



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

Why do you think it may be so difficult to talk about how we use our money? What has helped you in the past have such conversations?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Creator God,
you made us in your image and provide us with all we need,
a world with plenty for all to share and delight in.
We bring our thanks and praises!

Redeemer God,
you came to forgive our sins, and show us the path to follow
through the highs and lows of all life throws at us.
We bring our thanks and praises!

Sustaining God,
you equip us and get us into shape for the journey ahead
challenging us, directing us and encouraging us.
We bring our thanks and praises!
Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 49:1 – 12

Hear this, all you peoples;
**give ear, all inhabitants of the world,
both low and high, rich and poor together.**
My mouth shall speak wisdom;
the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.
**I will incline my ear to a proverb;
I will solve my riddle to the music of the harp.**
Why should I fear in times of trouble,
when the iniquity of my persecutors surrounds me,
those who trust in their wealth
and boast of the abundance of their riches?
**Truly, no ransom avails for one's life,
there is no price one can give to God for it.**
**For the ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice,
that one should live on for ever and never see the grave.**
When we look at the wise, they die;
fool and dolt perish together, and leave their wealth to others.
Their graves are their homes for ever,
**their dwelling-places to all generations,
though they named lands their own.**
Mortals cannot abide in their pomp;
they are like the animals that perish.
Glory be 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 relationship,
you bring renewal in tired places,
and set us free to follow you into a hope-filled future.

Let us therefore bring to God those things in need of renewal:

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 new beginnings, of love stronger than even death,
you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.
Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and breathe new life into us. **Amen**

Reading Luke 12:13 – 34

Sermon

When I was a student in Durham, one of my housemates in my final year was a very conservative Christian, and I think he thought I was

a bit of heretic! I remember having lunch with him one Friday, during which he declared that people in his tradition always took their Bible seriously, did not pick and choose which bits they paid attention to, and never looked to interpret difficult texts away. In response to this declaration, I pointed out that none of us actually reads the Bible in a vacuum; our past experiences, relationships with God, theological standpoint and many other factors influence the passages we focus on and how we interpret them, especially when it comes to the really difficult stuff. To hammer home my point, I then asked him whether, following Jesus' teaching about money, he was willing to sell all his possessions, like the new suit he'd just bought, maybe, and give the money to the poor. His reaction was telling; he argued Jesus did not *really* mean it, when he told his hearers to sell all their possessions. As we will see, the truth is more challenging.

Our reading for today comes from a section within Luke's Gospel in which Jesus had been arguing with the Pharisees and subsequently attracted a vast crowd of people itching to hear more of what he had got to say. After warning his disciples to avoid the hypocrisies of the Pharisees, even if it meant being at risk of persecution, the direction of the conversation changed when a man asked Jesus to sort out a dispute about inheritance – or more to the point, to make his brother give him his share of the money there and then. That incident marks the beginning of a section of teaching about the danger of being too focused upon possessions and material things instead of God. Very little of it makes for easy reading, but its challenge is one we cannot shirk, however much we might like to be able to interpret it away.

So, what is going on in this text? Well, let us begin with the brothers, and their dispute about inheritance. It was not unusual for people to bring questions and disagreements to a rabbi for resolution, and the man clearly had strong views on the answers that Jesus was meant to give, but instead of getting drawn in to an argument, he cut to the heart of the matter, by warning the crowds about the dangers of the

greed that underpinned the man's demands. He told them a parable all about a farmer in receipt of a bumper crop, who decides to hoard away those extra proceeds and utilise his resulting financial security to live the high life – to eat, drink and be merry. Now, there is nothing wrong with being prudent, and putting something away for the future or for hard times, but it is the self-centredness of this chap's outlook that is the problem. It was *his* barn, *his* grain, *his* goods, *his* nice life – it was all about him, and he gave no thought whatsoever to having a golden opportunity to help others and live generously. Imagine his anger, then, when God pointed out that he could not take it with him! That is the lot of those who pile up riches for themselves but are not rich in God's sight...

Our passage then moves onto trickier issues, about managing basic needs for food and clothing. I cannot imagine, for someone existing on or below the poverty line, either then or now, that these are easy words to hear. I remember all too well the panic when I got down to my last £10 once as an undergraduate, and worrying about what I'd do until my hardship money had finally come through. The essence of Jesus' three images, the crows, the lilies and the grass, however, is that human beings need to trust God. Life, he says, is about more than just food or clothing, and our focus should be upon seeking the Kingdom of God. None of this is to say that God ignores our physical needs; indeed, Jesus speaks of how God provides sumptuously for the least important of the birds, and beautifully clothes both the lilies and even the grasses which are here today but then gone tomorrow. He emphasises the value God places upon human beings, who are worth so much more than these things. It is to say that material need should not be our first preoccupation, and the exhortation that I, for one, find very hard – not to worry – is one that I guess we might see the sense in even as we may struggle with it.

The final section of this reading – and our main focus for today – is perhaps the hardest to reckon with: Jesus told the crowd to sell their

possessions and give the money to the poorest, storing up treasure for themselves in heaven instead of in perishable and earthly forms. 'For where your treasures are, so your heart will be also'. The Greek used here means 'to give alms' and hence it stresses that we should be generous with what we have and willing to aid others, rather than hoarding our resources, and keeping them all to ourselves, like that selfish farmer in the parable. Being willing to sit lightly, if I can put it like that, to our possessions can be difficult at the best of times, and not least in a culture which states that our worth is directly correlated with the size of our bank balances and the things which we surround ourselves with. Many, including that friend with whom I argued over lunch that afternoon in Durham, have tried to argue that Jesus didn't really mean this, because it is just too uncomfortable, but taking this section of teaching together shows that this is indeed the challenge that Jesus lays down to us.

In his famous sermon about money, John Wesley talked of the need to be a good steward of what is given to us, so that we may *gain* as much as we can without damaging ourselves or others, *save* all we can so that nothing gets wasted on things that serve only to drag us down, and *give* all we can, using the excess after we have provided for our basic needs to bring benefit to others and especially the most vulnerable. This provides a useful way of thinking about some of the practical implications of Jesus' teaching in this challenging passage despite Mrs Thatcher's attempts to distort it, and use it to justify her neo-liberal economic policies. The Wesley who said, "Cut off all this expense! Despise delicacy and variety. Be simply content with what plain nature requires" would have had very little truck, I reckon, with a 'greed is good' mantra.

So, what might Wesley's teaching look like in practice? Well, he was keen to emphasise the need for hard work in the here-and-now, not putting off to tomorrow anything we can do today, and so on, to gain all we can. However, he also went to great lengths in his sermon to

stress that seeking to gain money or possessions at the expense of either our own wellbeing, or that of other people, is 'out of order'. In particular, it's never acceptable to trample over others to grasp what we want, and the 'ends' of gaining more don't necessarily justify the 'means'. The brother seeking his inheritance right now. and wanting Jesus to be an advocate, was so wrapped up in himself and his own gain, ignoring the impact of his actions on others, as was the farmer in the parable Jesus told in response to him. Acquiring possessions or money are not bad things in themselves, but how we go about it matters very much.

Secondly, Wesley talks about saving all that we can, as opposed to frittering away what we have on things that we don't really need. His exhortations to avoid 'fancy clothes' and 'fast living' – even down to having functional, rather than elegant, gardens (of all things!) – may sound somewhat austere. However, he makes the point that we are ultimately *stewards* and not owners of what we have, so using it well is therefore key. Moreover, it's way too easy to slip into idolatry, and to become so focused upon the material that God gets lost. We end up worrying about 'things', rather than seeking the Kingdom of God. However, Wesley goes on to say, "Nor, indeed, can a (man) properly be said to save anything, if he only lays it up. You may as well throw your money into the sea as bury it in the earth". This leads us to the third aspect of his teaching: giving all that we can.

Jesus made it clear that we are called to be generous and not to be selfish with what we have been given. This has, as Wesley stresses, nothing to do with driving ourselves and our families into poverty. It is about willingly giving what we can in order to benefit others, rather than selfishly clinging onto it, or accumulating yet more 'stuff' for the sake of it. So, just as that farmer in our parable could have used his good fortune to work for good, and act generously, we're also called to use what we have to further the Kingdom, and put into action the commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves. For Wesley, that

begins with giving to the Church and then to other folks in need, but however we do it, it's about living in generously and thus being good stewards of what God has given us. After all, as the farmer in Jesus' parable was reminded to his horror, we cannot take material wealth or even prized possessions with us, but we can store up treasure in heaven, where even death cannot get to it. For where our treasures are, so our hearts will be also. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Tom Wright's *God in Public* explores speaking of truth to power and challenging the assumptions which shape our world.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing