



## 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

If you could select three words to sum up who Christ is to you, what would you choose, and why?

## Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 19 (StF 803)

The heavens are telling the glory of God  
**and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.**  
One day pours out its song to another  
**and one night unfolds knowledge to another.**  
They have neither speech nor language  
**and their voices are not heard,**  
yet their sound has gone out into all lands

**and their words to the ends of the world.**

In them has he set a tabernacle for the sun,  
**that comes forth as a bridegroom out of his chamber  
and rejoices as a champion to run his course.**

It goes forth from the end of the heavens  
and runs to the very end again,  
**and there is nothing hidden from its heat.**

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;  
**the testimony of the Lord is sure  
and gives wisdom to the simple.**

The statutes of the Lord are right and rejoice the heart;  
**the commandment of the Lord is pure  
and gives light to the eyes.**

The fear of the Lord is clean and endures for ever;  
**the judgements of the Lord are true  
and righteous altogether.**

More to be desired are they than gold,  
more than much fine gold,  
**sweeter also than honey dripping from the honeycomb.**

By them also is your servant taught  
and in keeping them there is great reward.

Who can tell how often they offend?

**O cleanse me from my secret faults!**

Keep your servant also from presumptuous sins  
lest they get dominion over me;

**so shall I be undefiled, and innocent of great offence.**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in your sight,

**O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.**

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 costly love,  
who calls us to walk the way of the cross,  
and find our lives in laying them down for you,  
we bring to you those things in our own lives  
and within the life of the world we share  
in need of transformation and fresh hope.

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 costly love,  
who calls us to walk the way of the cross,  
and find our lives in laying them down for you,  
set us free us to follow you, and grant us that peace  
which passes all our understanding.

**Amen**

**Readings** Colossians 1:15 – 20  
Matthew 16:13 – 20

## Sermon

Then Jesus asked his disciples 'and who do you say that I am?'. It's a question that the lectionary – the set Bible readings for each week – invites us to consider several times over its three-cycle, and so in this sermon, we shall come at this text from a slightly different angle, and bring these challenging verses into conversation with two other passages – Psalm 19 and Colossians 1 – which invite us to consider 'Christ in creation'. My background is in science and having had the opportunity to study for a PhD in theoretical physics, I am interested in the fascinating and complex matter of how Christian theology and the Natural Sciences might relate to one another, without falling into the trap of assuming that conflict is inevitable, or that one of the two areas of enquiry invalidates or rules out the other.

Let's begin with the psalm. Psalm 19 is a 'psalm of three parts', if I might be permitted a variation on a terrible sporting analogy. Verses one to six are about the word of God present in creation, resounding through the heavens and in the movement of the stars, even as they themselves cannot speak. Verses seven to thirteen are about God's words to the people of Israel, and in particular the psalmist's love of the laws of God, which shape their life, and are declared to be more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey. The final verse moves on to considering human responses to God, and the psalmist prays that the words of their mouth and meditations of their hearts may be acceptable in God's sight. There's a sense of God's word at work in both the creation and human affairs which highlights a basic truth – these things aren't seen as mutually exclusive, but as two 'sides' of God's interactions with the world, to which human beings are invited to respond in word and deed.

When I was studying for my PhD, up in the beautiful but rather chilly city of Durham, I was once invited to have a cuppa with the Dean of the Cathedral, where I used to worship in the mornings. We chatted about how my research was going, and the kinds of problems I was

trying to grapple with. Then, Michael asked me what any of this had to do with my faith. I felt somewhat taken aback by the question, to be honest, because I'd never really thought about the two as related at all. I suppose that I'd unconsciously slipped into treating them as mutually exclusive, rather than as intimately bound up together. The following months saw unexpected but really enjoyable opportunities to explore connections between the two, like being invited to preach on the relationship between Christianity and Mathematics, for which I did quite a bit of reading and thinking.

One book which aided me in my thinking was Alister McGrath's *The Science of God*, which summaries for a popular audience the ideas in his *Scientific Theology* series. Our reading from Colossians helps to illustrate a key principle underpinning his argument. Christ is right at the heart of all that's been created, the writer argues; indeed, the world was made through, and for, the one in whom everything holds together. What's more, Christ is 'the image of the invisible God', the Word of God made fully human and present in the life of the creation for all to see. Putting the two together, McGrath argues, means that the Word of God *imbedded* in creation is that same Word *embodied* in Christ. Moreover, within the prologue to John's Gospel, the Word is understood as the *Logos* – a Greek term that carries with it in part an idea of rationality. Hence, the two 'sides' of God's interaction with the world are held together, and the natural sciences and faith aren't mutually exclusive. Moreover, humanity can 'relate' to the rationality and the logic of God, because we are made in the image of God.

One weakness of McGrath's approach is that the cross gets pushed to the sidelines somewhat, I guess because he wants to 'play down' the role of sin in 'blurring our vision' when it comes to understanding the creation. To talk about suffering as representing an anomaly, as McGrath does, sits deeply uneasily with a faith at the heart of which is a crucified God. However, Colossians reminds us how it's through the cross of Christ that God reconciled all things to Godself. Further

to this, the *logic of God* isn't divorced from the *love of God*; that love simultaneously creates, redeems and sustains everything, and is as much at the centre of what we mean by the *Logos*, the Word of God, as rationality. This highlights the importance of not reducing what it means to be made in God's image to rationality alone; doing so risks undermining the full humanity of people with learning difficulties, for example, and history shows us that it is a dangerous path to venture along, especially in polarised and troubled times, like those we face.

Despite these concerns, however, the fundamental claim of Christ's being at the heart of creation is important, as it opens up an avenue down which we can tread if we're open to bringing the sciences and Christian faith into fruitful conversation. One of the things which still fills me with wonder is how, sitting in a Durham coffee shop, sipping a hot chocolate, I could write down equations which really described the universe. As I got to the point where I began to break away from relying on my supervisor and make my own way, I came across new ideas and mathematical objects, albeit in a modest fashion. For me, such moments were profound; new discovery is exhilarating for any scientist, but having then explored the relationship between my faith and my work, it was particularly special. I was looking upon aspects of creation that had never been seen before and I had a deep sense of standing on holy ground. Hence, it frustrates me when Christians argue science is incompatible with faith, because my experience is quite the opposite; these were real 'God moments'.

Jesus asked his disciples, 'and who do you say that I am?'. For me, the answer has to include something about how what Christ brought into focus on the cross was that overwhelming love that shaped this amazing world, and draws us into the life of the new creation. Jesus' resurrection is the first fruit of this new creation breaking into the life of the world and making a difference in the here-and-now. Science's not the enemy of placing one's trust in the hope, and transformation, God's love brings about, but something which has potential to draw

one into a deeper experience of that love. For some people, looking upon the sunset makes them ponder why such unnecessary beauty should exist. For me, science holds that same capacity, and I share the sentiments of the author of Psalm 19; God's Word is present in the complexity and weirdness and beauty of creation as much as in the commandments and precepts there to help us live well together. They are two sides of the same coin, and both have the capacity to inspire words upon our lips and meditations in our hearts which are acceptable to God, our rock and redeemer. For these things, thanks be to God! Amen

### **Recommended Resource of the Week**

Alister McGrath's 2004 book *The Science of God* explores how real dialogue is possible between the sciences and Christianity.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

*After each bidding, the following Taize chant may be sung:*

**O Lord, hear my prayer; O Lord, hear my prayer.  
When I call, answer me.  
O Lord, hear my prayer; O Lord, hear my prayer.  
Come and listen to me.**

Reconciling and endlessly creative God,  
we bring before you our confession and prayers for others.  
In the power of your Spirit,  
help us to come before you with open hands and hearts.  
O Lord, hear our prayer:

You created everything there was, is, and ever will be,  
and you crafted human beings in your image.  
We confess our failure to care for what you have made,  
and pray for all those working to nurture our environment

and campaigning for climate justice.

O Lord, hear our prayer.

You created human beings to live together well,  
but so often we turn against one another instead.  
We confess our complicity in the fracturing of communities,  
and pray for all those working to sow seeds of hope,  
especially among children and young people.  
O Lord, hear our prayer.

You made yourself vulnerable in Jesus Christ,  
and came to show us how to love one another.  
We confess our struggles to follow his example,  
and pray for all those who have nurtured us in faith,  
and inspire us to be the best version of ourselves.  
O Lord, hear our prayer.

You came that we might have life in all its fullness,  
and appreciate all the colours of life.  
We confess that this isn't always easy to do,  
and pray for those we know who're struggling at the moment  
in body, mind or spirit, laying our own needs before you, too.  
O Lord, hear our prayer.

### **Lord's Prayer**

### **Blessing**