



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 met someone who has completely changed their life for the better? What stands out most about them?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

You are invited to use the hymn 'Love Divine' (StF 503) as a prompt for your own thanksgivings and praises.

The following prayer may also be offered:

God of transformation,
holy, good and true,
receive our thanks and praises. **Amen**

Psalms of the Week – Psalm 32:1 – 7

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

**Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.**

While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

**For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.**

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,

and I did not hide my iniquity;

I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord',

and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Therefore, let all who are faithful offer prayer to you;

**at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.**

You are a hiding-place for me; you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

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,
you bring renewal in tired places,
and set us free to follow you into a hope-filled future.
Let us therefore bring to God those things in need of renewal:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
God of mercy, forgive us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:
God of love, comfort us.

We bring to you the brokenness and oppression in our world:
God of justice, disturb us.

We bring to you the times we've hidden from the risks of love:
God of courage, fortify us.

We bring to you the failures of the Church to stand for justice:
God of liberation, convict us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of new beginnings, of love stronger than even death,
you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.
Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and breathe new life into us. **Amen**

Reading Luke 19:1 – 10

Sermon

When I went through the discernment process for ordained ministry in the Methodist Church, one of the many tasks we had to undertake was to prepare and deliver a short presentation on a figure from the New Testament whose example of discipleship we admired. I chose to speak about Zacchaeus, whose story is told uniquely within Luke, as one of the many examples within that Gospel of Jesus's concern for marginalised folk, for those who were judged unworthy by others to belong to God's people. Part of my reason for picking Zacchaeus over more obvious candidates like one of the Twelve is that like me, he was somewhat vertically challenged (Luke 19:3)! Indeed, so that he would stand some chance of seeing Jesus as he passed through the town of Jericho on the way to Jerusalem, Zacchaeus climbed a tree on the route (19:4). I suppose the equivalents these days might

be camping out on the Mall to see a royal event, or outside a concert venue to be the first to get tickets. However, there was another more compelling reason behind my decision to focus upon this character. At the time, I worked in financial services, and hence I felt an affinity with him as somebody who was also maligned for his work.

Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, meaning that he would have been in charge of a team of others. To state that tax collectors were not popular with the people of Israel would be rather an understatement; indeed, as they collected harsh taxes on behalf of the occupying Romans, they were seen as collaborators and sell-outs. What's more, it was accepted practice that they would demand more money than was due and keep the extra for themselves. As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus would have profited not just from any dishonesty of his own, but from that of his minions too; hence, it isn't surprising that Luke tells us both that he was wealthy (19:2) and not at all popular with those who reacted badly to Jesus' seeking to stay with him (19:5–7). My experience of working in banking in the years immediately following the financial crisis of 2008/09 was that church was not a supportive place to be. The stereotype of bankers as folks who are reckless, unethical and greed-driven was not borne out the vast majority of the time, yet there were difficult moral questions and dilemmas raised by my work, and it was disappointing to find church life so unsupportive as I sought to navigate them with integrity. Even when I found myself potentially facing the sack for challenging what I considered dishonest demands from management, it seemed that most people were more interesting in judging rather than listening.

The parallels with Zacchaeus were not exact, but I nonetheless saw the points of connection as coming as close as anything did to what it felt like to be a disciple in a profession where ethical issues lurked around many corners. One of the things that intrigues me about him is that he overtly sought out Jesus, to the extent of being apparently unafraid to expose himself to probable ridicule by climbing up a tree

in order to see clearly (19:4). Being told by Jesus to hurry down tells us that, from his point of view, this encounter with Zacchaeus wasn't an accident, or a merely incidental encounter, but something with a degree of urgency about it (19:5). The key to making sense of it lies, in my view, in what we make of the chief tax collector's response as he comes face-to-face with Jesus. In 19:8, the Greek is ambiguous; it could be that Zacchaeus was promising to give away a half of his possessions to the poor and make fourfold recompense (thus going above and beyond what the Law of Moses required), but it may also be that he had *already* done these things.

Now, if the former is true and what we are looking at here is a person who has encountered Jesus, repented of his past actions and taken responsibility for the fallout by making restitution, and then received forgiveness (19:9 – 10), what we have is a classic conversion story. It is pretty neat from the point of view of an evangelical theology that privileges accounts of conversion which fit into that mould, but there is such a thing as being *too neat and tidy*, and I cannot help but feel rather unsatisfied with this take on Zacchaeus. If, on the other hand, Zacchaeus is telling Jesus about what he has *already* done, maybe he did so in response to criticism from the crowds (19:6) or because he felt he needed to justify himself to Jesus. Either way, and despite the extent to which his profession pushed him to the margins of that society, Jesus affirms that salvation has come to his house (19:9a). Notice, however, that this has not come to pass because of anything Zacchaeus has done or not done, but is simply because he is a child of Abraham, and thus part of God's people of Israel (19:9b). On this reading, this is another instance of Jesus as deliberately positioning himself with the lost, with society's no-hopers (19:10).

So, there are (at least) two ways to approach the story of a chief tax collector who sought out Jesus and ended up discovering salvation. I wonder which makes most sense to you. For me, Zacchaeus offers an example of wholehearted faith. He was not afraid to publicly state

his commitment to Jesus and the transformed life which had already resulted from, or would go on to result from, this allegiance. Many of us will, at some stage of our lives, find ourselves having to navigate our way through challenging waters, in which charting a true course requires integrity and may well prove costly. As we are reminded in the Methodist Covenant Prayer, discipleship may prove compatible with our natural inclinations and material interests, but may also run contrary to both. Yet, God is with us in such circumstances because we are all God's beloved children. This is not a status we might earn or demand or acquire, but instead it is a free gift. As Rowan Williams reminds us, we are holy not because we are good, but because God *chooses* to see us as holy and make us good. Zacchaeus continues to inspire me as an ex-banker who is a Methodist minister. I pray he will also be an inspiration to you, as you seek Jesus. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Rachel Held Evans' collection of essays, *Wholehearted Faith*, looks at what it means to live out a just and loving faith.

Prayers of Intercession

God of overflowing love,
Three-in-One and One-in-Three,
we bring to you our prayers for the world you create:

We light a candle as we pray:
For the dark places of your world,
where light and love are in short supply:
hear us, we pray.

We place a stone into water as we pray:
For all those seeking renewal and refreshment,
in a world blighted by pandemics of disease and inequality:
hear us, we pray.

We hold a cross in our hands as we pray:

For those people who suffer for what is right,
when injustice, hatred, dishonesty and division seem to rule:

hear us, we pray.

We rub earth/soil through our fingers as we pray:

For the planet you sustain and which we share,
in the face of the climate emergency and bad stewardship:

hear us, we pray.

We break apart a slice/piece of bread as we pray:

For those in need of nourishment and sustenance,
where hunger for food and for you is rife:

hear us, we pray.

God of overflowing love, Three-in-One and One-in-Three,
we hold before you the people we are worried about today,
in the quiet and stillness of this time...

Lord's Prayer

Blessing