



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 an example of somebody you respect who has authority in some sense. What is it about them that you admire?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

As you offer your praises and thanksgivings to God, you may find it helpful to conclude with the following:

God of authority and power,
we praise you as your power is the power of love,
and thank you for the blessings you pour out upon us.
In the name of Jesus, who holds all authority. **Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 25:1 – 9

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.
You are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.
**Be mindful of your mercy and your steadfast love,
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, O Lord!
Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore, he instructs sinners in the way.
**He leads the humble in what's right,
and teaches the humble his way.**
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 renewal and transformation, hope and change,
we come before you knowing there is much in our lives,
and in the life of the world you create and sustain,
in need of your redemption and renewal,
which we bring to you now in prayer:

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of all goodness and blessings,

thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and equip us to be your disciples. **Amen**

Reading Matthew 21:23 – 32

Sermon

What gives a person authority? Is it a birthright, as in nations with a hereditary monarchy or aristocracy, or else to be conferred through a democratic mandate, like in a republic? Does it depend on holding office within certain institutions such as the police or churches, or is it more a product of personal qualities like wisdom, intellect, staying calm under pressure or charisma? Is our ability to connect with folks face-to-face more or less important than the size of our social media following? Once it is acquired, is authority better maintained through our inspiring respect, adulation or fear? These questions and others arise when we think about what we mean by authority, and I imagine we can all recall examples of it being used well and badly in different contexts, maybe even by the same person. Sadly, the Church in the broadest sense of the word hasn't always used its authority in ways that fit with the Kingdom of God. It has been concerned with cosying up to the powerful at the expense of the vulnerable, and with holding onto its status within and influence upon society. However, the story of Jesus' authority being questioned offers another way.

The day before the events depicted in today's Gospel passage, the city of Jerusalem had been thrown into convulsions by the entrance of Jesus of Nazareth in profoundly symbolic fashion, on the back of a donkey as Israel's Messiah was foretold as doing. He immediately went up to the Temple, thought to be the dwelling place of God, and overturned the money-changing tables, in a protest bringing its daily operations to a standstill. The Temple's establishment, represented by some of the Chief Priests and Scribes, were enraged and scared. Enraged as this was a direct challenge to their authority, and scared

because it almost being the Festival of Passover meant the Roman governor was in town, and thus any sign of trouble could trigger the taking away of the limited power which they were permitted to wield. They confronted Jesus over the shouting of 'Hosanna to the Son of David' by the crowd, dangerous as it was a title used of the Messiah and they knew Rome would tolerate no rivals. Yet, he dismissed the criticism, and left for his overnight stopover (Matthew 21:1 – 17).

On what we now call the Monday of Holy Week, Jesus returned and went to the Temple courtyard, to teach the throngs of local residents and Passover pilgrims gathered together. The Chief Priests appear to have been waiting for him, and wasted no time in confronting him. Who did he think he was, and whose authority was he acting under? In typical rabbinic fashion, Jesus responded to that question with an enquiry of his own. If they could satisfy him, he would give them the proper answer. Did the authority of his older cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist, derive from heaven or merely some human source of power? As John had paved the way for Jesus, if the former acted with the authority of God, then it follows that the latter did so as well, but if Jesus did not, then neither did John. This threw the Elders and Chief Priests into a quandary: if they answered 'yes', then in treating Jesus with such hostility, they were being hypocritical, but if instead they said 'no', they knew they would anger the crowds, who pictured John as a prophet. Concerned more with saving face than admitting God was at work in the two cousins, they took the only option left to them and replied that they couldn't answer Jesus. He in turn refused to give them an answer (21:23 – 27)! In the other Synoptic Gospels, Jesus then told the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (21:33 – 41), but Matthew has him first offer the unique story of two sons.

In this short parable, the son of the vineyard owner who was initially reluctant to obey his father and get to work there changed his mind, while the brother who declared he would go did not. The former was like the tax collectors and sinners with whom Jesus spent much time

while the religious establishment were like the son who promised to do the will of the father, but failed to do thus in practice. Both groups were children of God, but only the unlikely candidates for entry into the Kingdom were sufficiently open to recognise that authority given to John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth (21:28 – 32). At the heart of the matter is this: because the authority of the cousins came from heaven, they did not need to compete with others as the Elders and Chief Priests were compelled to do. Their power wasn't one derived from military might or systems of sacrifices, but instead they wielded the power of love – a source of authority which increases in its being given away, so that the world might be transformed. Paul sums this up beautifully in the poem of Philippians 2:5 – 11: Jesus did not cling onto equality with God but emptied himself, and embraced the world in love with arms outstretched wide upon the cross.

I wonder what difference it would make if those churches convinced that the decline of Christendom and the loss of a privileged voice in the national discourse is a tragedy were to embrace the teaching of Jesus in this passage. What if, instead of lamenting not being in the corridors of power, the Church's authority derived from authentically standing with those who find themselves on the margins of society? The Methodist Church has embraced the calling to be a truly justice-seeking church focused less upon institutional survival and more on engaging with today's equivalent of those tax collectors and sinners centred by Jesus. This will likely mean becoming a leaner and more prophetic part of the Body of Christ, working with others to make the difference God has called us to make, even if that leads us to a self-emptying, so that love might freely flow out and transform the world. It will not be easy or without cost, but perhaps this is the direction in which God is guiding us: to be those whose authority comes not via the size of our membership, but our walking the talk. Let us pray:

Surprising God, whose power is the power of love,
help us to see the new things that you are doing,

and to trust in the authority of your Son, Jesus Christ,
as we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Marcus Borg and Tom Wright's *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (2007) offers different perspectives on Jesus's authority.

Prayers of Intercession

Almighty God,
you sweep away the cobwebs of injustice,
and bring winds of renewal and change.

We bring to you places in need of rekindled hope,
situations in need of a reboot and a fresh start,
and people who long for the breeze in the deserts of doubt.
God of all authority, **hear our prayer.**

We remember those places where conflict or disaster
have torn lives apart, and forced people to flee their homes.
We pray for compassion towards refugees,
and uphold those working to bring light to bear in dark times.
God of all authority, **hear our prayer.**

We remember those situations where disease and malady
have torn lives apart, and left people grieving and scared.
We pray for those fearful of the spread of infections,
and uphold those working to bring hope and healing.
God of all authority, **hear our prayer.**

We remember those people for whom economic downturns
have torn lives apart, and left them fearful of the future.
We pray for all who are worried about making ends meet,
and uphold those working to alleviate poverty and distress.
God of all authority, **hear our prayer.**

We remember those countries where unrest and injustice have torn lives apart, and human dignity has been affronted. We pray for our politicians and civil servants, and uphold those charged with building a safe society for all. God of all authority, **hear our prayer.**

We remember those people we know who are suffering, whether in mind, in body or in spirit. We pray that all those people and situations on our hearts may experience the hope, renewal, and refreshment of God. God of all authority, **hear our prayer.**

Lord's Prayer

Blessing