



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

Have you ever found yourself being harshly (mis)judged by another person? What happened, and how was the situation resolved?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 16 (StF 802)

Preserve me, O God, for in you have I taken refuge;
I have said to the Lord, 'You are my Lord,
all my good depends on you.'

**All my delight is upon the godly that are in the land,
upon those who are noble in heart.**

Though the idols are legion that many run after,

their drink offerings of blood I will not offer,
neither make mention of their names upon my lips.

**The Lord himself is my portion and my cup;
in your hands alone is my fortune.**

My share has fallen in a fair land;
indeed, I have a goodly heritage.

**I will bless the Lord who has given me counsel,
and in the night watches he instructs my heart.**

I have set the Lord always before me;
he is at my right hand; I shall not fall.

**Wherefore my heart is glad and my spirit rejoices;
my flesh also shall rest secure.**

For you will not abandon my soul to death,
nor suffer your faithful one to see the pit.

**You will show me the path of life;
in your presence is the fullness of joy
and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.**

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 renewal and transformation, hope and change,
we come before you knowing there is much in our lives,
and in the life of the world you create and sustain,
in need of your redemption and renewal,
which we bring to you now in prayer:

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of all goodness and blessings,
thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and equip us to be your disciples. **Amen**

Reading Luke 9:51 – 62

Sermon

Today's Gospel text is a particularly challenging one to grapple with. I have been preaching for over a decade now, and being in full-time ministry for almost five years means I have been doing so for almost every Sunday for a considerable time. Consequently, there are very few of the lectionary Gospel readings that I have not given sermons on before, but today's is one of them. When I was training to preach, I was taught that writing a sermon was a three-step process. Firstly, the passage needed to be placed into context so that congregations would gain a sense of where it fitted within the story of God's people and be able to picture the scene. Secondly, working through the text by pulling out key factors, expanding on important points, and giving explanations of what was going on meant diving into the details and bringing study and research to bear on it. Lastly, the application step meant asking, 'What has this text got to say to us today?'. Now, with today's passage, I can see how to undertake the first two stages but not the latter. Allow me to explain.

Jesus was about to start on his final journey towards Jerusalem, the city in which he knew he would be betrayed and killed. He had taken his three closest disciples – Peter, James and John – up a mountain and been transformed before their very eyes, had spoken to two of the greatest figures in the Hebrew tradition in Moses and Elijah, and had been consumed in a cloud within which his friends were told to listen to him, as God's beloved Son (Luke 9:28 – 36). The remaining disciples, who had been waiting at the foot of the mountain, needed to be rescued by Jesus, as they had failed to heal a tormented man. Jesus then told them about the grim fate awaiting him, but they had no idea what he meant and started arguing amongst themselves as to which of them was the greatest, and who could legitimately act in Jesus's name (9:37 – 50). Things were, therefore, not looking overly

rosy when Jesus 'set his face' to go to Jerusalem – a phrase unique to Luke's Gospel, which pointed to both fulfilment of prophecies and to his determination to follow this pathway without being distracted.

So it was that Jesus and the disciples hit the road, but it wasn't long before things started to unfold in a way which takes some grappling with to understand. The passage divides neatly into two halves, and we begin with the second section. This consists of three encounters between Jesus and folk who were probably perspective disciples as opposed to his existing followers. As these are just two verses long, we have very little background to help us interpret them, and hence, a certain amount of guesswork becomes necessary. Within the first snippet (Luke 9:57 – 58), a man approached the group and declared he would follow Jesus wherever he went. He was told that while the birds and foxes have their homes, the Son of Man was without anywhere to lay his head. At first glance, this might sound like a strange way to reject the offer. Perhaps Jesus meant that discipleship could involve alienation and rejection. Maybe the man imagined following Jesus would bring him status and power, and needed to be set right, or perhaps he was too much like Peter in his rashness. The third of the encounters saw another man offer to follow Jesus, but only once he had said farewell to his family (9:61–62). The reply he got leaves me thinking that maybe he was somebody for whom the time would never be right. Finally, a man who was asked by Jesus to follow him requested the time to lay his father to rest, but was told 'let the dead bury the dead' (9:59–60), which I can only rationalise in terms of the absolute priority of the Kingdom over everything else.

Now, Jesus's responses read to me as hyperbolic – exaggerated to make the point about what setting his face toward Jerusalem meant and looked like in practice. Yet, this is nothing to what we find within the first half of our passage, in 9:51 – 56. Advance scouts had been despatched and they had looked for accommodation in a Samaritan village, but were declined. Given the historic animosity between the

Samaritans and the Jewish people, it is possible that racism was at the root of this rejection, but as we only have minimal details to work with, we cannot know for certain. What we do know is that John and James, the 'Sons of Thunder', reacted in a way that appears absurd at face-value. They asked Jesus if they should command fire to rain down from heaven and consume the poor village. Possibly, this was an echo of the much-misunderstood story of Sodom and Gomorrah, in which the lack of hospitality shown to people in dire need left them in real peril (Genesis 19:24), or the fire called down by Elijah on the soldiers of an evil king (2 Kings 1:10 – 12). Whatever the reason for this outrageous suggestion, Jesus rebuked the two brothers and the group moved onto another village instead.

Taking this passage as a whole, it is rather difficult to draw out some meaningful applications for us today, for what I hope are pretty clear reasons! The best I can offer takes us back to the first verse in which Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem. My thinking is that his laser-like focus on his goal meant nothing could be allowed to distract him at all – not young disciples bent on revenge for perceived slights, or perspective followers not fully committed to the same ends. Nothing else seems to make sense of the extremities of the responses found in this reading. If this is correct, then a 'take-home' for us today may be that we too need to have the concentrated focus in the pursuit of the Kingdom of God displayed by Jesus herein. Yet, in the absence of clarity, perhaps it is for each of us to do the hard work of grappling with this text. Therefore, I leave you with the challenge of doing thus for yourselves, as we too journey along the road with Jesus. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Tom Wright's *Simply Jesus* (2011) explores who Jesus is – and why he matters – picking up on the undercurrent of Luke 9:51 – 62.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing