



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

Have you ever struggled to accept that something you had believed to be true was not? What happened, and how did you feel?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 89:1 – 4, 15 – 18

I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, for ever;
I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.
**I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.**
You said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:
"I will establish your descendants for ever,

and build your throne for all generations."

Happy are the people who know the festal shout,
who walk, O Lord, in the light of your countenance;
they exult in your name and your righteousness all day long.

**For you are the glory of their strength;
by your favour our horn is exalted.**

For our shield belongs to the Lord,
our king to the Holy One of Israel.

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 costly and life-giving love,
who bids us come and walk the way of the cross,
we bring to you those things in our own lives
and within the life of our broken and messy world
in need of renewal and restoration at this time:

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 costly and life-giving love,
who bids us come and walk the way of the cross,
thank you that you forgive, restore us,
and send us out to be bearers of hope and justice,
and to bring new life through our words and actions.

Amen

Readings Jeremiah 28:1 – 10
 Matthew 10:40 – 42

Sermon

Sometimes, there is a big difference between what we *want* to hear, and what we *need* to hear. The role of the prophets is to speak truth, but we don't always wish to listen. TS Elliot noted in *The Wasteland* that human beings cannot bear too much reality; we struggle to face the facts of ourselves, and the complexities of life as it is. Ultimately, we struggle to face God, because we cannot deceive God as to the human condition and the state of the world. Thus, much energy gets directed into distractions and deflections, and even into persuading ourselves that what we anxiously *want* to believe is in fact the case, despite evidence to the contrary. The prophet's task is to cut straight through all of these layers of self-deception and corporate delusion, and thus to lay the truth before us.

As an example, there is much interest these days in what one might loosely call 'spirituality', which is reflected by the content to be found within the 'mind, body and spirit' section of many bookshops, and a fair bit of material that is popular online. However, much of that vast output is geared toward either furthering material ends or the pursuit of 'inner peace', as if 'spirituality' is about a feelgood factor. Contrast that with Rowan Williams' description of Christian spirituality as that which interrogates *us*, and strips us naked before the reality of God. The former easily becomes self-absorbed; the latter demands being

ready to lose one's life in order to really find it, letting go of pretence and distractions, and daring to face the truth. One is easily put down should it become too hard; the other bids us 'come, and die'.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus had been preparing his disciples to hit the road and proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God in both word and action. They knew that this would not be an easy or simple task, and that the gift of the authority they were being given to teach others of the closeness of the Kingdom, to heal and set free and be bringers of new life (10:7 – 8), would likely cost them everything that mattered (10:16 – 39). At the end of these instructions, Jesus turned to talk of welcome and of reward. Speaking of righteousness recalls the faithful upholding of the Law of Moses; setting this together with the imagery of prophets and their rewards reminds us how Matthew was especially keen to point towards Jesus as fulfilling both the Law and the Prophets. There's also something here about hospitality, in an echo of the 'Parable of the Sheep and the Goats' (25:31 – 46); if you give even the least of my followers a mug of water, then you do the same for me, and thus ultimately for God the Father (10:42). But what of these rewards? Exactly what is the 'prophet's reward'?

The answer might not sound very attractive when looked at from the perspective of the world. Jonah was somewhat unique amongst the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures because he was *not* killed for his trouble, and we know how Jerimiah met a rather sticky end! Indeed, God bids us, 'come and die'. Hananiah didn't see it that way. It's far easier, and more profitable for oneself, to tell people what they want to believe is the case despite all evidence to the contrary, especially within a context of great anxiety. The court of Judah was beset with worry amid the threat that, like Israel had previously, they too would be conquered by the Babylonians and marched off into exile. To get his point across (that this was the inevitable consequence of having departed from God's ways), Jeremiah had placed the symbolic yoke around his neck. Hananiah broke it, in order to spread false hope to

those who were only too willing to cling to whatever gave them their longed-for sense of comfort and 'inner peace'.

I am not sure whether it is more or less cynical to wonder if, perhaps, Hananiah did actually believe he was speaking God's word and, like many a televangelist today, if he happened to profit through playing on others' fear and need, then so be it! Jeremiah embodies a rather different kind of spirituality. He would love to be able to speak words of hope and new beginnings; unfortunately, they simply wouldn't be true. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, he says; if you're really proclaiming the word of the Lord, then what you say will come to pass. Jeremiah slices through the veneer of 'spiritual authenticity' created by his rival. This wouldn't be about what the people *wanted*, but what they actually *needed*. His reward certainly wouldn't be that of power or status – God bids us, 'come and die' – and yet, as Jesus alludes to within our Gospel reading, the rewards in heavenly terms are worth walking this difficult path of reality amid others' unreality.

So, what are we to make of this? How is this good news in our 'post-truth' world? Well, these passages are undoubtedly challenging and they point to the cost of authentic discipleship. However, we're also reminded that to encounter and welcome one speaking God's truths is to welcome Jesus. The good news here is that we cannot exhaust our opportunities to turn towards, and embrace, God's love in Christ Jesus. This does mean facing up to the truth of ourselves, and those ways in which our world fails to reflect that love, which may feel like a less than encouraging experience. Jeremiah spoke of a fire in his bones, which he couldn't ignore (Jeremiah 20:9); he had to face the truth. However, it also means coming to see the realities of our God, which is always encouraging and is always good news.

So, who are those prophetic voices we need to heed? For me, they are people like Greta Thunberg and David Attenborough, who could not be more different on one level but who have both in their various

ways called world leaders to account over climate change, which is arguably the biggest crisis of our time. How we engage in economic activities and combat poverty without also harming the environment is a hard question, but we cannot simply ignore their message. They are two people ready to speak the truth, even though it makes them unpopular with those people who would prefer to ignore stark reality and listen instead to modern-day equivalents of Hananiah, insisting that every little thing will be alright, and anybody who says otherwise is probably part of one conspiracy or another anyway! To leave you with a question, who do you think are the key prophetic voices which we need to heed, and how does their message align with the values of the Kingdom of God? May we have the courage to embrace those hard truths, and respond accordingly. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* is a classic book from someone prepared to put his body where his hope was.

Prayers of Intercession

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world".

We pray for those enduring the darkness and despair of war, and all who work for peace across our broken world.

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life".

We pray for those in need of nourishment and sustenance, and all who struggle to believe they are worth nourishing.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life".

We pray for those in positions of power and authority, and all who seek justice for themselves and others.

Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd".

We pray for those who feel lost, isolated or abandoned,

and all who use their time and talents to reach out to others.

Jesus said, "I am the true vine".

We pray for those who feel God absent or distant from them,
and all who are desperate to abide in the love of God.

Jesus said, "I am the gate of the sheepfold".

We pray for those who share the good news of God's love,
and all who enable churches to be places of warm welcome.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life".

We pray for those who are bereaved or struggling with loss,
and all who are unwell in body, mind or spirit.

In a time of quiet reflection,
we now bring to God our prayers for those on our hearts,
and for our own needs at this time
as we seek to keep the rumour of God alive...

Lord's Prayer

Blessing