



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 looked at someone who is in need, and been able to recognise the face of Jesus? if so, what happened?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 95:1 – 7a (StF 818)

O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

**For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;**

the heights of the mountains are his also.

**The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land,
which his hands have formed.**

O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

**For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.**

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 hope and justice,
you call us to make your Kingdom visible
by giving food and drink to the hungry and thirsty,
by welcoming the stranger and breaking down barriers,
by taking care of the sick and visiting those in prison,
for what we do for the most vulnerable, we do for you.

When we have walked on by those in need or distress,
God, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

When we have been quick to judge and slow to listen,
God, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

When we have defended policies that cause hardship,
God, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

God of hope and justice,
as we receive your forgiveness and renewal,
give us the courage to take responsibility for our failings,
and the encouragement we need to make your love visible
in our words and in our actions.

May we embody real hope in Jesus' name. **Amen**

Sermon

In the *Harry Potter* books, the new students at Hogwarts School are sorted into houses by a magical hat, called the Sorting Hat. This hat makes its decisions, we're told, by looking deep into the heart of the student upon whose head it is placed, and making a judgment about their character. They're thus sorted into the most appropriate house for them. Today's Parable of the Sheep and the Goats also features a process of sorting, for which an appropriate choice of headgear is a flat cap in honour of the shepherding imagery Jesus employs! The practice of grazing both sheep and goats together remains common in the Middle East to this day, and both are valuable to their farmers. However, the goat breeds tend to be less hardy than the sheep, and they need to be separated so that the former might be kept warm in the cold weather. Apparently, it's hard to tell them apart, and the tail is usually the thing which gives it away when it comes to the sorting! Such is the background to one of the most famous and most argued about of the parables of Jesus...

The author of Matthew's Gospel presents a range of parables which rely on the same basic premise – two types of people, which cannot easily be told apart, are allowed to dwell alongside one another until there is a sorting, a judgment process. This particular story is unique to Matthew, and it calls on two differing sets of images – that related to sheep, goats and shepherding on the one hand, and the Kingdom language running through so much of Jesus's Holy Week preaching on the other. Thus, Jesus is depicted as being both a shepherd and a king when sorting takes place between folk from all nations – Jews and Gentiles alike – gathered before him. Echoes of Zechariah 14:1 – 21 resound, with its frightening and disturbing depiction of the day of judgment and God stood upon the Mount of Olives, as Jesus was when he gave this parable to his disciples. As with much apocalyptic

imagery in the New Testament, the descent of the Son of Man (from Daniel 7:13 – 14) is the catalyst for this judgment in which the sheep inherit the Kingdom of God, while the goats are cast out.

What we have set before us, then, is a choice. Before Israel entered the Promised Land, Moses set life and death, blessings and curses, before them and enjoined them to choose life (Deuteronomy 11:26). In much the same way, Jesus sets a choice before us – will we take the pathway which leads to life, or follow the road that leads to death instead? Both Jews and Gentiles are included in the vision of justice proclaimed in this parable, which is connected to the disciples being called to share the good news of Jesus to the very ends of the earth (Matthew 28:16–20). All are called to discipleship, and all must give an account of their responses. This is one of those now-and-not-yet moments, as Christ's resurrection means the Son of Man is *already* sat on the throne of glory (Matthew 25:31), and hence the judgment depicted comes to meet us in the here-and-now, as well as awaiting us when God finally renews the heavens and the earth. How will we be sorted? Are we sheep or goats? Will we choose life?

There's some argument among Biblical scholars about whether this parable concerns how those out spreading the Gospel were treated by their hearers, or the need to treat all vulnerable and marginalised people with dignity and respect. Certainly, when Matthew uses such terms as 'little ones' (Matthew 25:40), it generally refers to disciples of Christ, and we do know that Matthew's early Christian community were being given a hard time in synagogues and by secular powers for their faith. On balance, I think this parable probably was intended as an encouragement for that community, and indeed I am sure that it resonates with Christians across the world who face real violence, persecution, and hatred because of their faith in Jesus Christ. There are countries and contexts in which to follow Christ is literally to take one's life in one's hands. However, as Matthew 7:12 reminds us, it's crucially important to treat others as we wish to be treated, and thus,

there is no sidestepping the challenge here. How will *you* be sorted? Are *you* a sheep or a goat? Will *you* choose life?

Ours is a deeply divided and unequal world. Many are hungry every single day, and millions of people live without access to clean water. Hostility to asylum seekers and refugees has become a depressing feature of British life, and homelessness continues to rise as a result of both the cost-of-living and housing crises. Treatment backlogs in the NHS mean waiting lists are longer than ever, with mental health services in particular struggling to keep up with demand. Moreover, in various senses, many people find themselves imprisoned without hope for the future. Against this bleak backdrop, it would be easy to fall into despair. However, the calling to feed the hungry, bring water to the thirsty, welcome the strangers and clothe the naked, tend the sick and visit the prisoners remains. Even amidst times of darkness, we're called by God-in-Christ to choose life, and we can all make a difference. So, how will we be sorted? Are we sheep or goats?

The bottom line here is that each and every one of us can make an important difference to the world around us. We can take action, get involved in loving service, campaign for justice, pray for those doing this costly work, and be encouragers. God tasks us with feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming strangers and clothing the naked, tending to the sick and visiting the prisoners. Thus, if the Sorting Hat was placed on our heads, and were to call out the house which we belong to, based on what it finds in our hearts, what would it say? Or, to put this in another way, how might *you* be sorted? Are *you* a sheep or a goat? Will *you* choose life?

Recommended Resource of the Week

Philip Yancy's 2002 book *What's So Amazing about Grace?* is quite interesting to hold alongside today's reading, in exploring where the theology of forgiveness and grace sits alongside a reading that puts the emphasis on 'good works'.

Prayers of Intercession

God of hope and justice,
we remember those in this country and across the world
who do not have enough to eat today,
or are worried about where their next meal is coming from.
We pray for those working to alleviate food poverty,
and organisations like All We Can helping those
impacted by climate change to adapt.
Loving God, **may we bring hope.**

God of hope and justice,
we remember those without access to clean and safe water.
We give thanks for projects like Toilet Twinning,
improving sanitation in various countries across the world,
and for organisations such as Water Aid bringing clean water
to many communities whose lives will be transformed by it.
Loving God, **may we bring hope.**

God of hope and justice,
we remember those whose situations may leave them
feeling naked, exposed, and vulnerable.
We pray for those without the basics of shelter and clothing,
those without the resources they need to care for themselves
and their families as winter fast approaches,
and those living in crowded or inadequate housing.
Loving God, **may we bring hope.**

God of hope and justice,
we remember all those who are unwell in body, mind or spirit.
We pray for those who are in hospital or hospices today,
those struggling with long-term chronic health issues,
for those who find themselves stuck on long waiting lists,
and for all who work in the NHS and Social Care systems.
Loving God, **may we bring hope.**

God of hope and justice,
we remember those imprisoned in various senses today,
and those who are not made welcome in our midst.
We pray for those who have been incarcerated,
for victims of crime, and all who work in criminal justice.
We hold all who feel trapped by their circumstances,
especially those struggling with mental health challenges,
victims and survivors of any form of abuse,
and refugees and asylum seekers as they seek sanctuary.
Loving God, **may we bring hope.**

Lord's Prayer

Blessing