



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 about a time when you had let someone serve you who wasn't being paid to do so. Did you find it easy or hard to do that, and why?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Gracious and welcoming God,
your love resounds throughout all you have made,
and you draw us to yourself.

We bring our thanks and praises!

Humble and self-giving God,
you came not to be served but to serve,

and you stoop to wash our feet.

We bring our thanks and praises!

Empowering and life-giving God,
you equip us all with gifts and talents
with which to make a difference.

We bring our thanks and praises! Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 54

Save me, O God, by your name,
and vindicate me by your might.

Hear my prayer, O God;

give ear to the words of my mouth.

For the insolent have risen against me,
the ruthless seek my life;

they do not set God before them.

But surely, God is my helper;

the Lord is the upholder of my life.

He will repay my enemies for their evil.

In your faithfulness, put an end to them.

With a freewill-offering I will sacrifice to you;

I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good.

**For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.**

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

Servant God, who makes all things new and freely loves,
you bring renewal and refreshment in tired places,
and set us free to follow you into a hope-filled future.

Let us therefore bring to God those things in need of renewal:

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 wounds and fractures in our community:

Restore us and heal us.

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

Restore us and heal us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of new beginnings, of love stronger than even death,
you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.

Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and breathe new life into us.

Amen

Reading Mark 9:30 – 37

Sermon

The famous Simon and Garfunkel song 'The Sound of Silence' was what came to mind as I read this week's Gospel passage; it contains no fewer than four telling silences in just eight verses, each of which speaks volumes about what was happening at that point. Jesus and his disciples had just come away from a challenging encounter with hostile crowds and the Scribes, when those who had *not* been taken up what was probably Mount Hermon to witness the Transfiguration

had been unable to heal a demon-possessed child. The first silence comes from his not wanting anybody to know he was now travelling through Galilee, because of the highly dangerous nature of what he was teaching his friends (9:30 – 31). Given how they failed to lie low even in predominantly gentile regions like Tyre (7:24 – 30), let alone in an area where Jesus had been followed about wherever he went, this was a tall order! Yet, as they headed towards his base camp in Capernaum, he sought to maintain a *stealthy* silence.

The second silence we encounter reflects how challenging what the disciples were now being told was. This is the second of three times Mark has Jesus predicting his death and resurrection (9:31), but the original Greek makes it clear that the snippets recorded herein were part of an ongoing process. He spoke for the first time of being given over to "human hands" in the present tense, before later being killed and rising again after three days. Ideas about the 'Son of Man' being vindicated after suffering on behalf of God's people, the mysterious Suffering Servant figure of Second Isaiah bringing about healing for all of the nations through his denigration, and the righteous sufferer depicted in the Psalms, were well-known. Yet, they didn't feature in what most imagined that the Messiah would be like. Moreover, while Daniel 12:2 looked to the general resurrection of Israel's martyrs, in the final judgment, Jesus was introducing a new and radical idea by predicting his own resurrection from the dead. It is not too surprising that they therefore struggled to understand what this all meant, and perhaps because of the fierce rebuke Peter got when he challenged Jesus previously (8:31 – 33), they didn't dare ask him to explain this teaching (9:32). Our second silence is thus a *shocking* one!

The third silence may well be best described as an *embarrassed* or *shameful* silence. Having arrived in Capernaum, and safely entered the house where they were all staying, Jesus asked his friends what they had been arguing about on the way (9:33). Their lack of a reply, Mark informs us, reflects how they had been debating which of them

was greatest (9:34). I imagine Jesus already knew the answer when he asked the question, and their reaction is revealing. We know this would continue to generate friction between them, and it is possible that Jesus selecting just three friends to witness the Transfiguration (9:1 – 13) had fuelled emerging rivalries. I find myself picturing them starting down at the floor, and shuffling uncomfortably; perhaps they were expecting another dressing down from Jesus. However, if they were worried, they need not have been, as Jesus then sat down like any Rabbi might have done, to teach them again (9:35).

Presumably, that child he brought into their midst and hugged (9:36) was a member of the household and known to them. Yet, they didn't say anything when offered this illustration of servanthood. Welcome a child, someone not considered to have any status until old enough to be economically 'useful', and you welcome the one who sent me, said Jesus (9:37). It makes a powerful point; if you want to be 'first', to be the highest status person, in the Kingdom of God then you will need to be humble in how you relate to others, and ready to see the ideas of hierarchy operating about, and including, you turned upside down (9:35). Hence, our fourth silence is a *subversive* silence which challenged not just the disciples' thinking but the wider cultures they inhabited. It is still a tough concept for us to grapple with today amid a society in which status and social class influence so much of what our experiences of life end up being like, but grapple with it we must.

In the midst of all these four silences – stealthy, shocking, shameful and subversive – sits a fifth word beginning with S, which is servanthood. As the disciples would eventually come to understand, Jesus' commitment to embodying God's freely-given love would shape his actions in ways that reflected *not* the acquisition of power and status for himself, but the self-emptying and sacrificial love that led toward Calvary and the cross (Philippians 2:5). In John's version of the final supper they shared together, Jesus put his teaching into practice in dramatic fashion as he washed the disciples' feet, something which

was normally done by the most junior servants. Hence, servanthood was an important part of Jesus' ministry, and it's a part of our calling today as disciples in the twenty-first century. Yet, it's also something that needs a bit of 'unpacking' to make sense of it within our context, and I would like to suggest three things we need to keep in mind.

Firstly, serving others, and putting self-forgetful love into practice, is part of the task of all Christians; however, the greater burden of this has often fallen on particular groups in the Church, such as women, and results in some people feeling that their needs aren't supposed to matter. When this happens, it misses the point of what Jesus was teaching. Secondly, we need both to serve, and to be served. Often, we are good at serving but uneasy about allowing other folk to serve us, especially as we are frequently told we should be self-sufficient. However, there is a big difference between 'unhealthy dependency', and 'mutual interdependence'. Thirdly, what servanthood looks like in practice will vary between different contexts, but it always reveals God's grace and love, and that offers us a yardstick of authenticity. So, as we listen to the sounds of the silences present in today's text, may we have the courage to prayerfully examine what servanthood means in our context and our everyday lives, and put it into practice, not that we might acquire status and be thought of well, but because the first in the Kingdom of God is the one who serves. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

For all caught up in situations of war and conflict, and whose lives are blighted by fear and violence, servant God, **hear our prayer.**

For all bearing the brunt of worsening climate change, and political leaders ahead of the Cop-26 conference, servant God, **hear our prayer.**

For all who serve in local and national government,
and for civil servants as they implement policy decisions,
servant God, **hear our prayer.**

For all faith communities who seek to serve you and others,
and in particular for the congregations to which we're linked,
servant God, **hear our prayer.**

For all feeling isolated, lonely, lost or disorientated today,
and those without adequate shelter, food and resources,
servant God, **hear our prayer.**

For all we know who are suffering in body, mind or spirit,
and those things on our own hearts today as we worship you,
servant God, **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**