



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,
use technology to connect with each other,
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 a time when you felt trapped in a situation. What happened, and what did it feel like to break free?

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 22:19 – 28

O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
Save me from the mouth of the lion!
From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

**I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:**
You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;
**he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.**
From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
**The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live for ever!**
All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.
**For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.**

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

*You are invited to use the hymn God! When human bonds ([StF 649](#))
as a prayer, after which the following is said:*

God of all goodness and blessings,
thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and equip us to be your disciples,
agents of change and transformation.
Amen

Reading Luke 8:26 – 39

Sermon

We decided to go over to Gerasa for some peace and quiet, after a hectic few weeks of following Jesus, as he preached and taught and healed people throughout Galilee. Things had started to heat up, as the 'authorities' – by which I mean that bully, Herod Antipas, and his gang of sycophants and cronies – had picked up on what was going on, and felt threatened. Jesus wanted time to let things die down a little. Added to that, the Pharisees and Scribes had also noticed him, and were after an excuse to arrest him. Consequently, heading over the Sea of Galilee to somewhere we weren't so well-known seemed like a sensible option. So it was that we got into the boat and set off for the predominately Gentile region, on the eastern side of the lake.

However, we'd hardly gotten far when the weather took a sharp turn for the worse. A storm kicked up which was so fierce we thought the boat would be capsized. This was not the first time it had happened; conditions often went from calm to tempestuous in a matter of a few minutes on the lake, but this was far worse than usual. Huge waves were crashing into our boat, and great gusts of wind tossed us from one side to the other. We barely managed to hang on – Peter nearly fell overboard at one point – and what was Jesus doing while all this was happening, but sleeping, would you believe!

We went to wake him up – I think somebody shouted out something like "we're all going to die!" Everybody was panicking, but Jesus got up, calm as you like, and told the sea to settle down. Within a matter of seconds, the waves had died down, the wind ceased howling and battering us, and we could even see the Sun beginning to poke out from between the clouds. "Where's your faith?" he asked us, before lying down and going back to sleep again. Well, I do not know about you, but I hadn't thought anything like that was actually possible, let alone something would find myself witnessing right in the middle of a crisis. I remember a peculiar mixture of wonder and terror washing

over me, as I looked at Jesus adjusting his pillow and yawning. Who was this guy that even the weather obeyed him?

Next morning, after a sleepless night spent trying to make sense of what had happened, we arrived in Gerasa. It is on the northern edge of the Decapolis, the set of ten Gentile towns generally regarded by Jewish people as dens of iniquity, meaning few ventured over there, if they could help it. As I say, we had all hoped for some respite from the relentless demands on us, but no sooner had he stepped ashore than a man from the nearest town dashed toward Jesus. I will never forget that sight. He was covered from head to toe in grime and was stark naked. There were thick red lines around his ankles and wrists where it looked like shackles had rubbed. He had long, dirty, greasy hair and a ragged beard, but it's his eyes I'll not forget, though; they looked wild and unnaturally large, as if he was high as a kite, but at the same time ... well, deadened. It was like all the life had gone out of him. A bloke who was looking on said this was the man who lived in the graveyard, and that clearly he had escaped his chains again. My friends and I looked at one another, and we all felt uneasy. What was this pitiful soul capable of, we wondered?

I almost jumped out of my skin when, without any warning, this man suddenly started screaming out at the top of his shrill voice – a truly horrible sound. It still makes me shudder when I remember it. Jesus told the demons that'd clearly got a watertight grip on him to get out. He said, "Jesus, Son of the Most High God! What do you want from me? I beg you, don't punish me!". We are frightened now, but Jesus didn't seem in the slightest bit phased. He asked the poor man, who was on his knees now, what his name was. We were shocked when he cried, "Legion", because that was a group of six-hundred Roman soldiers. "Please do not cast us into the abyss!", they begged Jesus. Instead, they asked if they could take over the herd of swine feeding on the hillside above. We do not eat pigs because the Law of Moses says they are unclean, and we know their meat makes people ill.

Anyway, Jesus did as the demons asked. At first, all fell quiet as the man fainted and his screaming and moans stopped. Then we heard what sounded like a drumbeat somewhere off in the distance, but it grew steadily louder. Suddenly, we saw the herd of pigs stampeding down the hillside and rushing headlong into the water until the whole lot of them had drowned. Meanwhile, the fellow's body was shaking, like he was having some sort of seizure that gradually died down as the pigs vanished out of sight. John placed his cloak under the guy's head to keep him safer, whilst James mopped his sweaty forehead. Jesus just gazed into the distance, as if this bizarre episode was the most ordinary thing in the world! We saw the swineherd pointing at us from up in the surrounding hills, and shouting abuse at us – I will not repeat what they said! – and then they ran off, towards the town. So much for a quiet break, I thought. After the last pig was drowned, and quiet fell once again, the fellow slowly began to wake up. Jesus knelt down next to him and had a whispered conversation, while we gazed on, feeling overwhelmed by what we had just watched. Soon we were dispatched to fetch some spare robes and a towel from the boat, and to find a discrete spot where the man could clean himself. As he wandered off, I sat down on a rock, and sought to make sense of everything I had seen in those last twenty-four hours.

Back when I decided to follow Jesus, I had heard he was a prophet, and a teacher – someone who was unusually close to God. I'd been so intrigued and inspired that I could not help wanting to get to know him, to journey with him, but I hadn't bargained on anything like this! For centuries now, we had been hoping God would send a Messiah, somebody who would put things right in the world, once-and-for-all, so that God would dwell amongst us and we would be truly with God – could Jesus of Nazareth actually be the Christ, come at long last? This was too good to miss; I wanted to find out for myself.

In those few short months we had been disciples, we'd heard Jesus stand up and proclaim release to the captives, sight to the blind and

freedom to the oppressed. We had watched him be hounded out of his hometown for daring to suggest that God cared about more than just Israel. We'd seen him break rules and laws about food, touching ill people, hanging out with sinners and even taxmen, not to mention telling the people who thought they had control of all things religious and spiritual that the 'God' they had constructed for themselves was way too small. Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven was a reality in which all are truly welcome. The poor guy he helped that day was just one of countless people which the rest of the world regarded as outsiders, as beyond care, or redemption, or hope. Yet, Jesus made him whole. As I finished my ponderings and wandered back over to join the others, the bloke (whose name, it turned out, was John) was cleaned up, fully-clothed, and sitting at Jesus's feet listening to him, like any other Rabbi's pupil taking in their master's wisdom. I almost staggered back when I saw him – it was nearly impossible to believe it was the same person who had wildly thrown himself at Jesus' feet and looked at him with those wild eyes. However, the serenity of the scene didn't last long...

The herdsman had brought a large crowd from the surrounding area with them, and when they saw the man sitting down there, they were understandably petrified. Jesus walked up to the one who appeared to be in charge to speak to him, but he flinched, as if he thought that Jesus would attack him or something. After a few minutes, he came back, and told us we had been asked none too politely to leave, and to get into the boat. As we walked away, John cried out "Jesus! Wait for me! I'm coming with you!" Jesus replied, "Go back home and tell everyone what God has done for you". After a while, he turned away and headed up the hill toward the town. I remember thinking that it would not be easy for him; after all, his past was hardly a secret and it'd be a while before people accepted him back into the community.

Yet, that day, John went from being a despised, mocked and feared outsider to taking his true place in the Kingdom of God. His story is

only one of many which I could tell you about how Jesus transforms lives. In the end, the love he embodied was too much for the people in charge to handle, and Jesus ended up nailed to a cross, branded a rebel and as criminal. We humans made our God into the ultimate outsider that day. Yet even that didn't stop God's love, and the crazy and almost unbelievable fact is that death wasn't the end of his story or his power. I have met many more people who have had their lives changed beyond recognition by his love since that first Easter.

I'd like to think you're listening to me because, in turn, you have your own story to tell. Please, go and do what John did – tell it to all who'll listen, and spread the word. There's no shortage of people who feel like 'outsiders', who need to know God loves them beyond anything they could imagine. So, go and tell everybody you meet of what God has done for you; you never know what difference it might make for the person listening. Amen

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of our past,
thank you that you formed and shaped us,
and know each one of us inside and out.

We bring you thanks and praise!

God of our present,
thank you that you invite us to follow you,
and show us how to love.

We bring you thanks and praise!

God of our future,
thank you that you're always faithful,
and will guide our footsteps.

We bring you thanks and praise! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

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**