



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

How do you feel about Jesus being referred to as a king? Why might some find this difficult, and what is positive about it?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

You are invited to bring your own thanksgivings and praises to God, concluding with the following:

Majestic and awe-inspiring God,
**receive our thanks and praises
in the name of Jesus Christ,
to whom be the glory forever. Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 46 (Singing the Faith 810)

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble;
therefore, we will not fear, though the earth be moved,
**and though the mountains tremble
in the heart of the sea;**
though the waters rage and swell,
and though the mountains quake at the towering seas.
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place of the dwelling of the Most High.
God is in the midst of her;
therefore shall she not be removed;
God shall help her at the break of day.
The nations are in uproar and the kingdoms are shaken,
but God utters his voice and the earth shall melt away.

The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.
Come and behold the works of the Lord,
what destruction he has wrought upon the earth.
He makes wars to cease in all the world;
**he shatters the bow and snaps the spear
and burns the chariots in the fire.**
'Be still, and know that I am God;
**I will be exalted among the nations;
I will be exalted in the earth.'**
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

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

Forgive us, Lord of all goodness and mercy,
when we uncritically accept the world's realities,
when we side with the powerful and overlook the vulnerable,
when we divorce heaven and earth.

In a world in which competing powers fight for our attention,
and rival kingdoms demand our allegiance,
help us to act wisely, practice mercy, and serve lovingly.

**In the name of Jesus Christ,
who is the way, the truth and the life,
we bring our prayers for renewal to you,
and embrace your forgiveness and new beginnings.
Amen**

Reading Luke 23:33 – 43

Sermon

Today's reading contains one of the most famous things Jesus said, and yet he probably never said it. In Luke 23:34, the phrase "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" is attributed to him as he is crucified at Golgotha, the place of the Skull, by Roman soldiers on the orders of the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. The contrast with Jesus' cry of desolation recorded in the earlier Gospels of Mark and Matthew could not be stronger, and draws our attention toward a different dimension of the events of Good Friday. However, Luke's Gospel does not contain these words in its earliest manuscripts and it is likely that this was a later addition. Now, as some commentators have argued, this might not trouble us too much, because it fits with the wider theme of the narrative. Even so, it does give us pause for thought, as it prompts us to consider the agenda behind the way in which this account of Christ's crucifixion is presented. Especially as

this is the set Gospel reading for the Feast of Christ the King, asking questions about why such a detail might have been inserted into the text does make a difference when it comes to interpretation.

The Feast of Christ the King has somewhat dubious origins; relative to the other landmarks and staging posts in the Christian year, such as Advent and Christmas, Easter Sunday and Pentecost, it is a fairly new kid on the block. It was instigated by Pope Pius XI in 1925, with the aim of bolstering the authority of the papacy amid the increasing secularisation of wider society. As such, its origins are bound up in questions of institutional authority raised during the inter-war period, which saw a widespread loss of confidence in pillars of the world as it had been before the mechanised slaughter of trench warfare. This brings into sharp relief issues of power inherent in choosing to focus on the image of Christ as king amid all the other myriad possibilities. After all, this serves to reinforce patriarchal and imperial power if it's not handled carefully, as various feminist and liberation theologians have made clear. For several centuries, the Church as an institution stood at the very epicentre of power in Europe and the legacy of the Tudors is such that England still has an established church. Anyone who watched the Queen's funeral cannot have missed the Anglican Church's pivotal role, even while ecumenical and interfaith inclusion was greater than would have been dreamed of at her coronation. In this context, what are we to make of Luke's crucifixion account?

Well, in my view, Luke goes further than any of the other four gospel writers in shining a light upon Jesus' identification with marginalised people. In the past few months, we have explored a number of tales Jesus told and encounters he had which draw our attention to God's particular care for those folks the rest of the world routinely ignored, and indeed still ignore today. This included those two men executed alongside Jesus, whose offence is not disclosed but who have often been described in older biblical translations as thieves. One of them joined in with the religious leaders and Roman soldiers representing

sacred and secular powers alike, deriding and mocking Jesus as he demanded that he save not just himself, but them too. The other did not join in with all this, nor did he stay silent like the watching crowds who had gathered at Calvary, on the edge of Jerusalem by the local rubbish dump. Instead, he reached out to Jesus.

One of the interesting features of Luke's account is the way that the people mocking Jesus inadvertently use many of his titles – the King of the Jews, the Messiah, the chosen One of God. They do this with the intention of showing him up as a fraud, as just another wannabe saviour of God's people amongst many failed candidates. However, the second criminal to speak takes seriously what the others did not and responds to Jesus with genuine sincerity. We do not know how this man knew that Jesus was innocent of any wrongdoing, but once he'd admitted his own having been justly condemned, he petitioned Jesus to remember him when he came into the Kingdom, in an echo of Psalm 106:4 – 5. In response, he was told that he would join with Jesus in paradise, in dwelling with God forever. In short, he received salvation without going through lengthy confession, or saying some evangelical 'sinner's prayer'. He did not explicitly repent but did look to Jesus in his time of need. Now, some have described him as just an exceptional case, but I am not so sure.

Whether or not Jesus did forgive the Roman soldiers as they nailed them, naked and helpless, to that cruel wooden cross, that certainly does fit with the narrative. The grace of God is shown here to be no less than radical and scandalous. Agents of a brutal regime without regard for the value of human life are forgiven, and a criminal whose actions were branded sufficiently serious to deserve crucifixion was assured of salvation. What had he done, I wonder? Was he stealing food in order to feed his children? Was he a rapist, a murderer or a leader of a rebellion? We do not know for sure, but we do know that reaching out to Jesus in that moment was enough. No doubt there's a difference in the level of sympathy one would have with somebody

who was forced to take desperate measures to survive and one who chose to harm another person for pleasure or revenge or to exert a power over someone else. Indeed, we might go as far as to suggest that some actions are unforgivable or at least deserving of spending the rest of one's life behind bars. However, the scandalous grace of God does not make distinctions, and is freely given to anybody who will turn to God in sincerity – even the very worst of us.

This is, for me, the crux of the passage: God-in-Christ identifies with the lowliest of the lowly, and raises them up. It follows from this that the offer of redemption is there for us too, so it is very sad that many really struggle to accept this for themselves. My experience of being a pastor has brought me into contact with several people who hoped for forgiveness, being genuinely sorry and remorseful for how they'd hurt another person and looking to make amends, who were denied that for a range of reasons. The pain of this in cases where it is clear that forgiveness is being deliberately withheld to cause anguish and distress is immense, and can leave people feeling stuck. I have also met many folks who felt unable to forgive themselves for something they did, or failed to do. In all these types of scenarios, God's radical graciousness can be profoundly liberating, enabling troubled people to find peace by embracing the forgiveness God offers us all.

We live in a society that can so often be unforgiving, to the point of being vengeful and vindictive, especially when it comes to prisoners and people trying to make their way after being released. Timpson's are a rare example of an employer willing to give people the chance to rebuild their lives following prison, and evidence shows that being in steady and fulfilling employment is one of the most effective ways to prevent reoffending. This is an example of radical grace in everyday life, and it shows that 'societal forgiveness' can be transforming. Now, it is important to recall that nowhere in today's passage do we see Jesus letting the criminals off the hook for what they have done, and forgiveness is not about pretending that we do not need to take

responsibility for our actions and make amends. If anything, it is the precise opposite of playing a game of 'let's pretend', because letting go of anger and beginning a process of forgiving someone who has really hurt us requires naming and acknowledging the damage done to us in the first place. Evangelical Christians who speak of needing to repent are not wrong, but it is about far more than saying sorry to God; it is about changing for the better and owning our actions.

Thus, in the context of the Feast of Christ the King, it is important to recognise the power of spending time with Luke's account of Jesus' crucifixion, regardless of whether 23:34 is a later addition. Within it, we are brought face-to-face with the radical grace of God and hence deeply challenged. Forgiveness and redemption are freely available to all who will acknowledge their sins and turn sincerely toward God in Christ, even when this forgiveness contradicts popular ideas over who does or does not deserve such grace. It is there for you and for me, and all who will genuinely embrace it. To do so is no easy option because, as the narrative makes clear, it means owning our actions and taking responsibility for them. The criminals crucified with Jesus exemplify both the cruelty in human nature, and the fact that nobody is beyond the grace and love of God. Thus, as we prepare ourselves to begin a new liturgical year and enter into Advent once again, may you know the scandalous grace of God upholding you. Amen

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