THE ECUMENICAL REVIEW

World Council of Churches

Toward Gender Justice

Reimagining Religion, Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Acts 8:26-40

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Abstract

This article reflects on our experiences of facilitating the Bible studies for the Just Community of Women and Men pre-assembly gathering to the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in August–September 2022. Working with the text of Acts 8:26-40, commonly known as the baptism of an Ethiopian eunuch, the article reflects critically on our own facilitation as well as participant feedback from the workshop. It begins with a description of how the Bible studies were planned and developed, based on an adaptation of the contextual Bible study method. Thereafter, it reflects on how participants brought three aspects of the eunuch's identity – gender, race, and religion – to bear on the multiple and intersecting challenges faith communities experience in their various local contexts. The participants' insights and the facilitation of the Bible study revealed the ongoing importance of embodied and lived experiences in the process of biblical interpretation. This article contributes to the ongoing reflections on the pedagogical and transformative underpinnings of contextual Bible study as a method of faith engagement in diverse ecumenical contexts.

DOI: 10.1111/erev.12761

Keywords

contextual Bible study, gender, race, religion, identity, baptism, World Council of Churches

When we were invited to facilitate the Bible studies for the Just Community of Women and Men gathering before the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), we knew immediately that while the focus of this programme was on gender justice, it would be important for us, as scholars from the global South, to amplify the intersections of gender with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and religion.[1] Our commitment to biblical interpretation that surfaces and signals these intersections found enduring resonances with the text of Acts 8:26-40 (commonly known as the narrative of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch), and so this was our text of choice.

It was also immediately apparent to us that the method of Bible study we would use was contextual Bible study (CBS). CBS is "an interactive study of particular texts in the bible, which brings the perspectives of both the context of the reader and the context of the Bible into critical dialogue, for the purpose of raising awareness and promoting transformation."[2] Our collective experience – as trained biblical scholars and Bible study facilitators in local, global, and ecumenical communities of faith – as well as our commitment to the politics and ethics of transformative biblical interpretation made this choice an obvious one for us.

The CBS method has been well documented. The Centro de Estudos Biblicos (CEBI) in Brazil established this form of communal, popular Bible reading in 1979, and it was taken up in various ways by what is now the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, in 1989.[3] In subsequent years, scholars

[1] Sarojini Nadar's research interests are in gender-based violence – physical, sexual, and epistemic. This article is based on ongoing work supported by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa (Grant Number 118854) within the research theme of Gender and Religion. The author acknowledges that the opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed are those of the author alone, and the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this regard. Paulo Ueti is a theologian and a member of the Ecumenical Centre for Biblical Studies in Brazil. Johnathan Jodamus' research interests are in gender and cultural studies as well as Black theology. This article is based on ongoing work supported by the NRF of South Africa (Grant Number 138251). The author acknowledges that the opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed are those of the author alone, and the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this regard.

[2] Sarojini Nadar, "Beyond the 'Ordinary Reader' and the 'Invisible Intellectual': Shifting Contextual Bible Study from Liberation Discourse to Liberation Pedagogy," *Old Testament Essays* 22:2 (2009), 390.

[3] Gerald West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993); *Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual*, Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research, rev. version, 2015, https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/253823/6-Ujamaa-Manual-doing-contextual-Bible-study-a-resoruce-manual.pdf.

like Sarojini Nadar[4] expanded the theorization of CBS, conceptualizing the method as featuring 5 Cs: community, context, criticality, conscientization, and change.[5] A few years later, in 2015, reflecting on the work of Ujamaa and CEBI, Gerald West adjusted and adapted the Cs, swapping Nadar's conscientization for collaboration, and adding a sixth C: contestation.[6] It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into all the features and values of the CBS methodology. What is important to note is that as facilitators, we were committed to incorporating many of these overlapping elements into the paradigm within which we were working.

Community

CBS is conventionally facilitated with small, intimate groups, usually within a shared faith community context of about 10 to 30 people, often several times over a full day or even many days. However, we had about two hours to facilitate a Bible study with 200 to 250 participants of multiple linguistic backgrounds, geographical locations, church affiliations, political persuasions, gendered identities, sexual orientations, educational qualifications, social classes, and physical abilities. CBS works within a pedagogical model of facilitation: rather than teaching, the process must be interactive to allow for engaged communal learning and sharing. We therefore had to adapt the method to suit the larger number of participants. We split ourselves across the auditorium, attempting to give as many people as possible an opportunity to have their voices heard.

Whereas the method of CBS is quite flexible and fluid, we had to be fairly deliberate and direct in our facilitation in order to intentionally create a community of readers in that particular moment (different from pre-existing organic communities). To this end, we prepared strategies for how to manage such a large and diverse group. The strategy of singing together was helpful not only to get people to stop talking in their groups and return to plenary discussions but to encourage cohesiveness and shared ecumenical belonging, especially after controversial discussions in small groups where people might hold on to rather strong and dissenting ideas. At the beginning of the process, Paulo explained that when we started to sing a few verses from the short hymn "Take, O Take Me as I Am," this was a sign for groups to return to plenary discussions. The choice of hymn was appropriate given the themes of the Bible study. See Figures 1–4.

[4] Sarojini Nadar, "Hermeneutics of Transformation? A Critical Exploration of the Model of Social Engagement between Biblical Scholars and Faith Communities," *Scriptura* 93 (2006), 339–51.

[5] Nadar, "Beyond the 'Ordinary Reader,'" 384–403.

[6] Gerald West, "Reading the Bible with the Marginalized: The Value/s of Contextual Bible Reading," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1:2 (2015), 237–42.

Figure 1. 29 August 2022, Karlsruhe, Germany: Bible study session at the Just Community pre-assembly to the WCC 11th Assembly. The 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches was held at Karlsruhe, Germany from 31 August to 8 September, under the theme "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity." Photo: Albin Hillert/WCC.
[Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Another way of establishing community is to read the text out aloud together. The act of reading a text together for the purpose of study is different from listening to the lesson at a traditional church service, where one is preparing to hear a sermon. The idea behind reading the text aloud is to read it with fresh eyes and together. As biblical readers, we often imbue the text with received interpretations ranging from bedtime stories and Sunday school narratives to Sunday sermons and even seminary and university training. Reading the text out aloud with a community of readers helps one to hear a text anew.

Since CBS is about raising awareness and conscientization of injustices, we set the tone at the beginning by intentionally focusing the audience's attention on linguistic injustice. Reading the text aloud when one is reading with people who share the same language is fairly easy. In the assembly context, this was not the case. In this meeting alone, we probably had over one hundred languages represented, not counting the main

Figure 2. 29 August 2022, Karlsruhe, Germany: Bible study session at the Just Community pre-assembly to the WCC 11th Assembly. Photo: Albin Hillert/WCC
[Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

languages used at the assembly – English, French, Spanish, and German. We asked one of the participants to read the text in Bemba (a language spoken in Zambia). Not having her Bemba Bible there, she had to have her husband email a photo of the text to her, since an online Bemba version of the did not exist. This was our first moment of conscientization and awareness raising. We were able to draw the participants' attention to linguistic privilege and how such privileges are so entrenched that we hardly notice them. It was also important to evoke this unfamiliar tongue in the space to remind ourselves of the dominance of colonial languages.

After the participant read the text in Bemba, we again read the text aloud from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), in English, the *lingua franca* of the workshop.

> Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot

Figure 3. 29 August 2022, Karlsruhe, Germany: Bible study session at the Just Community pre-assembly to the WCC 11th Assembly. Photo: Albin Hillert/WCC
[Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Figure 4. 29 August 2022, Karlsruhe, Germany: Bible study session at the Just Community pre-assembly to the WCC 11th Assembly. Photo: Albin Hillert
[Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

> He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:26-40)

Once the text was read aloud, we began facilitating the Bible study using the pedagogical strategy of the remaining 4 Cs of CBS. These were not employed formulaically, but they informed how we proceeded.

Context

A useful way to establish contexts of the participants is to ask them to identify the themes of the narrative. Their answers reveal more about their own contexts than even they themselves first realize. When we asked participants to identify the main themes of the narrative, we divided them into groups, some according to where participants were sitting and others according to linguistic preferences (a practical consideration to save time on translation). Other participants communicated in their own languages, and

we had translation devices on hand with translators communicating so that everyone understood what the participants were saying.

As the facilitators, we walked among the participants when they broke up into smaller "buzz" groups discussing key themes; after a few minutes of discussion, we asked a member of the various groups to communicate the key themes and discussion points from their groups to the larger audience. The discussions were engaging and interactive, with many participants so eager and keen to participate that we had a hard time as facilitators rounding off the discussions. The conversations continued well into breaks and even into the many days of the assembly, with many participants articulating appreciation for how this method allowed their voices to be heard.

After the participants spent several minutes discussing their perception of the main themes of the text, we then asked some of them to share the themes their groups discussed. These were captured verbatim as they were articulated in the plenary session as follows:[7]

- Community overcomes barriers
- Eunuch and gender identity
- Namelessness
- Theological education
- Relations that develop
- Empowerment
- Restoration
- Agency (when asking for baptism)
- Inclusive mission that leaves no one behind
- Holy Spirit
- Grace
- Joy
- Satisfaction
- Deliverance
- Action
- Faith
- Piety
- Obedience
- Joy of learning
- Transformation

[7] We are grateful to Emma Rahman for her meticulousness in capturing the various responses from the participants.

- Queen Candace (overlooked although she is a leader)
- Philip heard, accepted, and acted on the call
- Eunuch reacted
- Extension of God's mission to Africa
- Intergenerational interaction (Philip – Young, Eunuch)
- Class distinctions
- Salvation is not inclusive
- Attitude of eunuch – although high ranking, humble, open to learning
- Courage for Philip
- Gospel grows
- Important scripture for LGBTQI+
- Acknowledgement of relationship with Africa
- Who is represented?
- Which bodies matter?
- How inclusive has this text been?
- Weaponization of Sexuality
- Baptism as a rite to belonging in the church

This exercise achieved exactly what we had intended. It surfaced the manifold issues facing faith communities in global contexts. In many faith contexts, this story is often reduced to individual spirituality, dealing with matters of personal piety and faith, or doctrinal aspects such as baptism, or even missiological outreach such as the expansion of the gospel. However, the themes that emerged from the pre-assembly went beyond faith, doctrine, and mission and dealt also with matters of identity, gender, inclusion, agency, and body politics – subjects often left out of polite Sunday sermons using lectionary resources. The surfacing of these themes from the participants themselves brought us strategically to the third C: criticality.

Criticality

In biblical narratives, what we find are not just (contested) historical accounts of the past but an invitation to reflect on the present in light of the past. This is precisely what the exercise of thematic identification helped to encourage. And yet, understanding some of the story in its own context is helpful, too, so that we can think of biblical stories not just as windows into another world, where we get to peer into the lives (imagined or otherwise) of those who have gone before us, but also as a mirror[8] or, as

[8] See Johnathan Jodamus, "Why (Do) We Still Need Black Theology? A Pedagogical Case for Intersecting Black Theology and Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Liberating Black Theology: Emerging South African Voices*, ed. Demaine Solomons and Eugene Baron (Cape Town: Sun Media Press, forthcoming).

Charlene van der Walt and Hanzline Davids more aptly put it, as "a reflective surface."[9] To think of the Bible as a dynamic reflective surface is to allow ancient biblical voices to become dialogue partners for contemporary communities. Without giving a long lecture on ancient historical and sociological background using historical-critical methods, we instead used the prompts and reflections coming from the participants to illuminate and expound on some of the key socio-historical and cultural contextual idiosyncrasies emerging from the text.

In this way, we did not superimpose our scholarly understanding of the ancient world onto the participants. Instead, we were guided by their understanding of the text and, when needed, and spurred on by their reflections, we came alongside them and complemented their understanding of the text with the relevant ancient Mediterranean sociocultural historical specificities that further illuminated our conversations. This is what it means to read critically in community and context. This leads well into the last two Cs of the CBS: conscientization and change.

Conscientization

Conscientizing communities of faith about injustices happens in the part of the Bible study when participants are asked to reflect on their contexts in light of the text. In this part of the Bible study, we asked the participants to reflect on this challenge: "If baptism includes full inclusion, what prevents people from full inclusion in your own communities of faith?"

As with the question on thematic identification, we asked them to reflect on this question in small groups. These were some of the responses captured from the feedback:

- gender, age, race, sexual orientation, disability, widowhood, infertility, social background (segregation based on religion), wanting to help the outsiders (but only outside, not in spaces we claim)
- Why do we need to be included? Who includes us? Women are affected by inclusivity (Women's ordination), cultural differences, children baptism
- Fear of cultures around us, not understanding the bible, having a closed mind, different theologies of baptism
- Certain cultural practices exclude/hinder baptism
- Status, fear of surveillance, fear of commitment, fear of stigma from religion (seen as lower class), misunderstanding of baptism

[9] See Charlene Van Der Walt and Hanzline Davids, "Heteropatriarchy's Blame Game: Reading Genesis 37 with Izitabane during Covid 19," *Old Testament Essays* 35:1 (2022), 40–42.

- Cultural practices that influence theology, how does the right of baptism affect relationships, baptism matters in marginalized context which gives the person a right to family
- Geographic locations, exclusion of global south – felt left out, social classism, so called 'historic' churches vs less-historic churches that are excluded in this ecumenical framework
- Rigidity – thinking our systems have same authority as scriptures, professionalization of Christian faith over who has authority
- Tradition excludes – not only to people but to practices, within counterreformation context
- Not honest about fears, lack of safe spaces
- Churches relating identity to national (or ethnic) identity
- Challenging of [what constitutes] holiness?
- Lack of religious freedom, selective reading of biblical texts which exclude women
- Physical conditions – seeing, walking: cannot have the same access as people who are physically able, geographic difference between north and south, power plays to prohibit unity, speaking of the grace of God as exclusionary, providing access to theological education
- Are we asking other religions if they want to be included to Christ's love
- In a multireligious setting – fear of persecution, shame of poverty, people being excluded for mental health

There were so many issues to draw on from the rich and extensive list provided by the participants. We obviously could not do justice to all of them. In light of the prominence of the global Black Lives Matter movement during the COVID-19 pandemic, we inevitably focused on the issue of race as it intersects with gender, sexuality, and class.

The issue of race comes up in various ways in the text that may not be the way that race and Blackness come up in contemporary times. What was starkly evident from our shared reflections was the fact that the Ethiopian eunuch has economic power – he is a minister of finance from a powerful kingdom. What came up was that in many of our conversations in ecumenical circles, the response to racism is often from a place of charity and development rather than justice. As a result, people of colour tend to be portrayed as being on the margins or as poor, and therefore the response is one of charity – the call to be attentive to "the least of us."

The participants pointed out, based on their own lived experiences, that this lens of charity obscures the real systemic reason that people are on the margins – which is racial injustice, colonization, queerphobia, apartheid, caste structures, and so on. It was

clear that the challenge was to speak concretely and not abstractly about racial and other oppressions. A recurring point was that naming structures of oppression is important work.

This required a discussion on actual bodies rather than just bodies of knowledge.[10] The text points to important questions in this regard. Which bodies matter? – which is a question of identity. How do bodies matter? – which is a question of intersectionality. How are bodies portrayed? – which is a matter of the politics of representation. While traditional interpretations tend to gloss over the actual body of the eunuch and focus instead on his spiritual body (his salvation), we centred his body in our reflections along three key aspects, related to the eunuch's own question of what is to prevent him from being baptized:

- *Body and gender*. In ancient Mediterranean society, the eunuch was "un-man"[11] because he was a castrated man. Therefore, he would have been relegated to the outer courts of the temple in Jerusalem to worship.
- *Body and sexual orientation*. The eunuch's sexual orientation is not made clear in the text, but we know that certainly any same-sex orientation would prevent him from full inclusion.
- *Body and race*. The eunuch was clearly a Black African man from what is now Sudan. How are Black bodies limited from full inclusion?

We asked the participants: What if the question posed by the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch was a rhetorical statement rather than a question? What if we gave the eunuch some agency? After all, marginalized people don't need their marginalization explained to them. They live it daily. And so, we offered the participants another option for interpretation. Knowing fully all of the many things that would exclude him from baptism, the eunuch instead gives Philip an opportunity for conversion.

1. The eunuch commands that the chariot be stopped.
2. The eunuch identifies that there is water.
3. The eunuch demands his full inclusion through the symbol of baptism.

These three options seemed more acceptable to the participants as a way of reinterpreting the text. We ended with these reflections on the first day of the Bible study with the following question: How will you be an agent for full inclusion at the

[10] See Obioma Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa's Way," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29:2 (2004), 363.

[11] See Brittany E. Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke–Acts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

assembly? This question was taken up more fully in our reflections on the second day, where we worked more intentionally with the final C: change. The discussions in the small groups on the previous day revealed myriad issues in local faith contexts that would have taken weeks to work through if we were to do justice to each one of them. What was important (and realistic) at this point was to surface them and amplify them for discussions going into the main assembly. This was achieved in this part of the Bible study, as we each provided the closing reflections on sexuality, race, and religion.

Change: Closing Reflections

The story is familiar to many of us – it is a post-Easter story, and the apostles are taking seriously the mandate of spreading the good news. Philip is no different and is occupied with his evangelization when he is asked by an angel to stop what he is doing and to go and meet this Ethiopian eunuch. As we considered the significance of this story for the main assembly theme, "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity," we asked the participants to consider who the character of the Ethiopian eunuch was. Who was this ambiguous man who sought to be baptized, who was seeking inclusion into a community of faith through the ritual of water baptism? As already stated, three aspects of his identity were important for our consideration of this passage – first, the eunuch's sexual and gender identity; second, his ethnic or racial identity; and third, his religious identity.

Sexual and gender identity

A eunuch was a man who was castrated, that is, he had his testicles removed in order that he might serve the royal household. Why would royalty need such a man? They had to be men who could be trusted with the royal women (that is, not to enter into sexual relationships with them, whether consensual or not) so that the bloodline to the throne and inheritance rights could be secured. By severing the men's testicles, the royals ensured that the eunuchs would be incapable of fathering children. Historical scholars tell us that while there may have been instances where men were forced against their will to be castrated and to serve the royal household, usually the most appropriate candidate for the role of a eunuch would be someone who was known not to desire women. So, eunuchs would be chosen from among such men. Even though the ancient world did not work within the same categories of homosexual and heterosexual as we do today, scholars of the ancient world and even Jesus in Matthew 19 indicated that various types of eunuchs could be identified: the Matthean Jesus says the following: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are

eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can" (Matt. 19:12).

This category of eunuchs who were this way from birth seems to be about men who from childhood may not have shown an interest in women and may very well have shown an interest in men. These were therefore the ideal candidates to serve as eunuchs to protect the royal bloodline. So, when this eunuch introduces himself to Philip, Philip would know immediately and exactly the kind of person he was dealing with. The question we asked the participants to reflect on was the following: As we go into the assembly, who are the people who are seeking full inclusion and what are their sexual and gendered identities?

Ethnic and racial identity

Added to the gendered identity, we again drew participants' attention to this unnamed eunuch, also identified as an Ethiopian. The term "Ethiopian," like the term "Moor" in the ancient world, was used generally for anyone who was darker skinned. More specifically in this text, it refers to someone who came from an area that historians have noted might be close to modern-day northern Sudan.[12] Contrary to common colonial portrayals of modern-day Ethiopians, this was a powerful and wealthy kingdom, and so the eunuch held an important position as treasurer. We might even go so far as to refer to him as the finance minister of the state serving the Candace, queen of Ethiopia. "Candace" means queen mother and was not a proper name. Instead, it meant the one in charge of the administration of the kingdom since, as many scholars note, the king was regarded as a god and therefore could not be involved in mundane matters such as the administration of a kingdom. The question we asked the participants to reflect on here was how Black lives matter in the assembly context and in the ecumenical context. What are the complex relationships between economy, race, and religion?

Religious identity

On the matter of the religion of the Ethiopian is where scholars seem to differ the most. Is he a Jew? Is he a Gentile? Is he a Gentile convert to Judaism? Does he follow the religion of the sun god? We could only raise these questions and not go into detail with the participants, as this was not a classroom context. The point we sought to make was that while the details of the eunuch's religious identity were obscure, we do know from the text that he is returning home after a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for worship and that he is, when Philip finds him, sitting in his chariot reading one of the prophets

[12] See Halvor Maoxnes and Marianne B. Kartzow, "Complex Identities: Ethnicity, Gender and Religion in the Story of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8: 26–40)," *Religion and Theology* 17:3–4 (2010), 184–204.

– namely Isaiah. So, with that background in mind, we asked them to return to the text and the question the eunuch asks of Philip, which we wanted to centralize: "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

What indeed?

The New Revised Standard Version provides no answer to the eunuch's question. Instead, we simply read that he "commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him." We encouraged the participants as they went into the proceedings of the assembly to stay with the question, as this was not just a rhetorical question. Given the eunuch's racial, gendered, and religious background, if he thought long and hard, he could have found many reasons that prevented him from being baptized. If we understand baptism to be the key to freedom to live and love and worship in a community, and we know what we know of the eunuch, then the question of what would have prevented him from being baptized becomes more real.

Conclusion

What indeed prevented the eunuch from being baptized – from being freely welcomed into the community of faith? In the end, it was nothing – not the religious laws and not his own fears. While the text tells us that after his baptism he goes away rejoicing, we also know that this idea of freedom might be slightly idealistic. This is because even when we are welcomed into our communities of faith, our lived experiences are sometimes based on false ideas of inclusion: "We gave you a space, now you abide by our rules!" But actually, as a community of faith we may need to reconsider what we mean by conversion to faith – in this story is it really the eunuch who is converted, or is it actually Philip?

Jesus invites us to cut off the branches that do not bear fruit in the gospels. What branches did Philip need to prune so that he might be more faithful to the liberating message of the gospel? Did he need to surrender his own power, privilege, and positionality to understand this Black African Christian queer? What privilege did the eunuch need to prune to understand this new religious movement that aligned with socialist values? How would he, as minister of finance of such a powerful nation, need to be converted?

And when the Black Christian queer (albeit wealthy, and we see the importance of an intersectional optic here) is welcomed, what might prevent him from staying in the so-called house of freedom?

We ended with an adapted blessing of St Francis:

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts …

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and the exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace …

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy …

And may God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done – to bring justice and kindness to all.