



### 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 being a witness to something which matters deeply to you, and why do you think that is?

### Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Gracious God,  
for ordinary folk who do extraordinary things in your name,  
for those who have encouraged us to know and use our gifts,  
for those who have radiated your love and drawn us to Jesus,  
for those who share in our struggles and restore our dignity,  
for those who opened wide the doors of your Church  
and invited us in to meet with you:  
**we give thanks and praise! Amen**

### Psalm of the Week – Psalm 40:1 – 11

I waited patiently for the Lord;  
he inclined to me and heard my cry.  
He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog,  
**and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.**  
He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.  
**Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.**  
Happy are those who make the Lord their trust,  
**who do not turn to the proud,**  
**to those who go astray after false gods.**  
You have multiplied, O Lord my God,  
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts towards us;  
**no-one can compare with you.**  
Were I to proclaim and tell of them,  
**they would be more than can be counted.**  
Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,  
but you have given me an open ear.  
**Burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required.**  
Then I said, 'Here I am; in the scroll of the book  
it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God;  
**your law is within my heart.'**  
I have told the news of deliverance in the great congregation;  
**see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord.**  
I have not hidden your saving help within my heart,  
**I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;**  
I have not concealed your steadfast love  
and your faithfulness from the great congregation.  
**Do not withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast  
love and your faithfulness keep me safe for ever.**  
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 overflowing love,  
who affirmed Jesus at his baptism as your beloved child,  
we bring to you that in need of your renewal and restoration,  
in our lives, in the world, and in your Church:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:

**restore us and heal us.**

We bring to you the times we've failed to love one another:

**restore us and heal us.**

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:

**restore us and heal us.**

We bring to you the injustices and oppression in our world:

**restore us and heal us.**

We bring to you the failings and disunity of your Church:

**restore us and heal us.**

*Silence is kept for a few moments...*

God of transformation and hope,  
you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.  
Thank you that you forgive us, restore us and call us on.

**Amen**

**Reading**     John 1:29 – 42

## Sermon

Courtroom dramas are a staple of both theatre and television shows because, I suppose, of the suspense of waiting to discover whether the alleged guilty party really was responsible for the crime of which they have been accused. Whether we are thinking of a 'serious' play

such as Agatha Christie's *Witness for the Prosecution* or the farcical comedy of the courtroom episode of *The Goes Wrong Show*, drama in a legal context builds anticipation and gets our brain cells working as we assess the evidence ourselves. For our purposes, it is helpful to note that they provide an example of what 'witnessing' means as when someone gets into the witness box, they have to take an oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Obviously, when we witness to our faith in Christ, truthfulness is a pre-requisite, but what else might be involved?

Today's reading offers another model of what being a witness looks like, as both John the Baptist and Andrew the brother of Simon lead others towards Jesus. They act as signposts pointing beyond themselves to another, and thus if one were to imagine John and Andrew in today's world with social media profiles, then a picture of an arrow would make for an appropriate image for their homepages. Now, for such witnessing to be effective, the credibility of the person pointing beyond themselves is important, just as it is in a courtroom, but what helps establish that trustworthiness may differ sharply; for example, someone with a troubled past whose life has been turned round by discovering God-in-Christ's love for them might be given a hard time in cross-examination whilst being compelling as a Christian witness. Whatever the case, however, the content of the message is central, and both John and Andrew had something important to say. Jesus's coming into the world would change everything and in their different ways, the two men witnessed to him as Son of God and Messiah.

John the Baptist is introduced to us in the prologue to the Gospel of John. He came with a mission to testify to the Word of God and light of the world (1:6 – 9). He was very clear that he himself was not that light, but his calling was to act as a signpost to Jesus. This evidently caused some confusion among the Jerusalem religious authorities, and they demanded to know who he was – the Messiah, the prophet Elijah whose return was believed to be the prelude to the coming of

the former, the mysterious prophet of Israel to whom Moses pointed shortly before he died, or somebody else (1:19 – 23). John told them that he was acting as a signpost, preparing the pathways of the Lord and crying out in the wildernesses of Judea, but this only led to them demanding to know why he was baptising people (1:25 – 26). Faced with this hostility, John again pointed beyond himself; the one whom he was highlighting by offering this baptism with water would be far greater than him, and would baptise with the Holy Spirit (1:27 – 28). This tells us a lot about the character of John; while he had gathered his own group of disciples and attracted, from what the Gospels and the Jewish historian Josephus tell us, thousands of people ready to be baptised by him, he consistently looked beyond himself, towards the greater one coming after.

The next day, we are told that John saw his younger cousin walking towards him, and he began to testify to what he knew. This was the Lamb of God bringing forgiveness and redemption to Israel. He had witnessed the Holy Spirit descend like a dove and remain on Jesus, and thus he knew both that this person would baptise with the Spirit and is the Son of God (1:29 – 34). John's testimony looks backward to the prologue of this Gospel and the affirmation that the Word who became flesh was present when the world was created (1:1 – 3). Its emphasis is also forward-looking, as it sets the scene for the coming of the Messiah, upon whom Israel's hopes rested. In this compelling way, John witnessed to the amazing and radical new thing God was doing in the world, and the next day, his reference to this led two of his own disciples to leave him and follow Jesus (1:35 – 37).

Now, one of the two disciples remained anonymous, which probably means they later fell away, and were not known to the early Church. However, the second is named as Andrew, the brother of Simon. In the Synoptic Gospels, we learnt that he was a fisherman who came from Galilee, but John's Gospel reveals how he was pointed toward Jesus by the witness of John the Baptist, which makes sense of his

willingness to follow Jesus, and hence leave behind his familiar life. The exchange between Andrew, his unnamed friend and Jesus can be mistaken for an innocuous conversation, but if we listen carefully to the Greek text, we discover a really significant meeting. When we find Jesus asking the men following him what they were looking for, the Greek actually reads more like 'what are you seeking?'; in other words, what are you longing for and what do you truly need? In turn, when they enquired about where Jesus was staying, the Greek text reveals how they were asking about abiding with Jesus, dwelling in his presence in the way 15:4 – 10 later tells us is the route to eternal life, to abundant life in all of its fullness (1:38).

Jesus' invitation to come and see (1:39) is the key. Having remained with him for a while, the first thing Andrew did afterwards was to find his brother, Simon, to tell him that they had found the Messiah (1:40 – 41). This encounter with Jesus had turned Andrew from someone who had been witnessed to by another into a witness himself, which tells us that he too was ready to point beyond himself towards Jesus and act as a holy signpost (1:42). It is tempting to focus upon Simon receiving the name 'Peter', and indeed Simon Peter would become a key figure in the early Church. However, it is worth pausing to see the significance in their story of Andrew, who clearly recognised that Jesus was greater than John, and built upon that witness in his own testimony. To return to where we began, the stories of independent witnesses corroborating gives them credibility in a courtroom setting and adds weight to their evidence, but unless Andrew had made the truth of Jesus his own, Simon might well have been rightly sceptical. For me, it was the authenticity of Andrew's words that led his brother to come and see for himself.

So, pulling this together, what may we learn about witnessing to our faith from today's passage? Well, there is something important here about truthfulness. John the Baptist did not deviate from his calling, even though he faced confusion for pointing consistently toward the

one coming after him; it would have been easy to big himself up and claim more for himself than was true. Andrew witnessed faithfully in a way that was authentic and again directed another beyond himself towards Jesus. Truthfulness is about more than just stating the facts in a dispassionate manner, when it comes to witnessing to Jesus in the world. When you think about it, witnessing in this way is a deeply countercultural thing to do. In a celebrity culture driven by the desire to be famous, and in a world profoundly influenced by social media, we're encouraged to draw attention to ourselves. However, pointing to Jesus means going against the grain, signposting others beyond ourselves towards the Word made flesh, the light of the world. We're to share our experiences of the love of God faithfully, like John, and authentically, like Andrew, but always with the arrow set firmly in the direction of Jesus.

Being a witness to our faith in a secular society is not easy but when we talk about evangelism, this is what we mean. We are to witness, not in the law courts, but in the midst of everyday life. Let us commit ourselves to make the most of the opportunities presented to us, as John and Andrew did, to invite others to come and see Jesus. Amen

### **Recommended Resource of the Week**

Samuel Wells' *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church* (2017) reflects theologically and practically on the essences of discipleship and Christian ministry today.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

God of costly and self-giving love,  
as we ponder the transforming reign of God,  
we bring our prayers for others to you.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those living in places blighted by war and conflict

and all those forced to leave everything behind to find refuge.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those impacted right now by climate change,  
and all working to support communities at the sharp end.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those struggling to heat their homes in the cold,  
and all who cannot afford to eat amid the cost-of-living crisis.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are unwell in body, mind or spirit,  
and all working in health and social care in these tough times.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are feeling lonely, isolated or anxious,  
and especially for those struggling to accept they are lovable.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are living with addictions of any kind,  
and for all who wrestle with destructive desires and wants.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are bereaved in this time of turmoil,  
especially those struggling to access support and care.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,  
and in the presence of the Holy Spirit,  
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

### **Lord's Prayer**

### **Blessing**