



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

Think of a time when you have contributed to efforts to work towards social justice. What did you do, and what was the outcome?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 19 (StF 803)

The heavens are telling the glory of God
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
One day pours out its song to another
and one night unfolds knowledge to another.
They have neither speech nor language
and their voices are not heard,
Yet their sound has gone out into all lands

and their words to the ends of the world.

In them has he set a tabernacle for the sun,
**that comes forth as a bridegroom out of his chamber
and rejoices as a champion to run his course.**

It goes forth from the end of the heavens
and runs to the very end again,
and there is nothing hidden from its heat.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
**the testimony of the Lord is sure
and gives wisdom to the simple.**

The statutes of the Lord are right and rejoice the heart;
**the commandment of the Lord is pure
and gives light to the eyes.**

The fear of the Lord is clean and endures for ever;
**the judgements of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.**

More to be desired are they than gold,
more than much fine gold,
sweeter also than honey dripping from the honeycomb.

By them also is your servant taught,
and in keeping them there is great reward.

Who can tell how often they offend?

O cleanse me from my secret faults!

Keep your servant also from presumptuous sins
lest they get dominion over me;

so shall I be undefiled, and innocent of great offence.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in your sight,

O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

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

Endlessly creative and relentlessly risk-taking God,
all there is exists because your life-giving love
flows from that fiery tango between Father, Son and Spirit.
You crafted human beings to reflect your nature,
with hearts made for powerful prayer and passionate praise.
When we turned away from your pathways of life and love,
striking out in our own misguided directions instead,
and tuning out our siblings' cries for justice,
you came among us as a vulnerable baby, as a refugee.

You grew into the man who embraced the world in love
with arms outstretched upon the cross,
breaking the chains of sin that bind us,
removing the blinkers of self-interest that blind us,
and rising again so that evil will never have the last word.
Your Spirit continues to inspire and disturb us,
as she blows through the Church and the world,
bringing winds of change and speaking words of truth.

When we have shied away from doing what we know is right,
open our minds and grant us courage.

When we have ignored the plight of the oppressed,
enlarge our hearts and grant us compassion.

When we have been on the receiving end of injustice,
comfort us and strengthen us.

Hear the gracious words of the whirlwind God,
who sweeps messy and muddled people, like you and me,
up into that sky-scraping, death-defying rhythm of love,
whose pulsating music reverberates through all creation:
'Your sins are forgiven. Go forward in faith, hope and love'.
Amen

Reading Luke 4:14 – 21

Sermon

Today's passage from Luke 4 is amongst the most powerful and the most revealing in the New Testament. In it, Jesus returns to his own, to his hometown of Nazareth, and does something that would have been familiar to the people he'd grown up with – standing up on the Sabbath and reading in the synagogue. However, the events of that particular day proved anything but familiar. Following his baptism in the River Jordan, the same river which the people of Israel had once crossed to enter the Promised Land, Jesus had been thrust out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. Those forty days had tested Jesus by setting before him the temptations and challenges that lay ahead as he sought to fulfil his baptismal calling, as God's Son and Israel's longed-for 'servant-Messiah'. Having wrestled with the 'devices and desires of his own heart', to quote the Book of Common Prayer, and passed the test, he quickly gained a reputation for himself as a great preacher in the synagogues of Galilee. Now, on his homecoming in the synagogue in Nazareth, he set out his stall in decisive fashion.

Standing up to read, Jesus was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and he quoted just two verses (61:1 – 2), which pointed towards the people of Israel being called by God to be a light to all of the nations, through whom others would be blessed. This was the reason for all that talk of a 'chosen people' in the Hebrew Scriptures; God was not interested in being the 'private deity' of a select group but in renewal and transformation of the whole creation through the people shaped by their encounters with and knowledge of overflowing divine Love. God works humanly, as Rowan Williams notes, and those two short verses capture what this looks like in practice: preaching good news to the poor, releasing the prisoners, restoring sight to the blind, and setting the oppressed free. By itself, quoting this text would not have caused a stir, but then he rolled up the scroll again, handed it back,

and sat down ready to preach in a typical Rabbinic style, which was an astonishingly audacious thing to do.

Not everybody could become a Rabbi. It's not like today, where one can download a certificate from the internet and proclaim oneself to be an ordained minister. It took years of learning and study, starting in childhood, and culminating in being apprenticed to an established Rabbi, taking on their yoke, and being disciplined by them. This hadn't happened with Jesus. Yes, he had impressed experts in the Temple in Jerusalem as a precocious twelve-year-old, but all that was a long way from Nazareth and he had not subsequently been through such a process of formation and development. Yet, here he was, the son of the local carpenter, ready to preach. Those who remembered him from childhood must have been taken aback. No wonder a hush fell, and all eyes were fixed upon him as he began to teach.

Jesus said, "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your own hearing", in one short sentence setting the room ablaze. Isaiah's words, spoken as Israel resurfaced from six desperate decades of exile in Babylon, pointed towards the mysterious figure of the Messiah and God's all-encompassing love. Here was Jesus not just identifying himself with the Messiah, which was controversial enough, but claiming this text as his manifesto, and daring to suggest that this applied beyond the people of Israel, by tweaking the original wording and ditching those references to vengeance on evildoers which follow. Luke tells us his hearers were astonished, which we often assume to mean amazed with Jesus's public speaking, but I think Tom Wright's take upon this passage makes more sense of what comes next. The crowd weren't astonished by his prowess, so much as his daring to tell people who hoped for a 'military Messiah' figure to restore them to the top of the pile of nations that their vision of God was much too small, and that God's grace stretched way beyond anything they dared (or wanted) to imagine. It makes sense both of Jesus going on to talk about God bringing grace and hope to non-Israelites, through Elijah and Elisha,

and the murderous hatred of the crowds in response which may not make much sense otherwise.

I love this text, and the manifesto contained within in. Too often, the Church has sought to water this text down and/or to spiritualise what Jesus says, as if he doesn't really mean that following him might be about challenging the *status quo* of how our world works in the holy name of God. However, what Jesus says and does, having escaped those who would have happily tossed him off the top of a mountain, refutes these readings of Luke 4. We really are to preach good news to the poor, release the prisoners, restore sight to the blind, and set the oppressed free. However, the hostility which Jesus experienced in response to proclaiming this isn't some historical aberration. This calling is incredibly costly stuff, not least because as Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer and so many others who dared to walk this path discovered, the institutional Church is deeply invested in maintaining the *status quo*, and thus stubbornly resistant to change and letting go of influence. It reminds us that enacting the manifesto of Luke 4 is not for the faint-hearted!

So, where do we begin? Well, firstly, we'll need to be ready for some internal work. Transformations and change begin with us. What are we passionate about? Where are our blind spots? How can we learn to see the world through the eyes of others who are different to us? This stuff is not easy or comfortable, because it makes room for the Holy Spirit to show us home truths and convict us of our complicities in sinful and harmful ways of seeing and shaping the world. It means being ready to change how we view (and speak of) others, to modify our lifestyles, to re-examine our political standpoint, and to lay aside some cherished assumptions about how things are and ought to be. Seeking the Kingdom of God in this way is the work of a lifetime, as we continue to learn and grow, and align our lives more closely with Jesus's radical manifesto, but it is necessary if we're to be equipped to step out into this domain.

Secondly, we are called to act. This rarely means doing so as a solo artist; working with others, building up new (and perhaps surprising) relationships and forming effective partnerships is key, not least due to the fact that working for justice is rarely a route to popularity. Are you ready, at the more mild end of the scale, to be accused of being political for recognising that black lives matter just as much as white lives, that not fitting within narrow definitions of sex and gender does not mean being ‘second-class citizens’, and that it makes absolutely no sense to malign or to demonise refugees drowning in the English Channel whilst loudly proclaiming that ‘all lives matter’? At the other end of the scale, campaign groups such as Christian Climate Action have highlighted those ways in which climate change is ruining lives *right now*, and that disrupting the *status quo* using non-violent direct action is sometimes the only way to get those in power to wake up, but this often comes at significant cost to those involved.

Like Jesus, if you’re serious about preaching good news to the poor, releasing the prisoners, restoring sight to the blind and setting those who’re oppressed free, you’re not in for an easy ride. However, this is as much a part of faithful discipleship as loving service. As Luther King once said, “He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it and he who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it”. Hence, if Love gets the last word, may us have the courage to speak it as Jesus did, by preaching good news to the poor, releasing the prisoners, restoring sight to the blind and setting the oppressed free. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring good news to the poor.
We pray for all those who struggle to make ends meet,
for those having to choose between food and heating,

and those who are worried about what the future holds.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring release to the captives.
We pray for prisoners of conscience throughout the world,
for those living under oppressive regimes and dictatorships,
and the work of human rights organisations and advocates.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring recovery of sight to the blind.
We pray for everyone who struggles to trust they are loved,
for those blinded by affluence, self-interest or greed,
and all those who have lost sight of you in the midst of life.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring freedom to the oppressed.
We pray for those experiencing isolation and loneliness,
for all victims and survivors of abuse of any kind,
and those struggling with ill health in body, mind or spirit.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

God of freedom and hope,
your Son came to proclaim the year of your favour.
Look kindly upon us in all of our struggles and trials,
and in this time of quiet and stillness,
pour out your love on those people and situations
that we now bring before you...

Lord’s Prayer

Blessing