



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

What comes to mind when you think about healing? Is this a subject you find easy or hard to discuss, and why?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 33:1 – 12

Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous.

Praise befits the upright.

Praise the Lord with the lyre;

make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.

Sing to him a new song;

play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

**For the word of the Lord is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.**

He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.

**By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.**

He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses.

Let all the earth fear the Lord;

let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.

For he spoke, and it came to be;

he commanded, and it stood firm.

**The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.**

The counsel of the Lord stands for ever,
the thoughts of his heart to all generations.

**Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.**

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 compassion and insightfulness,
as we approach you in prayer and humility,
aware of the many burdens on our hearts and minds,
we bring to you those things in need of renewal:

For the words and actions for which we're sorry,
grant us your forgiveness.

For the burdens we carry and the sorrows we bear,
bring us your comfort.

For the struggles we may experience to trust we are loved,
offer us your assurance.

For the injustice and oppression which blights our world,
inspire us to respond courageously.

For the failings and disunity of your Church,
make us ready to change.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of compassion and insightfulness,
thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,
heal our wounds and transform our world.

Amen

Reading Matthew 9:9 – 13, 18 – 26

Sermon

It is notable that, particularly since the lockdowns, there has been a greater emphasis placed on wellbeing in various contexts. Together with this, I have noticed that a more holistic approach is being taken, one recognising how our *physical health* is connected to our *mental and emotional wellbeing*, and I would add our *spiritual health* to this list. So, for example, if we are struggling with our mental health, this could manifest itself in physical symptoms, and having lengthy waits to access treatment for our bodies can have a profound impact upon our mental and spiritual wellbeing, perhaps raising questions about divine healing and unanswered prayer. However, important as such developments are, most approaches to wellbeing are individualised and thus they do not always take full account of wider factors. These include our *political wellbeing*, and in particular whether our need to live with dignity and in safety is being promoted or threatened, along with our *economic wellbeing*, which does not simply concern having

enough to meet our basic needs for food, shelter and warmth (which is becoming increasingly hard for many people), but having enough disposable income to enable us to meet a friend for coffee or a pint, to pursue hobbies and interests, and to do those things which enrich our lives and make them about more than just mere survival.

Another fundamental aspect of human wellbeing concerns what we might term our *social health*: how we are perceived by other people. Whether we are able to contribute to our communities or are pushed to their margins matters profoundly. The first part of our passage for this week sees Jesus' healing people in this sense, restoring the tax collectors and sinners gathered together within Matthew's house to social health by sharing a meal, and hence treating them as equals. Together with the later couple of physical healings, we have a triplet of episodes also found in the pages of Mark's Gospel, which seems to have provided Matthew with at least some of his source material. It is interesting to notice the differences between these two Gospels because the ways they make use of the same stories points towards how they view their underlying significance. The tax collector called from his employment to follow Jesus is known as Levi in the earliest of the two texts (Mark 2:14 – 17), and Matthew in the latter (Matthew 9:9 – 13), drawing our attention to the connection between the early disciples and Matthew's faith community. The brevity of the account given by Matthew 9:18 – 26 of the healings of a synagogue leader's daughter, and of a woman suffering from menstrual haemorrhaging, stands in stark contrast to the much lengthier text in Mark 5:21 – 43, which includes many details that Matthew decided to drop, perhaps because these had become somewhat embarrassing.

So, what might today's reading be telling us and why does it matter? Well, Jesus had just landed back in Capernaum (9:1), and managed to anger some of the Scribes by healing a man through forgiving his sins, which they contended was the sole preserve of God (9:2 – 8). Scholars continue to debate whether this is an example of what we

might now term a 'psychosomatic illness' being healed. Either way, Jesus was making an extraordinary claim for himself and his identity in relationship to God, which is why they accused him of blasphemy. Thus, the context from which our text stems was one of conflict and hostility that seems to have attracted the unwanted attention of both some of the Pharisees (9:10 – 13) and a few of the disciples of John the Baptist (9:14 – 17). Given the spotlight was shining upon Jesus, we should not be surprised that the sequence of four healings in the remainder of Matthew 9 succeeded in attracting huge crowds as he travelled around Galilee, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God (9:35). What had gone immediately before this puts the meat upon the bones of what that proclamation meant and looked like.

It becomes clear, therefore, that the breaking in of God's loving rule in the person of Jesus is not only about salvation in a spiritual sense but is about God's concern for us as *whole people*. God cares about our physicality and mental wellbeing, our political and economic and social status, all of which feature in Matthew 9 when taken as a unit. The story of the synagogue leader and of the healing of his daughter is both an example of God's attentiveness to our physical wellbeing, and a sign of the authority given by the Father to Jesus over disease and death. When he shared meals with outcasts such as the sinners and tax collectors of 9:9 – 13, Jesus manifested God's desire to see marginalised people restored to the centre and thus to social health. Moreover, the healing of the woman with bleeding brings both these dimensions together, as she was liberated from her physical malady and the stigma and exclusion which came with being seen as ritually unclean. Life in the Kingdom of God is not about yearning to escape from the physical body so that the soul might ascend to heaven, but is about wholeness of body, mind, spirit and society.

In response to this, our calling as God's people is to put this concern of God for wholeness into practice. This will mean *loving service*, so that we may respond to physical and emotional needs, being willing

to *share our faith* so that others might discover the love of God, and *working for justice* in order that social, economic and political health may flourish. These are the three dimensions of discipleship, which reflect the vision of the Kingdom of God that Jesus embodied within his life, death and resurrection. What this looks like will vary in time, and will depend on circumstances, but the foundation of it all is love, and that is the measure by which we may assess whether the things into which we put our energies are godly. May we have the courage to follow this calling, and work for healing and wholeness. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Jeffrey John's 2004 book *The Meaning in the Miracles* shines a light onto the symbolism and deeper meanings in Jesus's miracles.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing