



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 shared hospitality with someone who is very different to you. How did the experience change you?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of hospitality and welcome,
you embrace all who would come to your table,
reach out to those whom others exclude,
and challenge us to put your justice into action.

Thank you that you inspire us to join you
in building a Church in which all are truly welcome.

Thank you that you call us to tear down barriers
and build bridges across that which divides us.
Thank you that you unsettle and disturb us
when our churches do not embody your love.

God of hospitality and welcome,
receive our thanks and praises!
Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 112

Praise the Lord! Happy are those who fear the Lord,
who greatly delight in his commandments.
**Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.**
Wealth and riches are in their houses,
and their righteousness endures for ever.
**They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;
they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.**

It is well with those who deal generously and lend,
who conduct their affairs with justice.
**For the righteous will never be moved;
they will be remembered for ever.**
They are not afraid of evil tidings;
their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord.
**Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;
in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.**
They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;
**their righteousness endures for ever;
their horn is exalted in honour.**
The wicked see it and are angry;
they gnash their teeth and melt away;
the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.

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 hospitality and welcome,
you embrace all who would come to your table,
reach out to those whom others exclude,
and challenge us to put your justice into action.
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 hospitality and welcome,
you love us just as we are,
but too much to leave us where we are.
Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and breathe new life into us.
Amen

Reading Luke 14:1, 7 – 14

Sermon

In recent weeks, I have found the BBC series *Bradford on Duty* both an interesting and moving set of programmes. It has focused on the work of community nursing and social care staff, police officers, and council employees within both Bradford's deprived inner city estates and in the surrounding and notably more affluent rural communities.

It was interesting to notice the differences in the types of needs, and the levels of expectations, which folks tended to have in the various locations. As one of the health visitors put it, after visiting a relatively young man struggling with COPD and complex mental health needs in an area with major issues around traffic and air quality, some folk are so conditioned from childhood to expect to have bad health, and menial jobs, and poor experiences of public services, that they don't feel they deserve any better. On the other hand, those with a greater level of wealth often assumed they should get better service, amidst significant constraints on police resources, for example. This shows how much our 'location' with respect to power and status matters in a society with entrenched and deepening inequality.

When we turn to this week's Gospel reading, we find another sense in which our 'location' with respect to power and status matters. This time, the way we interpret the events described in our text, which is a continuation of our exploring Jesus's journey from Galilee towards Jerusalem (Luke 9:51 – 19:27), will vary, depending upon where we stand. The picture of Jesus which crystallises as we gradually weave our way through Luke's Gospel is one of a man who focused on the communal meal as something at the centre of his ministry. To share a meal with somebody in that culture was to treat them as an equal. Time and again, Jesus broke bread with those people pushed to the margins of society and incurred the censure of other Jewish leaders who felt he kept the wrong sort of company. On this occasion, things were different, however, because Jesus was the honoured guest of one of the leading Pharisees, a powerful man of status. The system

of patronage, which shaped how such people related to one another and governed all aspects of shared meals, was based on reciprocity and honour. Hence, it is likely the other guests were also high-flyers, from whom the Pharisee could expect a return invitation.

Despite being carefully watched at all times (Luke 14:1), and having no doubt already angered some people by healing a sick man upon what was the Sabbath day (14:2 – 6), Jesus observed the ways that his fellow guests behaved as they arrived, taking the places of great honour nearest to the host at the head of the table and leaving more distant stations to less prestigious attendees (14:7). He urged them firstly to act with humility, by taking the lowest places instead. Given that humility was not considered a moral virtue, in the Greco-Roman world where bigging oneself up was expected, this was a profoundly countercultural parable (14:8 – 11). Secondly, he spoke explicitly of going against the system of patronage by inviting not family, friends, or wealthy guests to dine with them, but the marginalised, and those considered least important, precisely because they could not return the invitation (14:12 – 14). Pulling this all together reveals how if we are 'located' with the powerful – with today's equivalents of the high-status Pharisee who hosted Jesus – then we're called to be humble, and not to seek status, but be generous to those who cannot readily return the favour or advance one's reputation.

However (and this is where our 'location' really matters), what about those Jesus encourages his powerful host to invite, the poorest and the most marginalised? What are we to make of this section of Luke, if we ourselves are located far away from the seats of power? In my reading of this text, we're called by God not to humble ourselves yet further or to bow and scrape to the powerful. We are to stand upright and recognise that we too are beloved children of God. The parable of 14:8 – 11 is set in a wedding banquet, pointing us to the heavenly feast of the Kingdom of God, when God renews all things. As Jesus makes clear in the sayings that follow, status and reciprocity are not

what shapes the life of the Kingdom, but a generosity and mutuality that recognises there's no such thing as a human being who doesn't matter to God. Thinking about my own childhood, in a deprived town in the North of England, reminds me of how being treated as a case for pity and charity is deeply offensive and unhelpful. Yet, when one has little, not being in a position to gift as much as somebody whose material wealth is greater does not mean one is thence relegated to the cheap seats in the Kingdom of God! Moreover, in later life, it has not been unusual to find that those with the least are most generous to others in need, and that problems start when we are treated more as 'issues to be fixed' than people equally bearing God's image.

As *Bradford On Duty* illustrates, learning to feel confident to take up space can be really hard work. One of the health visitors interviewed spoke movingly about how so many of the people she regularly saw had been conditioned from youth to expect poorer outcomes, health problems, only being able to land menial and unengaging jobs, and generally to have pretty rubbish lives. Faced with greater inequality, the impacts of years of austerity, massive real-term cuts in benefits, the huge cracks in health and social care provision, and the damage Brexit has done to the UK economy, it is not surprising that locations and communities at the sharp end of this often feel left behind. God, however, places an infinite value on everybody, without exceptions. So, as you reflect on this passage, where are you located, and how might you learn from what Jesus teaches in the light of that? Amen

Prayers of Intercession

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring good news to the poor.
We pray for all those who struggle to make ends meet,
for those having to choose between food and heating,
and those who are worried about what the future holds.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring release to the captives.
We pray for prisoners of conscience throughout the world,
for those living under oppressive regimes and dictatorships,
and the work of human rights organisations and advocates.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring recovery of sight to the blind.
We pray for everyone who struggles to trust they are loved,
for those blinded by affluence, self-interest or greed,
and all those who have lost sight of you in the midst of life.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

God of freedom and hope,
you came to bring freedom to the oppressed.
We pray for those experiencing isolation and loneliness,
for all victims and survivors of abuse of any kind,
and those struggling with ill health in body, mind or spirit.
God of endless love, **hear our prayer.**

Lord's Prayer

Blessing