



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 occasion when you had the opportunity to be generous.
Did you take it, and if so, what did you do and what was the result?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

*You are invited to take some quiet time and bring your thanksgiving
and praises to God, using the following to conclude your prayers:*

God of all goodness and blessings,
from whom all good things come,
receive our thanks and praises. Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 1 (Singing the Faith 800)

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked
**or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;**
their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so,
they are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

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 all goodness and blessings,
who calls us and draws us into the life of the Kingdom,
we come to you knowing that our lives and our world
need your renewal, and so we now bring you our petitions:

When we've been selfish or hoarded our resources,
Christ, forgive us.

When we've been slow to understand what you ask of us,
Christ, challenge us.

When we've been hurt by unjust words or hurtful actions,
Christ, comfort us.

When systems have been used to exclude or harm,
Christ, rebuke us.

When your Church has lost its way and turned inwards,
Christ, renew us.

God of all goodness and blessings,
Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and equip us to be your disciples. **Amen**

Reading Luke 6:17 – 26

Sermon

I wonder if you have ever reached a crossroads in your life, with two distinct pathways laid before you – one which seems to be the easy road even though your gut instinct tells you it will ultimately lead you astray, and the other which looks much more challenging but seems nonetheless to be the right way to go? Being a disciple of Jesus has sometimes been framed in terms of following the narrow way, which in turn implies that if we should take the wrong pathway at any point on the journey, it will become increasingly hard to get back on track. My experiences as both a disciple and a pastor have taught me that there is some truth in this. As a youngster, I used to go walking with my father in the Lancashire hills and forests. On one walk round the woods of Beacon Fell, we took a wrong turn at a crossroad because of an arrow having been deliberately rotated to point the wrong way, and the further we ventured on the more we were led away from our intended destination. Something similar can happen when we stray from the paths forged by God's love; we might become so entangled in the web of sin that we cannot easily escape and change direction, and instead we get deeper into trouble. Many a film plot is based on

someone being led increasingly further along a dangerous pathway, having taken the wrong fork in the road and been unable to go back. However, the good news is that God's grace goes before us and so there is always hope for a return to the pathways of abundant life.

Today's passage sees Jesus addressing a large crowd, drawn from the Jewish regions of Jerusalem and Judea, and the predominantly Gentile coastal areas around Tyre and Sidon. The setting of a 'level place' or plain is significant because, in Hebrew prophetic literature, such spaces were both places of desolation and hopelessness, and sites of renewal and salvation. In other words, we might well picture Jesus's hearers (which included his newly chosen inner circle of the Twelve apostles) as standing at a spiritual crossroads with one track leading away from God and toward condemnation, and the other as the pathway heading toward the life and hope of God's Kingdom. In contrast to the beginning of the Sermon upon the Mount with its nine beatitudes or blessings (Matthew 5:3–12), Luke has Jesus proclaim four blessings and four woes that constitute the different forks in the road laid out before the people. As with their ancestors receiving an invitation to choose life over death, when entering into the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 30:15–20), the crowds gathered upon the plain were being called by Jesus to embrace God's abundant life and turn away from the deadly alternative.

So far, so good. However, when we examine the content of the eight sayings in this first part of the 'Sermon on the Plain' (Luke 6:17–49), the former option may not seem quite so appealing. Blessed are the poor and hungry, blessed are people who weep and mourn, blessed are those excluded, reviled and defamed on account of their loyalty to the Son of Man (6:20–23). At face value, that might not sound an awful lot like the pathway leading to fullness of life, and indeed, New Testament thinking never suggests that discipleship is free from the possibility of suffering. Yet, what we discover herein is precisely the transformative and radical dynamic of God's Kingdom. Just as Mary

proclaimed that God humbles the mighty and raises up the lowly, in her passionate song of praise (Luke 1:46 – 55), so her Son sets out Gospel reversals which reveal God's particular care for those forced onto the margins of society.

The values of the Kingdom of God turn our normal expectations and ideas about the relationship between material wealth and blessings from God upside down. Following this pathway toward abundant life does not mean that poverty, hunger, mourning, and persecution are states of being to be sought after; instead, it means living attentively and generously, using the resources we have at our disposal to end poverty and hunger, to comfort the grieving and to stand in solidarity with our siblings in Christ whose discipleship puts them at great risk. In this vein, the pathway set out in the 'four woes' of 6:24–26 doesn't represent a wrong road from which there is no return when we begin to walk its way. Rather, it sets out the need for profound repentance, for a conscious turning away from a path of self-absorbed living and hoarding of resources. It may not be easy to find our way back when we go down this road, not least as it does mean embracing Kingdom values which are deeply countercultural. Yet, the possibility is there, precisely because God's grace goes before us and leads us forward on the pathways of righteousness. We can never be too far along a wrong road to be beyond the renewing love of God.

The United Kingdom has, arguably, wandered a long way along the road of injustices and inequalities. An aggressive pursuit of austerity policies has had a profoundly detrimental impact on public services, and massively widened the gap between the poorest and wealthiest in our society. Rapidly rising food prices and utility costs are forcing ever increasing numbers of people to have to choose between food and warmth, and both hidden and visible homelessness continue to rise as the housing crisis in the South East in particular makes rental prices unaffordable for many, particularly folk living in single income households. Recently, the Council of Europe ranked this country in

the same category as Russia, Poland and Belarus as nations where the human rights of LGBT+ people are under sustained threat. Right to protest restrictions, increasingly brazen governmental corruption, and a lack of integrity in public life have undermined faith in the very democracy previously championed on the international stage. Now, taking this as a unit may lead us to feel despair about the possibility of meaningful change. However, today's reading reminds us that it's impossible to go so far down a wrong road that God can't reach us.

If we want to see change so that the values of God's Kingdom really shape how we live together, it starts with us. The Gospel is political, because it concerns relationships and justice. It is not acceptable to ignore the gulf between the value God places on all people, and the lived realities of the poor, the hungry and the grieving. Hence, in the coming week, I'd like to invite you to pray about the differences you might make, and to take action for the sake of the Kingdom. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

After each of the prayers below are offered, you might wish to follow them by the Taize chant suggested:

O Lord, hear my prayer; O Lord, hear my prayer.

When I call, answer me.

O Lord, hear my prayer; O Lord, hear my prayer.

Come and listen to me.

Let us pray:

God of freedom and hope,

you came to bring good news to the poor.

We pray for all those who struggle to make ends meet,

for those having to choose between food and heating,

and those who are worried about what the future holds.

God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring release to the captives.
We pray for prisoners of conscience throughout the world,
for those living under oppressive regimes and dictatorships,
and the work of human rights organisations and advocates.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring recovery of sight to the blind.
We pray for everyone who struggles to trust they are loved,
for those blinded by affluence, self-interest or greed,
and all those who have lost sight of you in the midst of life.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring freedom to the oppressed.
We pray for those experiencing isolation and loneliness,
for all victims and survivors of abuse of any kind,
and those struggling with ill health in body, mind or spirit.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

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**