC:

It should not be forgotten that in working this great sign, in which our Lord is seen as the Light of the World, he gradually leads the man, by an ascending series of acts beginning with faith assisted by physical remedies and ending with faith assured by spiritual contact, to complete recognition of him as the Son of God.

In contrast Muderhwa, however, cautions by adding:

The progress into the understanding of Jesus' identity that is made by the man born blind is not a consequence of Jesus' explicit invitation to 'follow me' and 'come and see', as we read in L.43 and 46, but a spin-off of the miracle of receiving sight. A physical seeing is symbolically constructed to transform the miracle to 'believing', which is a unique way to see God's glory. The courageous confession that challenges the unbelieving Jews to follow Jesus clarifies that in Chapter 9 discipleship is nothing other than 'discipleship into light' (Muderhwa 2008: 157).

Trained reading of this text, as highlighted above, can run the risk of an overemphasis on “spiritual insights”, thus falling short on the transformative insights which should inform praxis geared to address injustice and promote healing for the marginalised. In contrast, we now turn to the way that the ordinary readers who participated in this study saw this text in the Bible studies that were conducted.

Reading through “ordinary eyes”

It was fascinating how the group dealt patiently (and compassionately) with all the contributions, even those who, to the facilitators, might have appeared strange and eccentric. In this respect, eyes were also opened to appreciate the importance of the common journey in the Bible study. Participants presented their insights to the whole group, which formed the basis of the following summation. Whilst we tried to stay as close as possible to the original words of the participants, this section summarises the key themes that emerged from the Bible study.

Firstly, the participants generally saw in this text the problems faced by this man as an opportunity for God’s power to be revealed concretely, especially for those whose trust is in Jesus. They also saw that God’s law about the Sabbath was misunderstood and abused by the religious leaders, while in contrast Jesus was willing to assist the people in need, even on the Sabbath. Jesus is indeed the “miracle-working God” for the ordinary reader. Miracles are not spiritualised, but are experienced in a real way.

Secondly, with reference to verses 1, 6, 7 and 35, three small groups (2, 3 & 4) put an emphasis on Jesus as one who is able to see “the man in distress /pain /discomfort” and is “compassionate and wanted to heal him and felt empathy for the man.” For them, “Jesus values people more than the Sabbath”, which is why he is able to “see our needs” (Group 2) and as a result “the man did not doubt Jesus, but he just believed” (Group 4).

Thirdly, with reference to different encounters described in verses 2, 8, 13, 18, 20 and 24, the participants said that “the disciples were concerned about the source of the problem” (Group 1) and were “wondering if the blind man was blind because of his parents’ sin or he was born blind” (Group 4). The disciples were also “finger-pointing (judgemental)” (Group 2 and Group 3). While “the neighbours and acquaintances doubted” (Group 1) and were filled with “amazement / curiosity / surprise / intrigue” (Group 2 & 3), they “couldn’t believe what they were seeing” (Group 4). Meanwhile, on the one hand, religious leaders said “Jesus was not the Son of God because he healed this man on a Sabbath Day” (Group 1) and therefore they “questioned the authenticity of the healing and they wanted to discredit the good deed by saying that it was performed on the Sabbath. This is because of their unbelief and they undermined Jesus” (Group 2, 3 & 4). On the other hand, though, the parents of the man born blind “were

afraid” and “beating the dog hiding the rod” (Group 2). Yet they “testified to the truth” (Group 3) by “acknowledging that he has been cured but they wanted the blind man to speak for himself because of fear of being excommunicated (Group 4). This substantiates the perception that “the law was more important than kindness” (Group 4).

Nonetheless, in the fourth instance, all groups graphically depict (see graphics below) this encounter as a progressive and interconnected transformation process that culminated in a holistic restoration of the man born blind, whereby he is “no longer invisible” (Group 3) in the society.

Fifthly, for this group this text has to be contextualised in such a way that the “invisible people” in a society take centre-stage. For them, these invisible people include “Orphans (x4), human trafficked (x2), children (x2), the aged (x3), drug addicts, homeless (x3), beggars, the mentally disabled (x2), materially poor (x3), widows, abused women and men (x3), strangers, people of different languages, refugees and unemployed (x2), the unemployed, physically disabled (x2), people feeding from bins, and women.” From their categorisation of the “invisible people,” it is significant to highlight the frequency of categories considered most invisible, starting with orphans followed by the aged, homeless, materially poor and abused women and men.

Sixthly, with reference to the kind of healing needed, the participants suggest “they need to be seen, touched, heard, found and supported. They need to be lifted up in faith to be transformed which means “uzoy'thola kanjani uhlelekhoneni” (Group 1). This healing has to empower them “economically (material, financial, shelter), spiritually, socially, physically and politically” (Group 2). According to Group 3, it also has to do with “emotional, psychological, spiritual and physical healing, resource-associated, socio-economic associated, political intervention, holistic counselling, support and care, re-integration and hospitality” (Group 3). Furthermore, “jobs, education and income (for the poor), care for the disabled, care for the elderly and for orphans and psychosocial support (for women and children)” (Group 4) has to be integrated into this healing process.

Finally, these ordinary readers articulated a practical plan for a transformational praxis. They said:

“We need people who have experienced what we are going through (...) to form an organisation that will focus on these issues: (Group 1).

“We need to create a platform for dialogue, unite (...), expose people to opportunities (free courses and skills training such as computers, brick-making, forklift, home economics, sewing etc.). We must also have referrals to service providers (i.e. shelters) and offer psychological support (i.e. counselling).” (Group 2)

“We need to advocate for transformation, shelters, education / raising awareness, job/skills training, small business entrepreneurs, efficient documentation and service, and collaborations (government, citizens, media departments).” (Group 3)

“We need to see people as people and see the needs of people. We must work towards changing the education system to become more practical than intellectual. We must engage with authorities on constitution. We must educate and inform our communities.” (Group 4)

From the aforementioned, one can deduce how the eyes of the ordinary readers evidently “see” and read very concretely how God acted in the pericope and what the real life implications are for their own situation, as homeless in the City of Tshwane. This sense is articulated in the words, “We see people as people and see the needs of people.” The matter of a blind beggar being the object of pity for bystanders, or discussion and sophisticated theological debates for those in the centre is seen in a real way, but more so, God’s action is expected in terms of organising, concrete skills development, but also advocacy for transformation. It confirms that “concepts of healing and health refer to the bringing of wholeness and soundness to any or every aspect of human life” (David & David 1995:431).

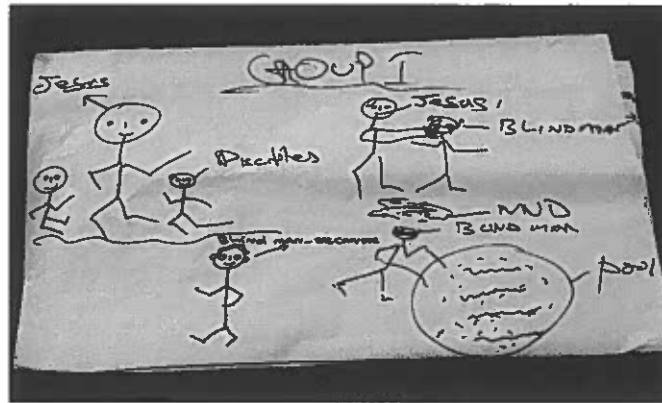
These findings point to important insights and conclusions for the way the church discerns God’s presence, in the quest for a healing justice. They essentially portray that the implications for health and healing “stretch beyond the individual to the communal, and beyond personal well-being to social, political and environmental conditions” (David & David 1995:433). With reference to Matthew 25:31-46, the real sick were to be “looked after.” That meant, in the words of Keller (2010:53), that the “ill and diseased were to be given comprehensive care until they are well” – not piecemeal, but comprehensive care. This speaks to justice and healing.

Key insights and conclusion

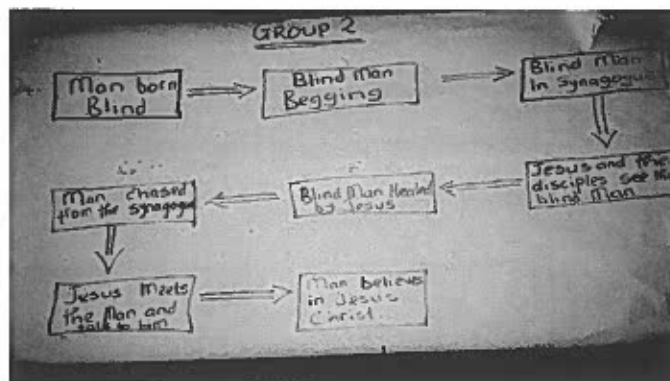
The urban community participating in this Bible study can indeed not only open the eyes of the “trained reader”, but also expose the (spiritual) blindness that often besets elite individuals and communities in reading and preaching the text. These readings can be exercises in dulling the senses of the readers, as well as those who are supposedly trained to be able to discern. However, unless our “contemplative gaze” leads the invisible to become concrete in order to see God in concrete ways, it would seem that the power and presence of God, in the human incarnation of Jesus Christ, can be missed. The signs, even where political organisation, hard skills, transformation or education becomes a needed reality, remain pointers to the God who became human, the Son of Man, the light of the world – the city healed and transformed, a pointer to the heavenly Jerusalem, where justice and peace will dwell (2 Peter 3:13).

Diagrams by groups:

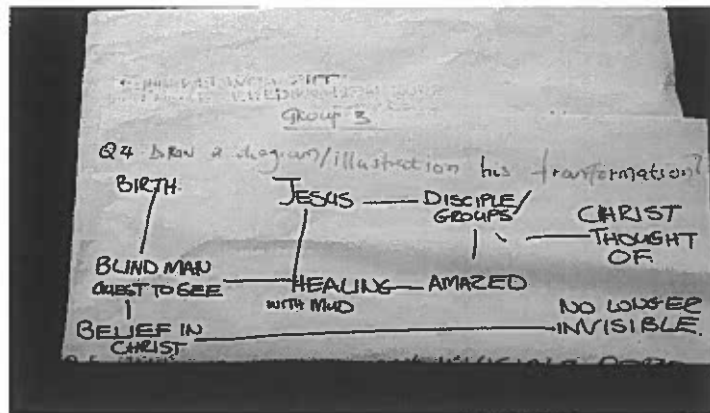
Group 1



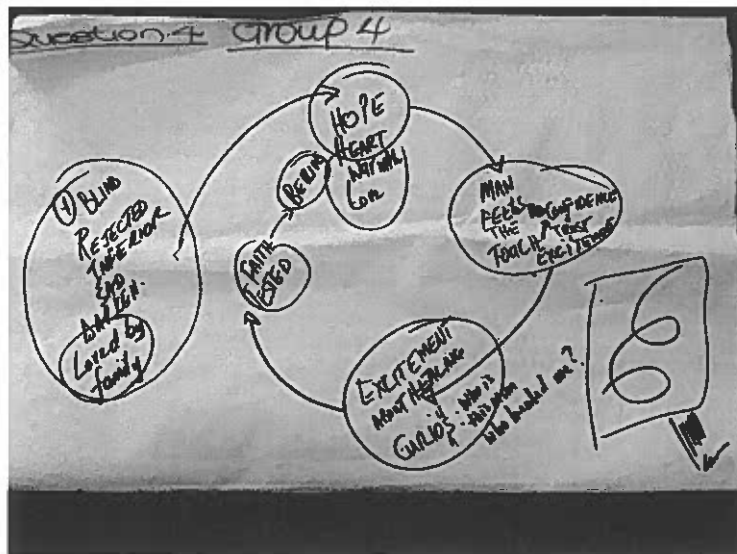
Group 2



Group 3



Group 4



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