



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

How comfortable are you discussing your use of wealth? Why might this be a difficult topic to discuss?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

You're invited to reflect on our week and the things you wish to give thanks to God for. At the end of this time of reflections, the following prayer may be said:

God of all goodness,
we offer you our thanks and praises
in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of renewal and fresh hope,
we bring to you those things in our lives and our world
in need of your refreshment and renewal.

When we've valued our possessions above following you,
Christ, forgive us.

When we've lost sight of you amid the pressures of life,
Christ, refresh us.

When we've been hurt by the words or actions of others,
Christ, comfort us.

When our systems of government exacerbate inequality,
Christ, rebuke us.

When your Church has neglected its calling to justice,
Christ, renew us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of renewal and fresh hope,
thank you that you forgive us, renew us,
and set us free to live for you.

Amen

Reading Mark 10:17 – 31

Sermon

Before training to become a Methodist Minister, I used to work for a major high street bank as part of the team setting lending criteria for mortgages. One day, I was chatting with my line manager about the growing pressure from the government to proffer ninety-five percent mortgages, as we had before the financial crisis of 2008 led to much

tighter controls. He was sceptical about whether this was a sensible move and asked me, entirely sincerely, how hard could it be to raise a deposit of ten-thousand pounds. Given that the median UK salary at that time was around twenty-five thousand pounds, meaning that half of people were earning less than that, the answer for many folks would be very hard indeed, especially in areas with high rental costs and for single income households. Now, having worked closely with my manager for a couple of years, I know he was definitively not the stereotype of a 'greedy and grasping banker' which many associate with people working in financial services. However, his affluence as somebody earning over three times the median average salary had, in my view, blinded him to the economic realities facing people who were getting by on much lower incomes. I could offer examples from different contexts of the same phenomenon; relative wealth can get in the way of our ability to relate to the struggles of others.

In today's Gospel reading, this appears to be what happened to the man who approached Jesus wanting to find out how he could inherit eternal life. The initial response that he received, which has caused no shortage of controversy among scholars, points to the goodness of God alone (10:18), and therefore reframes the question. After all, nobody can be 'good enough' to earn eternal life, which God makes possible through undeserved grace and unconditional love. Having reminded him of those sections of the Ten Commandments focused on human relationships and interactions (10:19), which he had quite sincerely kept from childhood (10:20), we are told that Jesus looked hard at him and loved him (10:21a). Yet, as is always the case when God's love is at work, Jesus clearly loved him too much just to leave him as he was. This meant letting go of the things getting in the way of him loving God fully; hence, he was asked to sell his possessions, and give the money to the poor, in order to gain treasures when the Kingdom comes in all its fullness, and become a disciple (10:21). In other words, Jesus invited him to focus on the remainder of the Ten

Commandments – on putting his God first, not worshipping idols nor taking God's name in vain, and turning away from covetousness. In 10:22, however, we're told that this man went away feeling sad and resentful, as he had many possessions.

Now, as the man vanishes from the narrative at this juncture without reappearing later on in Mark's Gospel, we just do not know whether he was a kind and generous person, or a selfish and greedy human being. However, whatever the quality of his character, it seems that he was unwilling to take up Jesus's challenge and thus do what was needed to free him to stand in solidarity with those facing hardships and struggles. Like my former line manager, his great wealth seems to have blinded him to the situations of those around him, in a period when hunger was even more widespread than within the profoundly unequal nation we inhabit. The disciples found it hard to understand that vast personal wealth didn't necessarily mean that a person was right with God, in an age where prosperity and divine blessing were often linked in people's minds. Indeed, it is arguably not so different nowadays! When Jesus spoke of it being easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to embrace God's Kingdom (10:25), there is simply no evidence that this image related to a narrow gate. Rather, the point here is that God alone can make the impossible possible (10:27). Once again, the value judgment of the world was being turned upside down by God (10:31).

Moreover, it is incumbent upon us as modern readers of this difficult passage to sit with its profound challenge, and not to seek to explain it away, or pretend that Jesus did not really mean what he said here, or try to wriggle out of applying this to ourselves. In his classic work, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann identifies the task of prophets as a call to "nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to [the worldview] of the dominant culture around us", which he says is both "grossly uncritical" and "wearied". In other words, prophets are all about cultivating a radically different

way of being centred upon justice and compassion and the freedom of God's liberating love. While the dominant powers insist there can be no new beginnings, the prophetic imagination cultivates renewal that leads to societal transformation. It takes stories like those of the man who ran to Jesus and threw himself down at his feet, and turns them into reenvisioned narratives of lives changed, priorities altered, and hope unleashed through solidarity across divides.

This consequently calls for the honesty to identify and penetrate the numbness and apathy that permits oppressive structures to flourish, especially when income-based segregation in facilities like housing and schooling can easily end up sheltering affluent people from the everyday struggles of the poorest and the most vulnerable. It needs courage, courage to grieve for the death of the current way of being and to articulate real hope, when those running the show are fearful of the death of that which advantages them, and insist that there is no alternative. Finally and crucially, it requires the imagination to tap into symbols in our culture that speak of hope. We need imagination to energise people, to enable us to discover language of poetry and praise to articulate wonder and amazement at the freedom of God's love. Imagination takes the deep wells of grief, and transforms them into wellsprings, torrents, monsoons of living water. Water is always needed for life, and prophetic imagination unleashes life.

Now, though his initial focus is on the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, Brueggemann views the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the ultimate example of this. His death on the cross acts as the ultimate criticism of all the oppressive powers of his day and our epoch stood and stand for. We do not like to dwell too much on the stark realities of crucifixion, which was designed to strip its victim of all their dignity and humanity. It was a punishment viewed as too severe for Roman citizens, and was therefore reserved for criminals and rebels. It was a shameful death, followed normally by being dumped in a common grave. Yet, this apparently foolish and crazy act, the letting go of all

earthly ideas of power and wisdom, the refusing to love and live with anything less than the ultimate freedom of God, changed everything in this world. The cross shows us – whether we like it or not – where our clinging onto what we have and excluding the stranger, the poor and the vulnerable leads us, and yet it also opens the door to a life-giving and transformative new way of being.

So, as we continue to journey toward Jerusalem with Jesus and his perplexed disciples, the challenge of this powerful passage to wake up and see clearly is one we must not shirk, or seek to negate using interpretations that water down Jesus's words. Our world needs that hope that is opened up when its flow is disturbed by those prophetic voices unafraid to say that the emperor has no clothes. So much in our culture encourages numbness in the face of injustice, taking the view that this is just the way things are, and nothing else is possible. Yet, to follow Jesus is to see this world fundamentally differently, to value treasure in heaven above enrichment in the here-and-now, to embrace the impossible and be ready to challenge what is taken as 'common sense'. The disciples found this hard and indeed it is hard; Jesus reminds us that persecution is part of the deal (10:30). For all that, however, this is the way of eternal life. So, let us pray that when Jesus shows us what we lack, we may respond positively. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

God of all goodness and justice,
hear our prayers for your world today.

Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For places beset by wars, conflicts and strife,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For those at the sharp end of climate change,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For political leaders carrying heavy responsibilities,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For people working to keep our basic services running,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For those anxious about a lack of work and opportunities,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For your Church, as we seek to discern your call afresh,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For all who are unwell in body, mind or spirit,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For those who will die today and all who are bereaved,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

In a time of silence, we bring our own prayers to you...

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

God of all our journeys,
as we go forward into the rest of the week,
may you be the light to our path and the breath we breathe,
and may the blessing of the Father, the Son and the Spirit
be with us and those whom we love and pray for,
now and forevermore. **Amen**