



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

Who are some of the people who played a significant role in bringing you to faith? What was it about them that impacted you?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 139 (StF 835)

At the end of the Psalm, we join in saying:

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

Reading John 1:43 – 51

Sermon

Who are those people who have made a difference to you, and who invited you to come and see Jesus? I didn't grow up going to church, but came to faith as an undergraduate student. Having initially been quite reluctant to set foot in the University Chaplaincy Centre, it was free food that enticed me over the threshold. While I was there, I got to know some of the other students, and it was quite an eye-opening experience for me. They had a level of integrity which pulled me up short; and made me question the vehement atheism of my teenage years. Perhaps I had got it wrong, and there might be something to Christianity after all! That started me on a journey of exploration and discovery which eventually led me to making a commitment to God, when I was confirmed a week before I graduated. It was not a quick process, but one which, having been invited to come and see Jesus for myself, has changed my life for the better in so many ways.

The gradual nature of my story of coming to faith contrasts with the abruptness of the turnaround for Nathaniel which we heard about in today's passage. It seems he had something of an epiphany, which was so sudden, it even took Jesus by surprise! This story forms part of a unit (John 1:35 – 51), which begins with the calling of Peter and Andrew as the first two disciples (1:35 – 42), and then turns towards Philip and Nathaniel as Jesus travels to Galilee (1:43). Having been called by Jesus himself, Philip continues the pattern seen within the earlier part of the unit, by inviting Nathaniel to come and see Jesus, just as Andrew had encouraged his brother Peter to do so. There is a growing understanding evident here, from John the Baptist calling him the Lamb of God (1:36) through to Nathaniel recognising Jesus as 'Son of God and King of Israel' (1:49), amidst a revealing account that tells us much about who he really is.

As we discover later within this fourth and final Gospel to be written, Nathaniel was from Cana (John 21:2), and the local rivalry between Cana and Nazareth was intense – hence his sarcastic remark when

Philip told him about how he'd found the one written about by Moses and the Prophets. Could anything good *really* come out of Nazareth, he wondered, as his friend invited him to come and see for himself? This initial prejudice reflects the ways local rivalries play themselves out, then and now. It's a bit like me, as a Lancashire lad, wondering if anything good could possibly come out of Yorkshire! However, the scepticism he brought was dispelled by Jesus' reaction to him. This requires just a bit of explanation, as John wasn't claiming Jesus saw Nathaniel under the fig tree in a *physical* sense, but a *symbolic* one, gesturing towards to a deeper set of realities.

It could point to him as one learned in the writings of Moses and the Prophets, drawing on imagery from Proverbs 27:15 that reminds us that the more we explore the texts (or search for figs!), the more we find there. Alternatively, it could be drawing on Micah 4:4's vision of Shalom, in which all have their own fig tree, meaning that Nathaniel was one who lived in peace. The latter makes more sense of Jesus' first comment about his being a 'true Israelite', without deceit (1:47). Either way, while we don't know exactly what it was about that short exchange which shifted Nathaniel's mind, the change was dramatic. He declared Jesus to be 'Son of God and King of Israel' (John 1:49), which at this stage almost certainly meant he recognised him to be the Messiah, rather than anything more. For his part, Jesus seemed to be quite surprised by this reaction and his response was intended to be humorous, I reckon. Speaking with the plural 'you' to all of the first few disciples, he promised them that they will see greater things yet (1:50), including angels ascending and descending from heaven onto the 'Son of Man' (1:51), which was his favourite title for himself.

This was a reference to the story (in Genesis 28:10 – 17) of Jacob's Ladder. Jacob was a trickster, who was always trying to get one up on his brother, Esau, even as they emerged from the womb. Having cheated Esau out of his birthright, he was forced to flee with just the clothes on his back when Esau turned on him. Yet, in a dream, God

showed him a ladder with angels going up and down to heaven, and told him that he would return in peace and prosperity. Jacob named the place where this happened Bethel, which means 'God's house', and it became a great sanctuary, a centre of Israel's early worship. When people remembered this story, they knew God would be with them when they worshipped in God's house. So, by drawing on this image, Jesus was pointing to his both fulfilling and going far beyond those promises that had come to be associated with the Jerusalem Temple. God was now dwelling with Israel – tabernacling with them – in the very person of Jesus himself (1:14).

In other words, then, Jesus was saying that those who followed him would see what it is like when heaven and earth are opened to each other, and all of this came about because Philip invited Nathaniel to lay aside his initial scepticism, and come and see Jesus for himself. Sometimes, we can be rather reluctant to invite the people we know to come and see Jesus for themselves. I wonder if this is sometimes because we are nervous about being rejected by others, or mocked for our faith in a secular society. However, very few people come to faith by being argued into it, and there's a pattern in this part of John that has been built on successfully down the centuries – inviting the people we know to come and see Jesus for themselves – and letting God work. Research into viewing figures for online services suggest that many folks out there are spiritually hungry, but I can guarantee that nobody is looking for the Church. They are looking for God.

So, how might you invite someone else to come and see? Checking out an online service could be a stepping-stone, or joining you in an outreach or service activity may be another. The possibilities, when you think about it, are endless, but the principle is the same. Be like Philip. Invite people to come and see Jesus for themselves, and put your trust in God to work. The response you get will not necessarily be as dramatic and sudden as that of Nathaniel; it took me years to get from crossing the threshold of the University Chaplaincy Centre

to coming to faith in my own right. However, you simply never know what might happen in the fullness of time if you take the risk of being willing to invite others to come and see Jesus. Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God made a covenant with the people of Israel, calling them to be a holy nation, chosen to bear witness to his steadfast love by finding delight in the Law of Moses.

The covenant was renewed in Jesus Christ our Lord, in his living, loving, dying and rising again from the dead. In him, all people may be set free from sin and its power, and united in love and obedience.

In this covenant, God promises us new life in Christ, and we promise to live no longer for ourselves, but for God. We meet, therefore, as generations have met before us, to renew the covenant which bound them, and binds us, to God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

Let us bring to God those things which hold us back from giving God all that we have been, are, and will become:

On the thoughts, words and deeds for which we're sorry,
let your light shine.

On the hurts, griefs and burdens we carry,
let your light shine.

On the injustices and inequalities of our broken world,
let your light shine.

On the failings of your Church, and the disunity of your Body,
let your light shine.

On the poverty of our worship and selfishness of our prayers,
let your light shine.

On the exploitation of your world, and our lack of care for it,
let your light shine.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of renewal,
you have broken the yokes that burden your people,
and through your Son,
you draw us to yourself once again,
making us your holy people.
Thank you that you forgive our mistakes,
heal our wounds,
and inspire us to live in the light of your love.

Amen

Covenant Prayer (*MWB*, pg.289 – Prayer **B**)

Beloved in Christ, let us again claim for ourselves the covenant which God has made with his people, and take upon us the yoke of Christ.

This means that we are content that he appoint us our place and work, and that he himself be our reward.

Christ has many services to be done: some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honour, others bring reproach; some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests, some are contrary to both; in some we may please Christ and please ourselves; in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.

Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us.

Therefore, let us make this covenant with God our own.
Let us give ourselves to him,
trusting in his promises, and relying on this grace.

Lord God, holy Father,
since you have called us through Christ
to share in this gracious covenant,
we take upon ourselves with joy the yoke of obedience
and, for love of you,
engage ourselves to seek and do your perfect will.
We are no longer our own, but yours.

**I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,
exalted for you or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing;
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen**

Recommended Resource of the Week

Adrian Plass and Jeff Lucas's 2010 book *Seriously Funny* explores what it is to follow Christ in the midst of the messiness of real life. It is a good example of others inviting us to come and see through the sharing of their experiences.

Prayers of Intercession

God of transformation and hope,
we bring to you our prayers for your world.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those living in places blighted by war and conflict
and all those displaced by hostility and hatred.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who are ill or suffering, and for people working
in hospitals at this time of unprecedented pressures.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for schools, colleges, and universities at the start of
a new term, especially for those facing exams this year.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our local communities, thinking especially of any
people we know who are feeling lonely, isolated or afraid.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for your Church throughout the world and especially
for those communities of which we are a part.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those people we know who are suffering in body,
mind or spirit today.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who are bereaved, or struggling as a result of
other losses, amid these dark and cold winter days.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

Lord's Prayer

Blessing