



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

Why do you think we sometimes value the spectacular and overlook the everyday? Can you give an example of this?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

We praise you, O God, for your love beyond all telling,
your kindness without limits, your joy without end.
We praise you, O God, for forgiveness beyond measure,
mystery past imagination, plans too big to see.
May we never think we have got
to the end of all that you are, or believe that we can contain
the wonder of your presence. **Amen**

Space for Quiet Reflection

Prayers of Renewal

God of the everyday,
you call us to be faithful in the ordinary things of life,
but we do not always reflect your trust in us.

When we have turned our noses up at the everyday,
and instead sought out the spectacular,
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

When we have not truly put our trust in you,
and instead treated faith as our own private possession,
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

When we have valued dramatic experiences over service,
and sought to glorify ourselves rather than you,
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

God of the everyday,
thank you that when we truly repent, you forgive our sins,
and set us free to follow you. **Amen**

Reading Luke 17:5 – 10

Sermon

In recent years, the 'experiences economy' has grown substantially. Perhaps this is a sign of living in a postmodern world, in which many reject overarching 'big narratives', in favour of individual perspective and experiences. Alternatively, it may be a product of concern about climate change, and the mass production of throwaway goods using fossil fuels, leading to a focus less on possessions and more on the making of memories. Either way, it is notable that marketing of such experience products emphasises the spectacular – the unusual and the dramatic, the 'once in a lifetime' event – as offering escape from

the ordinary and mundane. When I worked in financial services with an international team, most of my colleagues seemed to live for their holidays, so that when their basic needs were met, work was mainly about earning the money to go on their next exciting trip. Lunchtime conversation was often about past holidays, experiences and foods. It was escapism, and a desire for the spectacular, writ large.

Now, this is not something which only concerns individual interests, but is a trend with real theological importance. In her excellent book, *Everyday God*, Paula Gooder argues that as much as we might look for the unusual and extraordinary, it is actually the ordinary which is the 'essence of life'. It is in the *everyday* that we most often see God at work, taking the *ordinary* and making it *extraordinary*. When we're celebrating Holy Communion and gathered around God's table, we encounter the grace of God through the ordinary stuff of life – bread and wine. God takes the everyday and makes it extraordinary. What is more, at the heart of the Church's year is the season we currently find ourselves in – Ordinary Time. I have sometimes been asked to explain what this means, and one way to understand Ordinary Time is that it is the name given to those times when we are *not* celebrating or marking a particular season, such as Easter or Advent. However, this explanation does not do it justice, because Ordinary Time is so much more than just the absence of the spectacular, or the 'special'. Instead, Ordinary Time serves to remind us that God works through the ordinary and mundane to make them anything but boring. I think something like this is going on in today's reading.

Now, there's little doubt that this is a challenging text which contains some very problematic imagery. Speaking of 'moving trees' runs the risk of implying prayer is primarily about supernatural wonders, and the horrific legacy of the Transatlantic slave trade inevitably colours how we read Jesus' using of references to slaves and masters. With those concerns in view, my first reaction to learning that this reading was coming up was to skip over it and focus on something else; yet,

having spent time with it, I changed my mind. It follows from Jesus's teaching his disciples about not causing others to stumble, and how forgiveness is something always to be extended to a fellow disciple, if repentance is true (Luke 17:1 – 4). Given the demands of this and the high expectations Jesus clearly had of his friends, it makes more sense of their asking him to enlarge their faith (17:5). The remainder of the passage (17:6 – 10) shows him challenging their request.

This imagery of faith the size of a mustard seed enabling something impossible to happen is somewhat ambiguous. The Greek appears to suggest his disciples lacked faith in Jesus, to such an extent that one of the smallest seeds available outsized their commitment. Yet, there are good reasons we never hear announcements in churches about faith having 'increased or decreased by so many percent' this year. Faith is not something we can easily quantify, but by speaking of the mulberry tree being moved by fragile faith, Jesus encouraged his anxious friends to keep in mind that even a little faith is sufficient for the greatest demands of discipleship (17:6). When he moved on, and talked about slaves and masters (17:7 – 10), it is very important we recognise that, in Jesus's context, being a slave meant complete devotion to another. The patient prophet Simeon, who greeted Mary in the Temple when Jesus was only a few days old, labelled himself the 'slave of God' to reveal his faithfulness (Luke 2:29), for example. Here, the disciples were reminded of what was expected of a slave, before being told to see themselves as unworthy servants practising the everyday 'disciple stuff', without expecting credit in return.

Bringing this together points, in my view, to the 'God of the ordinary', and to mustard seed faith and modest discipleship sometimes being *exactly* what it is required. Perhaps, we need to have the confidence to go against the grain, and focus less on the spectacular, and those things prized in the experience economy, in favour of everyday work of fidelity and service. What do we mean when, as disciples, we ask to increase in faith? Are we looking for certainty in the face of doubts

and questions, mystical experiences to write home about, some sort of antidote to the struggles of our lives, or something else? Longings for the spectacular, for the dramatic signs and wonders, are nothing new; Jesus himself faced many demands for them as evidence that he was indeed who he claimed he was. However, our God normally works precisely through the ordinary and everyday things of our life, transforming them into the extraordinary. So, friends, may you have the courage to embrace the everyday God and the vision to see that God at work in the ordinary, so that through your fidelity and service, God may be able to make the extraordinary happen. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Paula Gooder's 2012 book *Everyday God* explores the 'ordinary' as the essence of life, and God's presence in the ordinary.

Prayers of Intercession

God of all goodness,
we bring our prayers for the world you love so much to you:

For those living in or fleeing from places of conflict,
bring safety and sanctuary.

For those coping with natural disasters and climate change,
bring renewal and revitalisation.

For those who have or who seek power and authority,
bring wisdom and humility.

For those struggling with the cost of living right now,
bring sustenance and transformation.

For those suffering discrimination and fearful for their futures,
bring justice and freedom.

For those looking ahead to new beginnings in coming weeks,
bring enthusiasm and reassurance.

For those unwell in body, mind or spirit this day,
bring healing and hope.

God of all goodness, we now bring you our own needs...

Lord's Prayer

Blessing