



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 understood something differently to another person. What happened, and how was this resolved?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of costly and self-giving love,
who created the world in all its beauty and vulnerability,
and took the risk of being rejected by those
you made for prayer and for praise,
in Jesus Christ, you showed us what it means
to walk the way of the cross as you opened your arms wide,
and embraced that same world in love.

As we worship you today and bring our thanks and praise,
we pray that you would give us the courage
to follow you in walking the way of the cross.

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...

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

Reading Matthew 16:21 – 28

Sermon

I imagine there will be very few people who have never looked back upon something they have done and wish they had acted differently in some way. It has been stated that hindsight affords twenty-twenty vision and especially with the passage of time, it is easy to make an unfair judgement about someone's behaviour in the light of knowing what subsequently unfolded. Several commentators on this week's Gospel passage seem to fall into this trap, criticising Peter for calling

Jesus the Messiah and Son of the Living God (Matthew 16:16), and yet dramatically misunderstanding what this actually meant (16:22). No doubt Simon Peter regretted his words that day when he looked back upon them later and wished he had acted differently. However, when we read his story, the fact that we know about the resurrection may lead us to judge him unfairly. It might seem very obvious to us that the Messiah had to suffer and die (16:21), but it wasn't then...

Israel's miserable experience of being exiled in Babylon led them to long for a 'something' that would change everything, but without any clear idea of what that would mean. Being at home with themselves, with one another and with God were deep-rooted desires, and these hopes crystalised in time around a messianic figure. The inspiration for much of this was David, a shepherd boy chosen by God because of his pure heart to become king (1 Samuel 16), and who went onto become the greatest ruler of God's people. Of course, we know that the longer-term consequences of his adultery with Bathsheba would eventually lead to the separation of Israel and Judah and create the conditions leading to those decades of exile. However, he remained a hugely important figure in Jewish culture, and it is no accident that one of the titles for the Messiah was 'son of David'. This figure would liberate God's people and make things right – that was agreed – but what this meant in practice was a matter of great debate.

For starters, would the Messiah be a prophet in the mould of figures such as Isaiah and Elijah, a new king like David, or a warrior like the Maccabees who had led Israel to victory over the occupying Persian Empire just over a century before the birth of Jesus? Armed zealots hoped for a military leader who would overthrow hated Roman rule, while radical sects such as the Essenes based at Qumran imagined the Messiah re-shaping Israel, into a separatist holiness movement. There was disagreement amongst two major factions within Second Temple Judaism – Pharisees and Sadducees – as to whether God's liberation of Israel would involve a general resurrection of those who

had laid down their lives to set God's people free. Moreover, how to relate to secular power in the meantime was a contested issue, with the Jerusalem Temple authorities and others collaborating with their Roman overlords, while rebels plotted their demise.

In short, several competing visions of what the Messiah would really look like were at work, and thus it is no surprise that Peter had quite different ideas in his head to those of Jesus. Suffering and dying for the sake of the people was not on his radar and indeed Jews to this day argue that the Messiah cannot take the form of a crucified man. There were several imaginative leaps involved in moving from ideas of a general resurrection at the end of time, to the raising by God of Jesus from the dead on the third day, something which would hence have been beyond the disciples' comprehension. Throw into the mix of all this their having left families, homes, and livelihoods behind to follow Jesus, and one can see why Peter rebuked him when he said he would walk straight into the place of maximum danger, and suffer at the hands of his enemies. The response he got for speaking what was on his mind was brutal, recalling the Satan's attempting to lead Jesus astray before he began his public ministry (4:1 – 11); the rock upon which the Church of Christ would be built (16:18) had become a stumbling block to the Messiah fulfilling his vocation (16:23).

Now, I imagine that this was enough to leave Peter reeling, but more was to come, as Jesus told his friends that they needed to enter into his death and resurrection by denying themselves and taking up the cross if they wanted to be his followers (16:24). We may sometimes complain about having our cross to bear when facing a burdensome task, but this misses the point. Jesus was calling his friends to a life of radical and reckless love which would prove too hot for authorities – religious and secular alike – to handle. They would be no need for them to seek out crosses to carry, because losing themselves in the finding of full and abundant life (16:25) would attract trouble enough for plenty! In Christ, God's Kingdom was so close at hand that many

of them would indeed see the coming of the Son of Man (16:28) and know first-hand the glory of the Father (16:27). Theirs was a calling, grounded in love, of sharing in the death of, and rising with, Christ.

Now, it would take time for Peter and for the other disciples to grasp this and to begin to put its implications into practice. However, while they did not have the benefit of hindsight as we do when we engage with their stories, they did have the courage to grow and change as they followed Jesus and made their mistakes, and gained a wisdom that was hard-won. Peter and company were not perfect, and hence they sometimes got it spectacularly wrong – ‘get behind me, Satan!’ – as today’s reading illustrates. Yet, if we can set aside knowing the ending of their story and imagine ourselves into their shoes, we may find much encouragement for our discipleship today. After all, when we are honest with ourselves, we can recognise our own fallibilities; in truth, we are not so different from Peter and the others who’d first sought to become Jesus’ friends. God calls, and has always called, ordinary and flawed people to share God’s radical and reckless love for the sake of the world. May we have the courage to follow. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Rowan Williams’ 2017 book *God with Us: The Meaning of the Cross and Resurrection* explores a variety of images for the crucifixion.

Prayers of Intercession

Whirlwind God,
you came to sweep away the cobwebs of injustice,
and bring winds of renewal and change.
We bring to you places in need of rekindled hope,
situations in need of a reboot and a fresh start,
and people who long for the breeze in the deserts of doubt.
God of the cross, **hear our prayer.**

We remember those places where conflict or disaster
have torn lives apart, and forced people to flee their homes.
We pray for compassion towards refugees,
and uphold those working to bring light to bear in dark times.
God of the cross, **hear our prayer.**

We remember those situations where disease and malady
have torn lives apart, and left people grieving and scared.
We pray for those fearful of the spread of infections,
and uphold those working to bring hope and healing.
God of the cross, **hear our prayer.**

We remember those people for whom economic downturns
have torn lives apart, and left them fearful of the future.
We pray for all who are worried about making ends meet,
and uphold those working to alleviate poverty and distress.
God of the cross, **hear our prayer.**

We remember those countries where unrest and injustice
have torn lives apart, and human dignity has been affronted.
We pray for our politicians and civil servants,
and uphold those charged with building a safe society for all.
God of the cross, **hear our prayer.**

We remember those people we know who are suffering,
whether in mind, in body or in spirit.
We pray that all those people and situations on our hearts
may experience the hope, renewal, and refreshment of God.
God of the cross, **hear our prayer.**

Lord’s Prayer

Blessing