



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 of a time when you have been challenged to explain why you do something the way you do. How did this impact you?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of healing and compassion,
you made us for prayer and for praise.
and long for all creation to be made whole.
We offer you our praises!

God of healing and compassion,
your Son set people free from the chains of sin

and lifted the loads of illness and pain.

We offer you our praises!

God of healing and compassion,
you sent your Holy Spirit to be our Comforter,
enabling us to know peace passing all understanding.

We offer you our praises!

Praise be to you, healing and compassionate God,
Three-in-One and One-in-Three.

Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 71:1 – 6

In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame.

**In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me.**

Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.

**Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.**

For you, O Lord, are my hope,

my trust, O Lord, from my youth.

Upon you I have leaned from my birth;

it was you who took me from my mother's womb.

My praise is continually of you.

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 healing and compassion,
you open up the way to everlasting life,
and set all creation free to flourish and be whole.

We offer you our prayers for ourselves and our world:

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 injustices and oppression in our world:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the failings and disunity of your Church:

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 Luke 13:10 – 17

Sermon

In my experience, it's all too easy for the reasons behind why we do things in the way we do to get lost over time. Traditions develop and are passed down between the generations, but the rationale behind them isn't always remembered, and as the years go by, their origins are forgotten. One of my theological college tutors told a story which stuck with me, about how one church used to decorate their building in a very particular way at Christmas every year, but nobody actually remembered why, until one of the longstanding members explained

that it was because a former church warden always arranged things like that. The warden did not like Christmas trees in church, and that was why the tree was always stuffed away in an alcove, so that they would not have to look at it during worship! In the absence of a clear explanation and rationale, various alternatives usually emerge to fill the resulting vacuum. A classic example is why some clergy choose to wear stoles. I have heard this described as a symbol of ordination and as pointing to the servant ministry of Jesus as the one who took it upon himself to wash his disciples' feet. However, it actually dates back to when clergy exercised semi-legal authority and mirrors what a judge would have worn. Reasons can so easily get lost!

I wonder if something like this was going on in today's Gospel story, in which Jesus clashed with a synagogue leader about the Sabbath. This is a text which requires some careful handling, as too often the way Christians have talked of Jesus' fellow Jewish leaders has cast them as legalistic and uncaring, but that is not what is going on here. To put this passage into context, Jesus and his disciples were going from Galilee to Jerusalem, pausing to heal and teach along the way. Large crowds were following them around, some of whom had tried to make a link between suffering and sin by telling Jesus about what befell some Galileans who were massacred by Roman forces in the Jerusalem Temple. He rebutted their insinuations, but also made it clear that yielding good fruit for the Kingdom of God is essential and so they themselves should not become complacent (Luke 13:1 – 9). Now, whilst the action shifted from outdoors to indoors, the focus of today's reading is still upon breaking perceived links between one's actions and afflictions, as we learn of the healing of a woman whose suffering was not her own fault. This episode would draw Jesus into one of the perennial debates within First Century Judaism.

It was a Sabbath day and, as was his custom, Jesus was preaching and teaching in a synagogue, the location of which was unspecified, as is often the case in Luke's Travel Narrative (9:51 – 19:27). While

there, he noticed a woman who had been afflicted by crippling back problems for eighteen long years, problems that made it impossible for her to stand upright (13:11). Seemingly without hesitation, Jesus called her over, pronounced her freed from her ailment, and healed her by laying on hands, so that she began to praise God, and rejoice in having at last found liberation (13:12 – 13). This was a wonderful, and moving, moment, which led the crowds to rejoice too. However, the synagogue leader was not pleased; he tried to turn the gathered people against Jesus, by arguing indignantly that healing was a task for any of the other six days of the week but not the Sabbath (13:14). Now, on one level, this leader had a point; in Exodus 31:34, work is outlawed upon the Sabbath as it is to be a day of rest from everyday tasks and preoccupations. There were layers of oral law elaborating on what this meant in practice, and on the surface, Jesus had failed to keep this central commandment. Yet, as we can see, the situation was not so clear-cut.

Using a standard form of rabbinical argument, Jesus challenged the conclusions the synagogue leader had reached, beginning with the everyday care of animals being permitted upon the Sabbath (13:15) and moving onto the greater concern of the woman finally being free from her sufferings after eighteen years (13:16). Hence, his starting point was to argue from what was agreed to be allowed towards the bigger picture, recalling why the Sabbath mattered in the first place. That synagogue leader was not being legalistic nor uncaring, yet he had forgotten the reasons why things were done that way. Time and again in Deuteronomy, Moses reminded the folks of Israel that God had liberated them from oppression, and thus they should keep the commandments in turn. In particular, the role of the Sabbath was to keep this reality before them at all times, so that the common life of Israel might reflect the light of God outward to the whole of creation. In short, the Sabbath was the *ideal time* for works of liberation, such as the healing of this daughter of Abraham.

Thinking about liberation might take us back to another Sabbath, on which Jesus taught in his home synagogue, and proclaimed that he had come to bring freedom from oppression, sight to the blind, good news to the poor, and to announce that the year of the Lord's favour had come (4:18 – 19). On that occasion, the crowd's abrupt change of mind when he spelt out what that meant in practice placed him in very real danger (4:22 – 30). He challenged them to rethink how the faith of Israel was to be lived out, and so why they did things as they did. On another day and in yet another synagogue, he healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (6:6 – 11), demonstrating how that opposition would not throw him off course. Jesus knew what he was doing, and why. I wonder what we might learn from taking these encounters as a unit about our traditions and practices. Do we work in the ways we do because this is how we remember it always being done, or can we see how what we do brings freedom and liberation?

Now, I am not saying here that traditions are necessarily bad or that we need to scrap what we have done before, and begin again. What I think today's passage invites us to do is to re-evaluate the reasons behind what we do. I was ten when the Sunday Trading Act passed, in 1994. During that time, a great deal has changed in terms of how many people spend their Sundays, and while this brings opportunity for living out our faith at work and leisure, it undoubtedly brings great challenges to which we all need to adapt. One positive development to emerge through the Covid-19 pandemic is the provision of online forms of Church, and of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Yet, as many of us have found, it is not easy to sustain community when other people are reduced to head and shoulders on a laptop screen! Changing working patterns have long meant that some simply don't have the option to attend in-person Sunday worship, and for a good many people, juggling the demands of weekend activities, spending time with family and friends, and getting necessary things done can crowd out coming to a service. How we adapt to this changed – and

changing – world will have a big impact on the Church's future, and demand we get back to the core reasons behind what we do.

If we are to bring liberation and freedom today, questions of practice and custom such as this will need to be addressed. The synagogue leader Jesus challenged was not legalistic and uncaring, but he had lost his sense of what the Sabbath was fundamentally about. Faced with our modern context, it is easy to forget that our primary purpose is to proclaim the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ. If we do want the Church to grow and flourish, we need to hold onto the core of why we're here, while being prepared to undertake a journey into new and uncharted territory. To bear fruit, what needs to evolve and change, and what needs to be preserved? As we wrestle with these questions and more, may we be open to the calling of the Holy Spirit as she leads us onwards in the knowledge and love of God. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Brene Brown's 2021 *Atlas of the Heart* explores the range of human emotions and how to build meaningful connections with others.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing