



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 about a time when you needed to be persistent to obtain what you required. What happened, and what kept you going?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 126

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
**Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;**
then it was said among the nations,
'The LORD has done great things for them.'
The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
**shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.**
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

Let us pray:

God of healing and salvation,
whose Son revealed your infinite love and left us your Spirit,
you long for all you have made to be whole and to flourish,
and so we bring to you those things in need of renewal
in our own lives, and in the life of the world we share:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
God of mercy, forgive us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:
God of love, comfort us.

We bring to you the brokenness and oppression in our world:
God of justice, disturb us.

We bring to you the times we've hidden from the risks of love:
God of courage, fortify us.

We bring to you the failures of the Church to stand for justice:
God of liberation, convict us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of healing and salvation,
whose Son revealed your infinite love and left us your Spirit,
you long for all you have made to be whole and to flourish;
thank you that you set us free to follow you,
and to be ambassadors for your Kingdom of love. **Amen**

Reading Mark 10:46 – 52

Sermon

Today's passage contains at its heart a provocative and challenging question – what do you want me to do for you? Jesus and his friends had almost reached their final destination, passing through the town of Jericho on their way up to Jerusalem. This journey had proven to be far from straightforward. Three times Jesus explained to his edgy disciples that being the Messiah meant he would need to suffer and die before rising again and entering into his glory. However, on each occasion, they'd failed to understand what he meant. The third time, James and John approached Jesus and were asked that very same question – what do you want me to do for you? They had demanded to be granted the places of honour when Jesus came into glory, and hence had to be reminded that in God's Kingdom, the ordinary order of things is turned upside down (10:35 – 45). As they continued their walk to the capital, the Twelve and the crowds following them would encounter Bartimaeus, who embodied the key principle that the last will be first in the new creation.

The story of Bartimaeus is one of the most powerful and provocative in the New Testament, offering us an excellent role model as friends and followers of Jesus Christ. We don't know whether he was totally unable to see or partially sighted, but we do know he had not always had problems with his vision. Going blind had a profound impact on his life, in a context where this meant facing economic hardship and social isolation, resulting in his being forced into begging by the side

of the road to Jericho. The only object he possessed of any material value was his cloak, which he would have used for collecting money more often than keeping warm on what was a hot and dusty road. I imagine he was tired of being pushed to the margins of society, and being disregarded by other folk, which goes some way to explaining why he was not put off by the hostile reaction of the crowd when he called out to Jesus. His persistence led to his being asked the same question as James and John – what do you want me to do for you?

Despite being physically blind, Bartimaeus is depicted as seeing the way things are far more clearly than the disciples. Having heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth to whom the noisy crowds were drawn, he called out, "Son of David, have mercy on me!". Using this title shows he understood that Jesus was Israel's long-awaited Messiah, which was a dangerous thing to say given the Roman Emperor claimed to be divine, and violent rebellions rumbled on within the Judea region. Consequently, and probably also because he was a beggar situated at the roadside and hence out of the action, some in the crowd tried to shut him up. Tossing off his cloak when called for by Jesus shows Bartimaeus leaving his current situation behind without hesitation or looking back, and there is something quite wonderful about the way those in the crowd were ordered to bring him to Jesus having sought to exclude him! It was then that he was asked today's key question, and Bartimaeus responded in a way that brought him both salvation and healing. He is a powerful example of faith in practice, and offers an attractive role model for us as twenty-first century disciples.

However, imagine a rather different scenario. Suppose that instead of wanting to see again, Bartimaeus had asked Jesus to make sure nobody else met with the economic hardship and social isolation he had experienced if they should lose their sight. In other words, what if he'd asked Jesus to address those unjust structures in that society which had pushed him into destitution? Fast-forwarding to our time, the sad fact is that despite decades of legislation outlawing disability

discrimination, culminating in the Equality Act 2010, exclusion is still an everyday part of life for many people living with disabilities in the UK. My own experience as somebody living with hidden disabilities, that aren't obvious on the surface, has been that misunderstandings still arise, and prejudice still causes problems. Simply asking people for large-print resources has resulted in me being called a nuisance, a troublemaker and an attention seeker, including in church settings and within institutions claiming to be 'inclusive'. This reflects not just individual ignorance or lack of care, but a wider problem – societies such as ours routinely treat those of us with disabilities as issues to be solved, rather than as people to be loved.

So, I take heart from Bartimaeus refusing to shut up when the crowd tried to stop him from getting to Jesus. He would not be silenced, or be denied the ability to exercise agency when Jesus asked him that crunch question – what do you want me to do for you? I don't reckon that the people who tried to shut him up were especially bad people, or unkind or cruel; rather, they struggled with how Jesus was willing to go out of his way to be the servant of Bartimaeus – a marginalised and undervalued person with just a cloak to his name – and thus to follow through on his teaching to James and John about the upside-down nature of the Kingdom of God (10:35 – 45). One might equally well translate Jesus' response to Bartimaeus in Mark 10:52 as 'your faith has made you well' or 'your faith has set you free'. Healing and salvation come together in this example of God's setting somebody free, and this has implications for our alternative, imagined scenario with its question about unjust structures.

Salvation concerns both flourishing in the here-and-now and the life of the new creation. As such, God is as concerned about justice and liberation, as with bodily wholeness and wellbeing. Many difficulties faced by people living with disabilities stem from the way the society around us operates, meaning that recognition of the challenges and struggles caused by the benefits system, inflexibility in employment,

and simply not noticing the potential of neurodiverse people are just a few of the (many) examples of what needs to change for our world to mirror God's passion for justice. Bartimaeus offers a powerful and provocative example of faith in Jesus, despite the crowds struggling with the notion that Jesus would go out of his way for a marginalised person. Today, it matters just as much that we listen to – and do not seek to silence – those voices drawing our attention to issues which result in people living with disabilities being pushed towards the side of the road. Jesus's actions enabled Bartimaeus to follow him in the way and thus to become a disciple as one socially and economically liberated. They also called out those in the crowds who tried to keep him clearly at arm's length, by making them carriers of the invitation to come to him. For the sake of those like Bartimaeus in our society, may we take the time to educate ourselves, to listen, and to practice inclusion in the name of the Son of David, who loves us all. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

God of immeasurable love, who brings wholeness and hope, we bring our prayers for others to you.

Where there is war, conflict and bitterness, we call upon you to bring true peace and reconciliation.

Where there is injustice, hatred and division, we call upon you to make real justice rain down upon us.

Where there is misuse of, and a lack of care for, your world, we call upon you to open our eyes and change our hearts.

Where there is abuse of power and exploitation of the poor, we call upon you to humble the mighty, and lift up the lowly.

Where there is suffering, pain and disease, we call upon you to empower us to bring care, skill and relief.

Where there is stagnation and fear of change in your Church,
we call upon you to renew us, and transform us for good.

And now, in a time of quiet and stillness,
we lift the concerns of our hearts this day to you, loving God.

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**