



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 about a time when something made you abruptly change your mind about someone. What happened as a result of this?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 71:1 – 6

In you, O Lord, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.
**In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me.**
Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.
**Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.**

For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O Lord, from my youth.
Upon you I have leaned from my birth;
it was you who took me from my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of you.
Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of overflowing love,
we've come knowing there's much in our lives
and in the life of the world
in need of your renewal and restoration,
which we bring to you now in prayer:

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 call us ever forward on the way. **Amen**

Reading Luke 4:21 – 30

Sermon

Some words and ideas seem almost destined to be misunderstood. A good example of this dynamic underpins today's Gospel passage, and concerns the nature of God's grace. The term 'grace' frequently appears in both biblical texts and contemporary prayers used within official liturgical works such as *Common Worship* and the *Methodist Worship Book*, yet rarely do we define what we mean by this. Grace is intimately 'bound up' with God's essential character and thus with the passionate and fiery dance at the heart of the Trinity, in between Father, Son and Spirit. In other words, God's graciousness and love are reflections of the same fundamental theological picture of God's nature. However, while I have seen demands for 'graciousness' and 'kindness' utilised to pressurise people into not challenging powerful individuals and unjust systems, a more widely prevalent issue is that tendency to shave the sharper edges off the concepts of both grace and love. When speaking of God's grace and love paints God as an unrealistically soothing figure who does the equivalent of wiping our brow and saying 'there, there', whatever we say or do, then we have created a false 'god' in our own image. Today's reading offers a vital but uncomfortable corrective to this thinking.

Having been baptised out in the Judean wilderness and survived an extended period of testing by Satan (Luke 4:1 – 13), Jesus emerged full of the power of the Holy Spirit and ready to commence his public ministry in the region of Galilee (4:14). Having spent time wandering around the area and preaching in the synagogues, he'd returned to roots by coming back to Nazareth. His encounter with a local crowd, who knew him as Joseph's son (Luke 4:22b), points to the edgy and prophetic character of God's grace. Throughout both his gospel and its sequel in Acts, Luke portrays Jesus as a prophetic figure, evident in this passage through his having quoted Isaiah 61:1 – 2a and 58:6,

declaring that its resulting vision had been and was being fulfilled in their hearing, and through his explicit statement about how prophets are rejected in their hometowns (Luke 4:18 – 24). Hence, it is rather striking that the crowd, who act in unison as in some classical Greek drama, were initially captivated by Jesus's 'gracious words' (4:22a). Yet, when confronted with the clear reality of prophetic divine grace (4:23 – 27), they soon changed their tune (4:28 – 29).

Real and authentic grace has razor sharp edges and is prophetic in character because it is fundamentally about transformative change. By paraphrasing the words of Third Isaiah, which emerged from the end of Israel's extended period of Babylonian exile as they yearned for a new beginning with God, Jesus was not simply offering up fine words for their delighting. Rather, he was making the startling claim that he was the locus of God's enacting of its vision of justice-driven hope, and thereby casting himself as a messianic figure. If the good news was to be preached to the poor, the unjustly imprisoned to be liberated and the blind restored to sight (4:18), then this would mean change. After all, Israel was meant to be the light to the nations, but both an establishment dependent on collusion with their oppressors and violent rebels hellbent on overthrowing the hated Romans were doing a good job of keeping God's grace cloaked in darkness. Jesus was clear that things couldn't remain the same, and the illustrations he borrowed from the ministries of Prophets Elijah (1 Kings 17) and Elisha (2 Kings 5) respectively (Luke 4:25 – 27) were reminders that God had always reached out beyond the boundaries of Israel, which in particular meant to the most marginalised.

If this reading is on the right track, then the reason the Nazareth folk turned so abruptly on Jesus is most likely that they realised the way they pictured God's grace was inadequate, their vision far too small to enable them to grasp the radical realities of the Kingdom that this local lad was inaugurating. Prophetic grace challenges those norms which shape our world, and thus shocks us out of our overfamiliarity

and complacency in our relationships with the divine. Moreover, the crowds wanting to throw Jesus off the cliff on which Nazareth rested (4:29) shows just how costly this can prove. We find an early pointer toward crucifixion and resurrection in his passing through the angry mob and going on his way despite their murderous intentions (4:30), and this incident is thus programmatic for the rest of Luke's Gospel. Despite this, the passage of two millennia has not lessened the real urgency of following this risky pathway and so embodying prophetic grace in a world in which many are poor, imprisoned, blind and living under oppression.

In his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Christian pastor and key civil rights advocate Martin Luther King Jr. exhibited no end of divine grace, as we have thought about it today. He acted prophetically, in challenging 'white liberal' church leaders who professed a desire for racial justice, but were unwilling to rock the boat of institutions which often reinforced white supremacism by preaching that its abhorrent evil was somehow divinely mandated. This was not comfortable and soothing grace, but it was very much in the same vein as Jesus that sabbath day in Nazareth. Real grace never prioritises theological or personal comfort over the cries of the marginalised and oppressed. As we know, King would pay the ultimate price for refusing to submit to systematic racism, if anything attracting more venom for refusing to respond to violence with more violence than if he had encouraged his followers to physically strike back. Prophetic grace is costly, and very much not for the faint-hearted!

Fast-forwarding a few decades, we also live in dangerous times and a highly charged atmosphere. The rise of populist leaders promising the return of national glory days across the world, and the growth of the Far Right in the UK in particular, point to the urgent need to open up people's minds and hearts to a different way to be. It is very easy to retreat into a small vision of God, as did the good folk of Nazareth as they sought signs and wonders rather than divine justice. Yet, an

important aspect of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus is exactly that of challenging narrow nationalism and systemic marginalisation of the vulnerable. What will you do to show those around you God's prophetic grace? How will you remind others of the value of all folks in God's eyes, and of God's care for those who are often demonised and rejected? That is the challenge of Luke 4. May we take it up.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

God of all our journeys,
as we go forward into the rest of the week,
may you be the light to our path and the breath we breathe,
and may the blessing of the Father, the Son and the Spirit
be with us and those whom we love and pray for,
now and forevermore. **Amen**