



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 heard someone give a great speech? If so, what was the context and how did it impact you?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Great and wonderful are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty.
Just and true are your ways, O ruler of the nations.
Who shall not revere and praise your name, O Lord?
for you alone are holy.
**All nations shall come and worship in your presence:
for your just dealings have been revealed.**
To the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb

be blessing and honour and glory and might,
for ever and ever. Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 15

O Lord, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?
**Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;**
who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbours;
**in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
but who honour those who fear the Lord;**
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;
who do not lend money at interest,
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.
Those who do these things shall never be moved.
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 overflowing love,
who invites us to embrace the radical justice of the Kingdom,
we bring to you that in need of your renewal and restoration,
in our lives, in the world, and in your Church:

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 transformation and hope,
you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.
Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and send us out.

Amen

Readings Micah 6:1 – 8
Matthew 5:1 – 12

Sermon

As many of you know, I enjoy walking, and thus frequently make my way to meetings and services 'on foot'. As this can mean journeying to the same places repeatedly, I try to vary the walking routes I take; I've learnt from years of experience that familiarity breeds contempt! This thought came to my mind as I began exploring our readings for today, which are challenging to preach upon primarily because they are both so well-known. It's like walking an overly familiar route, with repetitive scenery and landmarks. We find ourselves unconsciously 'switching to autopilot'. Our feet seem to carry us to our destination, without having to think about where we're going. With familiar texts, the risk is that we don't expect to discover something new, and thus we switch to a kind of 'spiritual autopilot' which ironically makes that very outcome far more likely to occur. So, today, I'd like to invite you

to come to our readings as if for the first time, as we approach them via a slightly different route. Let's start by taking a look at Micah.

Micah was a witness to rather turbulent and troubled times. He was alive in the eighth century BCE, by which point a once united people had split into Israel in the north, and Judah down in the south. Israel had been under attack from the Assyrians – the dominant power in the region – and that had led to an influx of refugees into Judah and a tightening up of national security. People were feeling scared, and overwhelmed. The ruling classes took advantage of this situation to ruthlessly acquire wealth at the expense of the poor and vulnerable; the opening verses of chapters three and six point toward damaging misuse of power. Yet, those same rulers were convinced God would remain faithful, as long as they continued to enact prescribed rituals and kept the religious 'show' on the road.

Micah stood firmly against both empty and self-serving religion, and unjust societal structures, pointing toward the radically different way found within the Law of Moses. Instead of pursuing self-interest, the people needed to take proper care of the poor and vulnerable within their midst. Faithfulness to God in that context wasn't about offering vast sacrifices of the best and most ritually perfect produce, nor was it about following the practices of neighbouring nations, and offering child sacrifice, effectively giving up the future to sustain the present. What God required from them, and requires of us today, is as simple and as tough as acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God, in all of our being and doing.

Turning now to our Gospel reading from Matthew, we find ourselves encountering the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, which forms one of five significant 'blocks' of Jesus's teaching. Having called his early disciples (who almost certainly formed a much larger grouping than the Twelve) and established a basecamp in the bustling fishing village of Capernaum, he went up an unspecified Galilean mountain

and gathered his followers, before assuming the standard Rabbinic teaching posture. While our text is unlikely to form a verbatim record of a sermon, and is more likely a collection of sayings, accumulated over time, it has been the cause of much 'theological ink' being spilt down the centuries, long before someone within the crowd in Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* thought Jesus had said, 'Blessed are the cheesemakers'! To make sense of it all, we need to fix two important points about Matthew's Gospel in our minds.

Firstly, for Matthew, the story of Jesus centres on events which took place up another mountain, in which Jesus was transfigured before his three closest friends. There, they saw him talking with Moses as the one who gave Israel the Law, and Elijah as the greatest of those Prophets who shaped Israel in the period of turbulence which led to exile in the 'strange land' of Babylon. For Matthew, Jesus fulfils both the Law and Prophets, bringing the story of Israel up to that point to its end, and launching its new phase by ushering in God's Kingdom. What we've come to know as the Beatitudes have their foundations in the teachings of the Prophets, especially in Isaiah and the Psalms (which were seen less as devotional, and more as prophetic, at that time). Jesus is drawing together the various threads of Israel's story, and the first half of each of the Beatitudes uses prophetic imagery.

Secondly, Matthew was writing his Gospel from that same 'position' in which we all stand, in the period of waiting for the kingdom of God to come in all its fullness, having witnessed its first fruits through the resurrection of Jesus. Ours is the now-and-not-yet period of history. To borrow a phrase from the Methodist theologian, Jane Leach, we are called to stand in the 'gap' between the now-and-not-yet, where God is "weaving the future". Consequently, today's new theological term is *eschatology*, which is about the fulfilment of all things, where God will renew the heavens and the earth. The resurrection heralds this new creation, in which Revelation 21 tells us there'll be no more suffering, tears and death. Notice that the second half of each of the

Beatitudes is eschatological, which means looking ahead to how all will be when God's Kingdom comes in its fullness. This fact matters, because what we are looking at here is no naïve description of how things are, but imagery pointing us towards how things will be.

With these thoughts in mind, it's now time for you to do some work...

Thinking about the opposite statement to the one we are looking at can sometimes make its meaning much clearer. Thus, I've prepared a list of the qualities and traits highlighted as blessed by Jesus, and your task is to identify what the opposite qualities or attributes might be. This will yield two contrasting sets of values by which to live and two very different visions of what fullness of life means...

1. **Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom**
Being 'poor in spirit' is akin to 'walking humbly with God'
What does the opposite of humility look like in this context?
2. **Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted**
The Messiah will bring comfort to the people of Israel
What are the opposites of giving comfort to distressed folk?
3. **Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth**
Meekness isn't about being pushovers, but being gentle/kind
What might people trying to take the earth 'by force' be like?
4. **Blessed are those who hunger & thirst for righteousness**
Righteousness means justice, so this is a passion for justice
What would failing to pursue justice result in? (cf. Micah 6)
5. **Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy**
Reflecting God's mercy & forgiveness in how we treat others
What would the world be like if we were unmerciful to others?
6. **Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God**
Being pure in heart reflects a concern for holiness in worship
What might characterise empty and self-serving worship?

7. **Blessed are the peacemakers, called children of God**
Jesus is the Prince of Peace; we're called to pursue peace
If we were the opposite of peacemakers, how would we be?
8. **Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness' sake**
Sometimes, pursuing justice is personally costly
What would result if nobody was willing to take these risks?
9. **Blessed are those falsely reviled on Jesus's account**
This is more than misunderstanding; it's lies about Christians
What things might lead to us being justly reviled?

So, together we've produced a set of contrasting qualities and traits, that sum up being 'in' or 'out' of the Kingdom of God. While we'll all make mistakes, and need grace and forgiveness, to 'do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God' is to follow this pathway. This brings us back to what we were thinking about earlier and the notion of 'weaving the future'. If we're to align with God in this task to usher in the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, then our 'weaving the future' means living in ways which are humble, just, gentle, kind, and merciful. It means putting our faith into practice in order that our worship might have integrity and we might bring peace. To return to where we began, this is the path less trodden, and though following it might lead us into unfamiliar territory, it is the way of light and life.

So, friends, may we have the courage to follow this way, but not for our own sake. Rather, may we do so for the sake of the world, which God loved so much that Jesus lived, loved, died, and rose again, in order to set us free. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Casey Cole's 2022 book *The Way of Beatitude* explores the path of justice and radical change in Jesus' teaching.

Prayers of Intercession

God of transformation and hope,
we bring to you our prayers for your world.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those living in places blighted by war and conflict and all those displaced by hostility and hatred.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who are working in hospitals and social care at this time of unprecedented pressures.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for schools, colleges and universities,
and for all whose learn and teach within them.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for local communities, thinking especially for any people we know who are feeling lonely, isolated or afraid.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for your Church throughout the world and especially for those communities of which we are a part.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those people we know who are suffering in body, mind or spirit today.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those bereaved or struggling with other losses, amid these dark and cold winter days.
God of love, **hear our prayer.**

Lord's Prayer

Blessing