

Unsettling Theology: Sunday school children reading the text of the Bible in the age of recolonisation



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During Women's month in South Africa (August), a group of Sunday school children from the rural congregation of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), Middelburg-Nasaret, got together to read the narratives of the resurrection of the daughter of Jairus and the healing of the woman suffering from a blood disease. The exercise which appears to be quite innocent is in a sense subversive in its hidden script. In the Reformed tradition, the pulpit as a centre of reading and preaching the Word has become the 'holy of holiest' which nobody, leave alone children, except the ordained minister could occupy. This is of course contrary to the intention of the Reformation to return the Bible to the people and have the people return to the Bible. The reading exercise of this article goes beyond all exegetical and theological presuppositions, unsettling conventional interpretations of Scripture. The children allow their real life experiences in the township of having witnessed, among others, child and women abuse to inform their reading of Mark 5:21–43. In the process they avoid a linear reading of the Bible which is based on the explication-application scheme of matters. Put differently, instead of doing a deductive reading of the portion, i.e. trying to explain or exegete the text clinically and then applying it to their context, they read it inductively, resulting in a hope sharing and hope giving understanding of the rising from the dead of the 12-year-old girl and the healing of the woman with a blood disease. A major spin-off of such reading of the Bible by children is the unlocking of refreshingly new avenues of reading the Bible and interpreting the text.

Introduction

The main objective of the article is to investigate a Bible reading exercise of Sunday school children in a rural township in South Africa in the matrix of women's month. Of paramount interest is to analyse whether they arrive at a more contextual reading of Mark 5:21–43 in which stories of a 12-year-old girl who was resurrected and a woman who was healed from a blood disease if they are assisted by a facilitator in understanding some of the historical and sociological realities behind the text. Are new avenues for reading, analysing and interpreting the Bible opened up?

The article is organised as follows. Firstly, based on the data gathered in August 2015 and April 2016 a description is given of real life experiences of participants in the Bible reading sessions in the township. Secondly, one of the modes in Contextual Bible Study suggested by West (1993:26–50), namely a reading behind the text is called into service, albeit more implicitly than explicitly in interpreting the text. A reading behind the text will be experimented with in further research to see whether the children in the reading exercise bring their own context into conversation with the text of the Bible. Thirdly, data is further analysed to see whether children's reading of the Bible necessarily unsettles conventional theology in opening up new avenues of interpretation. Fourthly, a brief reflection on why the participation of children is important, concluding with some findings and recommendations.

Right to participation

Well-meaning expressions like 'creating space' or 'accommodating' or 'factoring into' in relation to children could still be interpreted as rather patronising and evidence of the power matrix between adults and children. No wonder that experts in the field of working with children seem to suggest as a non-negotiable the location of such, and squarely so, in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, also CROC or UNCRC). The CRC has been adopted on 20 November 1989 in New York and became effective on 2 September 1990. At a Child Theology conference Prest-Talbot (2015) drew strong attention to the non-negotiability of dealing with children's issues in the context of children's rights and the serious ethical questions in research with children. She engaged critically on the pertinent question on the balance between presenting the interpretations of children 'uncut' and showing some measure of provocation. This remains a rather complex matter in any research

with children, not least in theology. In a follow up electronic consultation with Prest-Talbot (2016), attention was drawn to documents on children's rights, ethical and strategic issues relating to involvement with children. In the article, children's right to participation is brought into the discourse in terms of a definition of the participation of children and the outcomes of such participation.

Participation of children

The right to participation of children is looked at briefly. Before introducing Article 12 of the Convention for the Rights of Children which speaks to participation wariness of the following reality is paramount. In the world in general, and South Africa in particular there are children who are so poor, so unequal, so pauperised, so excluded and so utterly traumatised that the best and noblest of rights are of no consequence in their lives. Liberal documents like CRC are valuable, but they do not necessarily address themselves to the category of children described thus.

Article 12 of the CRC contains important elements on the participation of children though. It states that:

Every child capable of forming views, has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting him or her, and that their views must be given the weight in accordance with their age and maturity ... parents and guardians must have regard to the evolving capacities of children. (Art. 12)

Article 12 of the CRC states that every child, capable of forming views, has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting him or her, and that their views must be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. Not only is it a fundamental right, but the Committee on the Rights of the Child has identified it as an underlying principle which must inform the implementation of all other rights. Article 5 clarifies that when providing direction and guidance in the exercise by children of their rights, parents and other guardians must have regard to the evolving capacities of children. In other words, they need to recognise that children acquire skills and competencies as they grow up and they are able to take an increasing level of responsibility for decisions that affect them as these capacities develop. Articles 13–17 address the following elements: the child's right to freedom of expression, religion, conscience, association, privacy and information. Together, these civil rights have been broadly conceptualised under the term 'participation'. The Convention itself does not use the term 'participation' Rather it has been widely adopted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, as well as the wider child rights community, as a shorthand to describe the realisation of these rights.

Freedom of the Holy Spirit

Working with a sensitive nature as far as children's rights are concerned, it is, however, necessary to avoid any manner of technical engineering. Put differently, the official documents on the rights of children cannot rigidly guide and control processes among children. This holds true in general and in religious matters in particular. Working with children is not

like doing quality control in a factory where products are tested. Particularly in theology space is allowed for the freedom of the Holy Spirit to lead children to new insights innovative and creative modes of understanding and interpretation. And though new insights and modes of understanding could be scrutinised empirically, they are not as easily measurable as products made in a factory.

Research methodology

Two research methods are used. Firstly, a rather limited literature study is undertaken aimed at supporting the construction, albeit it tentatively, of contours of a Child Theology emanating from the reading of the Bible. Since the research and the writing of the article deal with a very specific exercise, sources on Child Theology in general cannot simply be called into service as shown elsewhere (Botha 2016). There are, however, some sources showing relevance for the current project. Secondly, the main thrust of the research is an empirical study based on questionnaires for qualitative research. In August 2015 a group of Sunday school children got together for the reading and interpretation of Mark 5:21–43 in the context of women's month. This was followed up by a focus group from the initial researchers completing a questionnaire consisting of seven questions. The responses to the questionnaire form the basis of the reflection in the article. In the first instance the process was co-facilitated by Kirkman, a Sunday school educator and Bezuidenhout who acted as scribe. In the second instance, questionnaires were handed out and children requested to complete those in their own time and submit. They were free to involve siblings, friends, peers and adults in discussing the questions, but ultimately they were responsible for completing and submitting the questionnaire.

Data were analysed with a view to verify whether there is a sense of agency with the children and how they read their context from the perspective of abused women and vulnerable children. Since a letter of consent has been processed the responses are analysed by mentioning the first names of the participants not only as a technical research issue but also as a measure of respectfully affirming participants in their agency.

Real-life experiences of children in the re-colony: On agency and context analysis

Before looking at the data gathered on two levels the first task is to provide an approximation on the re-colony. Why re-colony and not post-colony? Why would the township of Nasaret be identified as a re-colony? In South Africa it remains important to locate the discussion in the context of the much avoided question of colonialism of a special type which is in essence the same as colonialism in general, but with the following distinct feature: the coloniser and the colonised sharing the same geographical area on a radically unequal basis. A rather concrete feature of colonialism of a special type is the creation of townships in terms of the infamous Group Areas Act. In the analysis of Cronin

(1989:70–78) townships were constructed for purposes of ‘encirclement’ and ‘containment’.

Saul on recolonisation

The construction ‘re-colony’ is based on Saul’s (2008:47–82, 2009:333–367, 2014:43–70) notion of recolonisation. In brief and in very broad terms the underlying assumption with Saul is the disappointing failure of the project of decolonisation. He argues that instead a rampant form of recolonisation is seen in the mode of the emergence of the Global Capitalist Empire with devastating consequences for the Global South. He draws specific attention to the continent of Africa which he typifies as the ‘Fourth World’, suggesting that if the situation in the Third World could be described as serious, that of Africa is even worse. In engaging the development question Saul (2009) quotes Arrighi to clarify the actual problem:

A seemingly ‘iron law’ of a global hierarchy of wealth that stays in place no matter what the governments on the lower rungs of the hierarchy do or do not do – regardless, that is, of whether they delink or do not delink from the global circuits of capital, pursue or do not pursue power and status in the interstate system, eliminate or do not eliminate inequalities among their subjects. (p. 356)

In Africa, says Saul (2009:352) a ‘cruel symbiosis’ has been established. It is a symbiosis between global capitalism looking for profitable opportunities and a local political elite ‘bickering within itself for precedence and privilege while feeding off this global system’. The symbiosis is perhaps best captured by an anecdote cited by Saul (2009:361) of a Mozambican politician who suggests that the biggest moment of Mozambican politics in a particular year was when the government went to Paris to meet with the donors, calling this the moment of the actual meeting of the parliament.

In summary, and concretely for Saul the recolonisation seems to be manifesting in the following realities: the complete dominance of the global capitalist empire and its concomitant effects on Africa in the form of lack of development, a growing trend in socio-economic inequalities and lack of industrialisation. In describing the South African township as a ‘re-colony’ the basic assumption is that this is the location where there is generally very little or no development and where people bear the brunt of socio-economic inequality.

Questionnaire: Data presentation

Question 1: What do you know about National Women’s Day that is celebrated on 9 August every year in South Africa? What great event took place 60 years ago on this date? And
Question 2: How do you feel about the position of women in South African society? How are women viewed and treated in South Africa? Do you know of stories where girls and women are seriously abused?

In their responses, participants collapse two issues: knowledge of the particular day and context analysis. The

intriguing aspect to the responses relating to National Women’s Day is the consistent use of the term ‘fight’ or ‘fighting’ instead of ‘struggling’ or ‘mobilising’, for example. Ashwell refers to women’s month as ‘the month in which women fought for their rights’, Shanell sees it as the month (is) ‘about women fight for equal rights and Delmonique concurs that ‘the month is important...women fought for equal rights’. In follow up research it might be interesting to unearth why they use the very expressive metaphor of ‘fighting’. A speculative question is whether this does not feed into the nature of township life and the harsh realities prevailing in a place constructed for marginalisation, encirclement and containment.

Some of the responses speak clearly to the township realities. Lya refers to instances of verbal abuse among women themselves with specific reference to a mother and daughter. Austin tells the horrific story of a friend of his who raped his own sister while the grandmother is rendered absolutely powerless and not able to do anything about the situation, although being fully aware of what was happening. Ashwell relates the story of a girl being forced to sleep with someone without the police being called in. Hazel tells the story of a young mother on drugs who thrashes her child without feeding her. Delano knows of a friend who mistreats his grandmother by swearing at her and not giving her food.

In the contact session with those participating in the reading exercise a strong impression rose that the fragments of analysis on their community should not only be seen as a statement of fact, but also revealed the emotional involvement of participants in what was occurring around them. What could be teased out in a next round of research is whether the involvement emanates from underlying values like community solidarity and care. A further issue is whether their reading of context might result in some form of action in favour of victims of abuse.

Question 3: Write in your own words how you understand the stories about a 12-year-old girl and a woman in the text from the Bible. Does it bother you that their names are not even mentioned?

In responding to these questions the participants go beyond a mere recycling of the stories as shown by the following examples. The responses of Leigh-zhaan, Nicole, Lauren and Lorna draw attention to the issue that the woman with the 12-year-old blood disease went to different doctors, but was not healed as related in the story. In the responses there has been a free reign of the imagination though. Ashwell speculates that the woman was ‘weak, sad, never smiled and in despair’. Delano suggests that she ‘did not want people to come near to her and wanted to be alone at home’. Amy imagines someone who was ‘weak, paralyzed and could not walk up straight’. Despite her very serious condition, however, ‘she did not become discouraged, although she was in a dark room’ (Austin). Most respondents accentuate the manner in which the woman

reacted to Jesus. Nicole and Leigh-zhaan, for example, suggest that when she heard about Jesus she believed that she could be healed. Lya thinks that the woman 'did not believe anymore, but on hearing of Jesus, she got encouraged again'.

On the question, whether it bothers respondents that in the story the females remain anonymous, most respondents express concern about it. Only one respondent makes room for the possibility of 'sometimes people do not want their names to be mentioned'. The reactions of Nicole and Leigh-zhaan go further than merely showing concern. They indicate respectively that 'women and girls were not regarded as important' and 'women were seen as not as important as men'.

Question 4: If you think of your own immediate situation, how would you read the healing of the woman?

In answering question 4 none of the respondents reveal a connection between the healing story and their own context. The responses are general in terms of saying that she went from doctor to doctor, but no doctor could heal her. They also emphasise that it was only by faith in Jesus that she got healed. The closest attempt at bringing the healing story into interaction with the context of the respondent is the statement from Lya: 'people can go to a traditional doctor and not be healed'. It was necessary for the facilitator to point out that the statement should not be taken to be generally applicable to all traditional healers since there would be instances where some treated by a traditional doctor were healed. By the same token there are numerous cases of patients treated by biomedical doctors who were not healed. One respondent states that 'not doctors, but the Lord heals people', however, not ruling out the prospect of the Lord 'working through doctors' if there is a faith expectation (Lorna).

The take of respondents on the father of the 12-year-old girl in the story relating to his attitude towards Jesus and his disposition in a situation of serious bereavement, shows statements like: 'sad and terrified' (Austin), 'he loved his family' (Hazel), 'he was an important man' (Chenay) and 'the man did not give up hope and asked the Lord to heal his daughter'. Generally respondents seem to be impressed by the disposition of humility of Jairus in coming before Jesus despite the fact that he was a top dog in society: 'he was not haughty, but displayed faith (Shanell), 'he came like a little boy to kneel before Jesus showing humility despite the fact that he was an important man' (Lorna).

Question 5: If you think about your own immediate situation what significance does the story of the girl have for you? What does the world and life of a 12-year-old girl look like?

This is the question where the responses were weakest in that there is no attempt at all in reacting to the question directly by bringing their own context into some conversation with the story of the 12-year-old girl. Respondents rather draw attention

to the interesting feature in the story of the number 12. There was speculation in the group on the meaning of numbers in the Bible. For example, that the numbers 7 and 12 are symbols of perfection which in the context of the story could signify the following: that Jesus would perform perfect deeds or miracles in healing the woman from 12 long years of a blood disease and resurrecting the 12-year-old girl from the dead.

If some measure of overlapping is assumed between the different questions of the research, there is such between questions 1 and 5. In the responses to question 1 there are indications of the context of the respondents. Generally, the responses reveal an abysmal situation of woman and child abuse.

The specific responses to question 5 speak in some instances to the issues of faith and hope: 'if you believe and trust Jesus all your avenues will open up and your life will be all right' (Leigh-zhaan) and 'we should not give up hope and that we should have faith in God' (Nicole).

Question 6: What other aspects of the story do you find important and why?

The respondents reacting to this question highlight Jesus's differentiation between death and sleep. The respondents echo the utterance of Jesus that 'the child did not die, but was mere sleeping' (Leigh-zhaan, Lorna, Shaun and Nicole). Shaun adds to this that 'only the Lord knows when someone has died'. What is also highlighted by respondents is the pronouncement of Jesus for the girl to arise. Respondents seem to have been fascinated by the prophet manifestation of Jesus: 'Talita koem' which bears the meaning of 'girl, I tell you to arise'.

Question 7: Does this reading of the Bible help you to look at the text of the Bible in new ways and reading it in new ways. If yes, in what way are you helped to understand the story in new ways?

The responses to question 7 feed mainly into the miracle of the resurrection of the 12-year-old girl. In trying to reflect on how the reading of the story might be helping them in arriving at new avenues of understanding respondents interpret the rising of the girl in ways which show perhaps more than with some of the other questions, connections between the story and their own context. If read against the background of the narratives of woman and child abuse in the community, the interpretations are quite revealing: 'to get up and serve the Lord' (Delano Silas), 'stand up and serve the lord' (Lya), 'we must stand up for our congregation to help people in the situation' (Ashwell), 'we must stand up for our congregation and help where we can' (Hazel).

Reading the Bible in the re-colony: On theological reflection

Based on responses to all questions it would be safe to infer that there is a particular understanding emerging, albeit it

still fragmentary and tentative, of bringing text and context into conversation with one another. In the responses to question 7, there are snippets coming to the fore which suggest that the rising of the 12-year-old girl might not only be an historical event but could also be understood metaphorically. The rather brief responses show that the resurrection of a young girl is interpreted as a metaphor for standing up in a particular context.

There is, of course, a very clear connection created between text and context or more specifically the story of the rising of the girl and her immediate context by Lorna in stating: 'We must stand up for the people in our congregation, because we do not work with one another against drugs. It seems as if everyone has given up'. Shanell equally makes the connection by saying that 'it brings us hope to do something about against it'. Chenay sees the story of the resurrection of the girl as a source of solidarity: 'to put yourself into the position of people with problems'. In the face-to-face session, it was clear that the statement was made in the context of woman and child abuse.

Analysis of data

Snippets of analysis appear as part of the above presentation of data relating to the contact session with participants in August 2015 and the interviews through a questionnaire in April 2016. To wrap up, some further analysis now follows by way of summary more than elaboration. In collapsing questions 1 and 2 the important issue emerging from the data is some level of consciousness pertaining to the situation of women. The data reveals bits of social analysis relating to the forms of abuse in the community of women and children. Responses to question 3 show the sense of imagination among the participants relating to the condition of the woman suffering from a blood disease. An obvious aggravating aspect of the woman's life must have been further impoverishment caused by spending all her money on doctors who were not able to heal her. As already alluded to, the responses to question 4 do not show any specific connection between the text of the Bible and the context of participants. The dire need for healing in the re-colony on different levels has clearly not been called into service as a source of conversation with the story of healing from Mark 5. A similar lack of connection between text and context is seen in the responses on question 5. This needs to be assessed, however, against the overlapping between questions. Once again, responses to questions 1 and 2 show instances of woman and child abuse. Turning to question 6 it should be shown perhaps that one of the respondents makes a statement like 'get up' or 'stand up', 'you are finished sleeping' which could be interpreted as meaning: the time has arrived for you to stand up to the issues in the community. The time is now to rise up and to tackle the issues of woman and child abuse. This is of course the exact manner in which question 7 is responded to by participants in understanding the resurrection of the girl in the story metaphorically as a call to rise or to 'get up' or 'stand up'.

The importance of participation

Working with children in the congregation of Middelburg-Nasaret in the form of reading the Bible in context is a tentative step towards creating greater participation of children. In this context, it is paramount to clarify the importance of participation. If it is not done, the very research project could quite easily degenerate into another form of abuse. Any further research with the children of Middelburg-Nasaret should be assessed and scrutinise thoroughly for its delivery on what their participation bring to children. Among others, the CRC identifies the following four issues as important outcomes of child participation:

- Empowered children can become active and effective advocates for the realisation of their own rights. Though not advanced explicitly it would be fair to suggest that in embryonic fashion there is a resolve with participants in the reading of the Bible to stand up for their own as well as the rights of others. In the evolvement of consciousness it is hoped that there will be a growing awareness with the participants of the necessity of advocacy.
- Children acquire skills, knowledge, competencies and confidence through participation. It therefore enhances their development and contributes to the aims of education outlined in Article 29, their optimum development, in accordance with Article 6 and their capacities to exercise their rights, consistent with Article 5.

Since there was a lapse in time between the August 2015 contact session and the research with questionnaires in April 2016 the following tentative development could be observed: that some knowledge with reference to women's month and the importance of National Women's Day in South Africa has been acquired and greater confidence in participating in the second round. An important aspect of further research is to stimulate and assess greater self-reflective skills and competencies. Concretely this entails making sure that the research process delivers on assisting participants to see their context as a complex of inter-relationships and interconnections and more particularly to understand the power dynamics at play.

- Participation leads to better protection. Children who are silenced and passive can be abused by adults with relative impunity. Providing them with information, encouraging them to articulate their concerns and introducing safe and accessible mechanisms for challenging violence and abuse are key strategies for providing effective protection. Children who have access to information about health and sexuality are better able to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV. Child workers who form and join associations may be able to protect themselves better against exploitation and abuse. Opportunities to participate have been found to be of particular importance in situations of conflict and emergencies.

Having children participate in an exercise like reading the Bible in context is potentially empowering, because they have the freedom to express their views on the holy

book itself. Hopefully this will have a destigmatising effect as far as child participation is concerned and an equalising effect since children can now occupy space in an area that is traditionally reserved for adults or the clergy.

- Participation promotes civic engagement and active citizenship. Through experience of direct participation in matters of concern to them, children acquire the capacity to contribute to the creation of peaceful and democratic societies which are respectful of human rights. Participation contributes to a culture of respect in which decision-making is undertaken through negotiation, rather than conflict. Children also learn that human rights are reciprocal and mutual and not a route to selfish individualism. Community participation in government decisions helps improve public services, holds public officials to account, ensures justice and strengthens the rule of law.

The participation of children opens up new avenues for inculcating values. To be sure, in a situation where core values in society like love of peace, love of justice, democracy, respect and love of human rights are trampled upon by adults children remain the only hope for the creation of a qualitatively different society. A minimum set of values should consciously and deliberately be factored into any future research project with children in the context of reading the Bible.

Unsettling theology

The notion of unsettling theology could be interpreted in terms of a double meaning. Firstly, it could refer to the kind of theology aimed at reading the Bible to children. Put differently, it could be understood to mean that there is a child theology emerging that is drawing church and theology out of the comfort zone. In the Reformed churches the mere reading of the Bible to children where they are allowed space to render their own interpretation of a text from the Bible might be unsettling or disruptive for that matter. Secondly, it could mean that conventional theology is being ruffled by the rise of child theology. Even the research results presented here in their rather fragmentary form could be seen as unsettling in at least the following respects. If the discussion is limited to the Reformed churches for a moment an interesting example would be to look at what is happening in Sunday school. By and large any investigation into the matter may reveal that good material is being used, but that the teaching which takes place is still very old-fashioned. Sunday school children are approached as empty containers to be filled and not as agents who should be allowed space to bring their own experiences into play. Clearly the research with children is aimed at an entirely different situation where the agency of children is respected. In itself that is potentially unsettling if not disruptive to church and theology.

The two points raised here in unpacking the double meaning of unsettling theology could be likened to the concept liberating theology. On the one hand liberating theology refers to the kind of theology propounded and on the other hand it speaks to the liberation of theology itself.

Findings and recommendations

The limited and fragmentary nature of the research is conceded more than once in the article. A fair criticism at a Child Theology conference in August 2015 where provisional research results were presented was that this is not yet Child Theology. The issue was that there was not good provocation from the facilitator and that Child Theology is a theology of children and adults. The questions for the second round of research were consciously formulated in a way that would be slightly more provocative than in the contact session. Already some progress has been recorded in a few important areas. Firstly, an evolvment of consciousness is to be observed on the following two levels: children in the research group begin to accept their entitlement to participation and their right to air their views and they are developing a new consciousness relating to the position of women and children society. On women the emerging consciousness is corroborated by statements like 'many women are leading the men by being bread winners when men do not want to work' (Lya) and 'women are very strong- even when they get hurt they can always rise again and proof someone wrong'. Some consciousness on gender equality is also shown: 'There has to be equality between men and women' (Austin).

An interesting source of further research might be whether there is a growing consciousness among the participants in the reading of the Bible.

A further issue in the research is to ensure greater benefits for the participants. This can only happen if the outcomes envisaged are deliberately factored into the research project and if they emerge more and more as co-researchers and not only respondents. Of great importance also is checking the research against children's right with specific reference to the right to participation.

Yet another issue is whether the reading of the Bible should not be structured more coherently in terms of a particular reading strategy. A very fine example of such a strategy is the Contextual Bible Study (CBS) of West (1993:26–50) which draws from three modes of reading, namely in front of the text, in the text and behind the text. The research results presented in the article show something of a reading in front of the text. According to West a reading in front of the text is about looking into metaphors, images and key words.

Apart from the very helpful modes of reading CBS clearly defines the different roles of the facilitator and the readers in this reading strategy. It is assumed that the facilitator will be someone with training and consequently able to give the kind of input that would enrich the process. Typically the trained facilitator would be expected to provide input on a reading in and behind the text. With reference to the current research project the hunch is that exposing children to a reading behind the text in particular may assist greatly in working harder on an in-depth reading of the own context.

In broad terms, a reading behind the text entails an investigation into the historical and sociological background to a text (West 1993:29–34). Helpful research results are emerging in Child Theology on contextual Bible reading. Two examples must suffice. Firstly, the plight of orphaned girl children in the context of the killer disease HIV/AIDS and patriarchy in Botswana are brought into conversation with Luke 4:18–19. The disease and the scourge of patriarchy as an oppressive and destructive reality are confronted with the ‘heart of Christ’s mission ... that of setting children, women and men free from systemic oppression’ (Gabaitse 2014:65). Secondly, the text from Luke 9:46–48 is interpreted contextually in the light of the appalling situation of deprivation, want and disease of children in the *favela* of Jardim Olinda outside the city of São Paulo in Brazil. The challenge of reading the text contextually was to ‘let the Jesus of Luke 9:46–48 invade the reality of a 21st century Brazilian slum’ (Christine 2014:191).

A very helpful instrument might be the pastoral or praxis cycle of Holland and Henriot (1983) with its four steps of insertion, context analysis, theological reflection and planning. In the embryo, all four dimensions are emerging in the current research data. In ongoing research the dimension of insertion or agency (Kritzinger 2008) could be provoked by the facilitator creating space explicitly for children to tell their own stories. The same applies to context analysis. Children should be assisted in a manner that is not imposing or forcing the issue to develop skills in analysing their context more rigorously. In theological terms they should be provoked into and encouraged to learn to read the signs of their context. They should be assisted further to allow the dimensions of agency and analysis to inform their reading of virtually any text from the Bible and to develop appropriate strategies for action.

There is a need also for the deepening of theological reflection. A source of deeper reflection might be the bringing of the rising or standing up metaphor consciously into discourse with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Emerging from the research data already is a clear interpretation with participants that the rising of the 12-year-old girl should inspire them to ‘stand up’. In the context of Child Theology immensely creative fragments are to be found on relating the resurrection of Christ to the real life experiences of children. White and Willmer (2014:118) speak of ‘little resurrections’ which they understand to be ‘a way of conceiving (if only fleetingly, like a shaft of sunlight that breaks through the passing clouds)’. This metaphorical manner of speaking derives from the deep theological understanding that:

God in Christ is hinge, breakthrough, and door opening. God in Christ is liberation into newness of life, not a revolution that claims to take us out of this present, ambiguous, imperfect world into an unambiguous perfection, but as a love in persistent service, enduring in hope and faith. In the risen life of Christ, we may live again with God as he is in the world in Jesus doing good, showing truth. (2014:118)

Conclusion

The article is a tentative contribution to what is embryonically and potentially an ongoing project of developing a Child Theology in the community of Nasaret in Middelburg, Mpumalanga. What has been achieved is to draw authentic, albeit fragmentary data from children in the community by reading them a text from the Bible. The data shows an evolving consciousness relating to the situation of women and children in the community. A further issue is that there is an understanding of the agency of children on two levels coming to the fore: the right to participate and agency as ‘standing up’ to issues in the community. Clearly, a lot more needs to be done in developing a genuine Child Theology. Gentle provocation is needed to help children in reading the text from the Bible contextually, more consciously and deliberately so. Reading strategies which are available should be called into service. Some experimentation with CBS and an application of the praxis cycle as a research, organising and structuring principle or instrument might warrant interesting results.

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Competing interests

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Appendix starts on the next page →

Appendix 1: Letter of consent

This is to declare that I the undersigned,.....
....., consents to participation in the research project facilitated by Nico Adam Botha from the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, School of Humanities, College of Human Sciences at Unisa. I further consent to completing a questionnaire and grant permission that my first name may be used in the presentation of research results.

Signed at Middelburg, Mpumalanga on the 13th of August 2015.

.....
Parent/Gaurdian

.....
Participant

Appendix 2: Questionnaire

Question 1: What do you know about National Women's Day that is celebrated on 9 August every year in South Africa? What great event took place 60 years ago on this date?

Question 2: How do you feel about the position of women in South African society? How are women viewed and treated in South Africa? Do you know of stories where girls and women are seriously abused?

Question 3: Write in your own words how you understand the stories about a 12-year-old girl and a woman in the text from the Bible. Does it bother you that their names are not even mentioned?

Question 4: If you think of your own immediate situation, how would you read the healing of the woman?

Question 5: If you think about your own immediate situation what significance does the story of the girl have for you? What does the world and life of a 12-year-old girl look like?

Question 6: What other aspects of the story do you find important and why?

Question 7: Does this reading of the Bible help you to look at the text of the Bible in new ways and reading it in new ways. If yes, in what way are you helped to understand the story in new ways?