



### 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 an occasion when you have seen somebody exercise their power well. What did they do that was positive for others?

### Prayers of Thanks and Praise

We praise you, Jesus, for all you are to us:  
in a world of fake news, you are our truth;  
in a world of false gods, you are our Saviour;  
in a world of misused power, you are our peace;  
in a world of false dreams, you are our reality;  
in a world of pain and despair, you are our hope.  
You are the source of love and bringer of life.  
**We praise you, Jesus, for all you are to us. Amen**

### Psalm of the Week – Psalm 93

The LORD is king.  
God is clothed with majesty and strength.  
**The earth is set firmly in place and cannot be moved.**  
Your throne, O LORD, has been firm from the beginning,  
and you existed before time began.  
**The ocean depths raise their voice, O LORD;  
they raise their voice and roar.**  
The LORD rules supreme in heaven,  
greater than the roar of the ocean,  
more powerful than the waves of the sea.  
**Your laws are eternal, LORD,  
and your Temple is holy indeed, forever and ever.**  
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**

**Reading** John 18:33 – 40

### Sermon

One of my hobbies growing up was playing chess but I cannot claim that I am terribly good at it, probably because I am somewhat prone to getting engrossed in my own strategies and I do not always notice what my opponent is up to until it is too late. I gather there are similar pitfalls to be avoided when playing tennis, but as I cannot ever seem to simply get the ball back over the net, that's never been a problem for me! Chess is a game that calls for both careful strategic planning and the ability to respond well to the unexpected, and hence despite what most people assume, it can actually be quite exciting to watch, especially in the endgame. It also provides a lens through which to understand what's going on in today's passage from John's Gospel, but it needs a bit of adaptation to bring alive the dramas we discover

in this fascinating snippet of the endgame of Holy Week. This is true not least because, when we step back a bit and put this reading into its context, we discover that not only were two competing models of kingship at work, but that three unequal players in the game itself.

When we pick up the story, Jesus had just been betrayed by one of his friends, and abandoned by the rest, before being arrested by the religious authorities. After what amounted to little more than a 'show trial', he was handed over to the Roman Governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, primarily because the Temple authorities were not permitted to perform capital punishment themselves. Pilate asked whether he was the 'King of the Jews', a title claimed by various others who had gained their throne by violent means, such as Herod the Great. This was a picture of authority Pilate readily understood, even as he had little interest in the details of how those he ruled over related to each other. What he certainly did know was that there's no way any rivals to Caesar would be allowed onto his patch. Thus, while based upon outward appearances, there was no way Jesus was a 'normal' king, Pilate set about questioning him to get to the bottom of what he was doing, thus beginning their deadly game of chess (John 18:33).

We can get some further insight into how different the two men were if we compare how Jesus and Pilate arrived in Jerusalem a few days before this interrogation. The former was tasked with keeping order in Judea, which was far from easy. Jerusalem's narrow streets were overcrowded, dark and smelly, and so ideal for whipping up trouble. There were plenty of people looking to make his life difficult, and the festival of Passover drew thousands of additional visitors to the city. Thus it was that Pilate and his entourage always came to Jerusalem around this time, to ensure good order was kept. They made a point of arriving via the main West Gate, with row upon row of soldiers in full armour, and with weapons brandished. This was a serious show of force, cautioning the people not to mess with Rome if they valued their lives. In sharp contrast, Jesus entered in through the city's East

Gate on the back of a humble donkey, drawing on symbolic markers laid down in the Hebrew Scriptures. His was a very different strategy when it came to the game of chess unfolding here to the brute force approach of Pilate, reflecting in turn two radically varying models of kingship at work.

We can see how the resulting in-game dynamics played themselves out in today's conversation between the two, maybe most clearly as Jesus explained that if God's kingdom was also from this world, his followers would have used physical force to stop him being arrested in the first place. Moreover, when poor old Peter did lash out, at one of the slaves of the high priest, Jesus told him to put his sword away (John 18:10 – 11); the truth Jesus embodied was not one which met violence with violence. It seems that Pilate also struggled to imagine an alternative to the oppressive *Pax Romana* which was maintained at the point of a sword, and in the end, he uttered that deeply cynical response, which has echoed down the centuries: what is truth? One way to read their exchange is to say that the game of chess reached a stalemate at this stage, and having decided there was no basis to find Jesus guilty of a crime, Pilate returned to the Temple authorities and offered to release him, which they refused. Instead, they chose Barabbas, whom we learn was a bandit (18:40). It tells us a lot about Roman (in)justice that Pilate had Jesus flogged (19:1) regardless...

Now, at this point, we'll need to acknowledge the central role played by the Temple authorities if we want to get the full picture of what is going on. Thus, it might be helpful to think these events not so much as being like a conventional chess match, but more like a three-way game, with the Temple authorities as the third 'player'. We may also wish to question whether the three sides are best pictured as having the same number of pieces – or, in other words, with the same level of power at their fingertips. Yet, whatever our opinion on the correct initial balance of chess pieces, we do know that the truth Jesus held within his own person was as problematic for the Temple authorities

as it was for Pilate. This reflected the gap between the values which should have characterised what they were all about and the realities of how they operated, which caused real hardship for many ordinary Jewish people. However, Caiaphas and the Chief Priests were less concerned with Israel's calling to be light to the nations, and servant of all, and more wrapped up in a desire to preserve their own power and authority, which in turn meant keeping Rome sweet.

This means that they weren't only trying to outmanoeuvre Jesus on that three-way chessboard, but they were also playing a dangerous game against Rome, from whom their limited authority was derived. Caiaphas was concerned that Rome would destroy everything they had built up, if Pilate saw any signs of unrest or rebellion, and so he declared that it was preferable for one man to die for the sake of the nation than for this to transpire (John 11:45 – 53). It's ironic that they chose to have Barabbas released, because it's likely he was one of the revolutionary zealots whose guerrilla wars led to the destruction of the Temple, in 70 CE. With the benefit of hindsight, it was far from a smart move on their part to sacrifice longer-term position for short-term advantage. Moreover, in the sting in this tale, they were forced by Pilate to say they had 'no king but Caesar', in order to have Jesus crucified (19:15). The men who had been charged with representing Israel's God had committed idolatry and thus violated the first of the Ten Commandments. As we survey this scene, we may be tempted to picture Jesus as merely a pawn within this multi-layered game of chess between Roman and Temple authorities. However, the reality is that he was the one in control of events, as nobody could take his life from him. Jesus chose the path of the cross (10:18), and so was, and indeed is, the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6).

So, what does all of this mean for us today? Tom Wright argues that Christ inaugurates God's kingdom on earth not through the "love of power" epitomised in the dehumanisation of crucifixion, but through the "power of love". He embodies God's truth in his own person and

so, truth is an "event", an event that occurs when we behave in ways which reveal God's "fresh order" to the world. This reading therefore points to a key challenge: are we willing to live out God's truth in our lives by basing them not upon the love of power, but upon the power of love? Contrary to the deadly game played by Pilate and Caiaphas in Holy Week, there is no such thing as a dispensable human being; all people matter to God. So, if we are to call Jesus our king, we will need to love and care for all people; let us do so with passion. 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,  
we bring our prayers for renewal to you,  
and embrace your forgiveness. Amen**

### **Prayers of Intercession and 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**