



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.
Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Have you ever received aid from an unexpected source in a time of need? What happened, and what did you learn from this?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Glory to you, O God:
you created the world to flourish and be whole,
reflecting your steadfast love and passion for justice.

Glory to you, O Christ:
for us and for our salvation you overcame death,
and opened the gate to everlasting life.

Glory to you, O Holy Spirit:
you lead us into the truth, show us the way,
and breathe new life into us.

**Glory to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
now and forever.
Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 25:1 – 10

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
**O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.**
Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you're the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.
**Be mindful of your mercy and steadfast love, O Lord,
for they have been from of old.**
Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
**according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!**

Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
**He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.**
All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of relationship and overflowing love,
we've come knowing there's much in our lives
and in the life of the world
in need of your renewal and restoration,
which we bring to you now in prayer:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the times we've failed to love one another:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the injustices and oppression in our world:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the failings and disunity of your Church:

Restore us and heal us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of transformation and hope,
you sweep us up into the movement of overflowing love,
setting us free from the past,
to flourish in the future.

Thank you that you forgive, restore us,
and transform us.

Amen

Readings Micah 6:6 – 8
Luke 10:25 – 37

Sermon

Whilst I've largely lost my accent these days, having lived in various parts of the country, I am originally from Lancashire. I grew up on a pretty deprived council estate, which was the kind of area where the local community was quite close-knit; we knew our neighbours, and people looked out for each other. However, as well as suffering from the impact of high unemployment, and the problems that brings, the culture was very conformist, which it made harder for somebody like me who was a bit 'different'. I was an academic and bookish kind of teenager who was no good at the sorts of things which made people popular, like sport. We had a go at golf once as part of a post-GCSE activities week, and whilst I was alright enough on the driving range, things went awry on the actual course. One time, after no fewer than seventy failed attempts to hit a ball, I managed to send it two metres backwards – that's how bad I am at anything requiring coordination! At home, I was a young carer, and looked after my mum and brother when dad was at work. His job was both seasonal and low-paid, so we could not afford the branded sportswear that was so beloved of my peers. All this meant I did not 'fit in', and suffered for the fact.

One of the things that helped me to survive in that environment was finding spaces to go where I felt safe, and could be with people who encouraged me. One of those spaces was the local library. My walk there meant running the gauntlet of going through the neighbouring estate, but it was worth the hassles which were sometimes involved. The librarian had been working in there for decades, and had known me since my dad first started taking me along, when I was a toddler. She was a great listener and quietly supportive; her encouragement was key in giving me the confidence to become the first in my family to go to university, despite my parents' opposition. Being a constant and caring presence in local communities can make a big difference to the lives of people within them. Since becoming a Christian in my twenties, I've learnt that this involves making a commitment to living

in a way that sets others free. Sometimes, that means joining in with positive and life-giving projects already ongoing in our communities, but at other times, it means challenging aspects that are unhealthy, and which stop people from flourishing.

Today's New Testament reading shows Jesus challenging some of the unhealthy dynamics he saw at work in his own community. He'd recently sent out seventy disciples to the places he himself intended to go, telling them to proclaim the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God by words and actions. It seems their adventures had gone well, and they had returned celebrating what had proven possible for them in Jesus' name. However, this early missional work had also attracted the attention of those who were sceptical about who Jesus was, and what he was doing. In our passage, a lawyer seeking to test him out asked what he needed to do to get eternal life. When quizzed about how he interpreted the Law of Moses, he told Jesus that at the heart of it lay two commandments: to love God with all your soul, strength, and mind – from Deuteronomy 6:5 – and to love your neighbour as yourself, quoting from Leviticus 19:18. However, this lawyer was not satisfied with being told to go away and live these principles out. He wanted to justify himself and his actions, and thus he asked a follow-up question: just who is my neighbour?

To make some sense of why the story Jesus told proved itself to be so powerful, we need a bit of background. The rivalry between Jews and Samaritans had a long history, going back to a time over seven hundred years before Jesus' birth. God's people had divided up into two separate nations at this point, with Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. Samaria would eventually become the capital of Israel, and Jerusalem the capital of Judah. The outcome from centuries of being conquered and forcibly taken into exile was that relationships between the two groups turned seriously sour. Things got so volatile that the Jews trashed the rival Samaritan temple on Mount Gerazim, in 128 BCE. That is an awful lot of water under the bridge, and so it

is unsurprising that despite a shared heritage, Jewish folk regarded Samaritan people as deeply suspect. The feeling was mutual; theirs was a fierce and bitter local rivalry.

Knowing the background helps us see why the Parable of the Good Samaritan would have been shocking, even offensive, to most of its first hearers. A man was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho, which in those times apparently involved a four-hour hike through a rocky, deep, twisting canyon that at its widest point was about twenty yards across. He was set on by a gang of robbers; they stripped him, beat him up, and left him for dead. A priest and then a Levite going down that road both saw this injured man, but walked by on the other side. Many commentators argue they were worried about being rendered unclean by touching a possibly dead body, as this would have ruled them out from fulfilling their duties in the Temple. However, I wonder if it is significant that the victim was travelling *away* from Jerusalem. If the two religious professionals were also heading towards Jericho and thus away from their tasks, it reveals their actions as less about ritual purity and more simple failure to do the right thing. Either way, it was a Samaritan, a hated outsider, who bound the man's wounds, and paid for his future care. To the lawyer, being forced to admit the Samaritan was the one in the right, and not a fellow upstanding Jew, must have been pretty grating!

At the core of this story is a major challenge to something central to how many of Jesus' hearers understood their national and religious identity, which in those days were bound up together. Particularly in the context of Roman occupation, the system of ritual sacrifice from the Law of Moses was key in helping people to maintain a sense of who they were. However, the danger within all this was that keeping the Temple show on the road risked becoming more important than those principles underpinning it all. Here, there are parallels with the situation facing the Prophet Micah, in our Old Testament reading. A witness to turbulent and troubled days, the Israel of Micah's era was

under attack from the Assyrians, leading to an influx of refugees into Judah, and a tightening up of national security. People were scared, and feeling overwhelmed. The ruling classes took advantage of this situation to ruthlessly acquire wealth at the expense of the poor and the vulnerable; the opening lines of Micah 6 highlight this damaging misuse of power. Yet, those same rulers were convinced God would nonetheless remain with them as long as they carried on performing the prescribed rituals, as long as they kept the show on the road.

Micah stands against this empty, self-serving religion, pointing to a radically different way to be which harked back to the Law of Moses. Instead of pursuing self-interests, the people of God needed to take proper care of the poorest and the most vulnerable. Faithfulness to God within that context was not about offering large-scale sacrifices of the best, most 'ritually perfect' produce, nor was it about following the practice of neighbouring nations and offering up child sacrifices, effectively giving up on their future to sustain the present. What God required from them – and requires of us today – is as simple and as hard as acting justly, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God, in all our being and doing. Now, it is important to notice what is, and is not, going on here. Micah isn't providing step-by-step instructions for building an Ikea-style flat-pack nation. Instead, through him, God was and is offering a vision to explore and enact.

So, what might all of this mean for us today? Well, we are called by God to be a constant and caring presence in our local communities, to be God's hands and feet, to make a difference within the lives of other people. This means committing ourselves to living in ways that set others free to live that abundant life which Jesus Christ came to bring. Like those in Micah's time, our nation is facing a great deal of uncertainty as we grapple with war in Europe, the cost of living crisis and deepening polarisation within society, as government and parts of the media alike propagate their culture wars. Today's Parable of the Good Samaritan challenges us very profoundly, calling on us to

reach out to people who are different to us in various ways – neither buying into negative stereotypes that reinforce division, or retreating into a cosy religious world that makes us feel safer, but blinds us to the injustices facing others.

Jesus practiced what he preached – he risked crossing boundaries, to show God's love for all the people he encountered. I wonder what boundaries we might need to cross in order to embody and proclaim God's love for all people? After all, as Methodism has believed from John and Charles Wesley onwards, salvation is possible for anyone and everyone, which means there is no such thing as a person who doesn't matter to God. My own experiences have taught me that the biggest thing that stops us crossing boundaries is fear. Fear makes us want to put up barriers to keep others firmly at arm's length, even to the extent of shipping some of the most vulnerable people across the world rather than welcome them here. Yet, for all this, the driving force behind the Good Samaritan's actions, Micah's prophecies and Jesus's ministry was compassion. May we be people whose actions flow from love and compassion, rather than fears, for as Jesus said, 'I've come so that they may have life, life to the full'. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Emerson Powery's 2022 book *The Good Samaritan* explores some different interpretations of this parable and their ethical implications.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing