



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

What has given you comfort and solace over these past few months
and where have you caught surprising glimpses of God's love?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of all-consuming love and goodness,
you created everything there is, seen and unseen,
not because you needed to but because you chose to,
and you invite us to share in your overflowing love.
Thanks be to God!

God of unlimited compassion and searing honesty,

you became fully human, and shared our life and death,
showing us what full and abundant life really looks like,
and setting us free from sin, shame and pain.

Thanks be to God!

God of fiery passion and endless possibility,
you sent your Holy Spirit to be our companion and guide,
inspiring and energising us, planting seeds of hope,
and holding us to account as we seek to follow Jesus.

Thanks be to God!

God of loving relationship and life-filled community,
we offer you our thanks and praises. **Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 146 (Singing the Faith 837)

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!

I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Do not put your trust in princes,

in mortals, in whom there is no help.

**When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.**

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is in the Lord their God,

who made heaven and earth,

the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith for ever;

who executes justice for the oppressed;

who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;

the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;

the Lord loves the righteous.

The Lord watches over the strangers;
**he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.**

The Lord will reign for ever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.

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

Reading Deuteronomy 6:1 – 9

Prayers of Renewal

You are invited to reflect upon God's love and those things you need to let go of in response. You may wish to light a candle for yourself.

Reading Mark 12:28 – 34

Sermon

One of the most gruelling processes I've ever been through was the selection process for ordained ministry, which involves a fair variety of different interviews at local, regional and national levels. Some of the questions which cropped up time and again focused on thinking through what a minister is and does and issues of Methodist identity and theology, which makes sense within that context. However, for me, by far the most interesting question posed was one that all who seek to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ are called to ponder and wrestle with: if you were in a lift and had thirty seconds to 'pitch' what your faith is all about to your fellow passenger, what would you say? My answer would be that Christianity is as simple, and as hard, as recognising that there is no such thing as a person who does not matter to God, because we're all made in God's image and because Jesus Christ lived and loved, died and rose again to set us free from

everything that prevents us from becoming our very best selves. As simple, because it can be summed up in thirty seconds, and without resorting to too much Christian jargon. Hard, because when we start to think through what there being nobody who doesn't matter to God implies about God, about human relationships and society and what it means to be created beings, we will soon find ourselves grappling with a considerable degree of complexity.

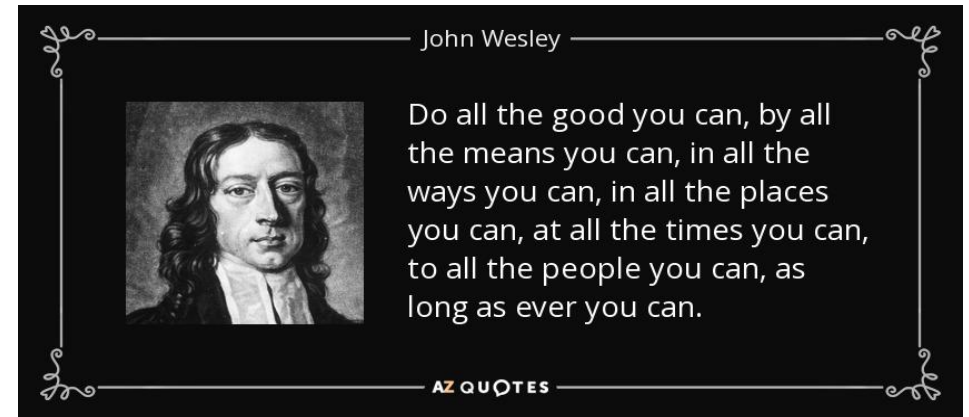
In today's Gospel passage, Jesus found himself in a similar position to someone called on to make an 'elevator pitch'. Having overheard Jesus debating in the Jerusalem Temple courtyard, and being really impressed with his reply to a question about resurrection, one of the Scribes then asked him about which of the six-hundred-and-thirteen commandments within the Law of Moses was the greatest. The task of the Scribes was to copy documents in an age long before printing presses came along, and their work often resulted in their becoming experts in the Jewish law code. Jesus was, effectively, being asked about what he understood as underpinning Israel's vocation to point to the light of God for the blessing of all the nations. In response, he cited two commandments which he described as both being equally important. As the late John Hull argued, though they're not identical, because the latter fulfils the former, they form two sides of the same coin. The call to love God with everything we are points to a 'vertical relationship', and the command to love others as ourselves forms a 'horizontal relationship', which both lead us toward the same centre. Together, they demonstrate that loving service and working towards social justice on the one hand, and proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour on the other, are not mutually exclusive, but reflections of the same commitment to God.

The Scribe evidently approved of Jesus' answer, which had brought together part of the *Shema*, that all Jewish people recited twice daily (Deuteronomy 6:5), and the call to social holiness found in Leviticus 19:18. We could translate the former verse perfectly reasonably as

'Love the LORD your God with total commitment and your total self, and do so to total excess', reflecting the wholehearted nature of any authentic giving of oneself to God which Jesus himself lived out. For the Hebrew people, the heart was the seat of our will and intentions, the soul was the inner self, and strength pointed to those resources available to that person. Jesus added to the original quotation taken from Deuteronomy 6:5 the need to love God with our whole intellect, perhaps reflecting the Scribe's background. Holding the two verses together – and living them out in word and deed – was, as the Scribe recognised, far more important than the Temple system of offerings and sacrifices (Mark 12:33). Not surprisingly, this resulted in Jesus' remarkable description of him as being 'not far' from God's Kingdom (12:34). For us today, and as Hull noted, these two commandments put an 'unqualified, one-directional, non-theological obligation' upon us. In other words, to love Christ is to love our neighbour but without expecting anything in return, or seeking cop-outs or selectivity.

Yet, as with my own attempt to capture the essence of following the said Christ, this summary in Mark 12:29 – 31 is not enough by itself. Jesus wasn't dispensing with the rest of the Law of Moses, not least as this dual commandment to love God wholeheartedly, and thus to love our neighbour as ourselves, does need some unpacking. What does it mean, for example, for individual human interactions with all their real-world complexity, or for the way society is to be organised and governed? What about our wider responsibility as the stewards of the world God created and creates in the face of the climate crisis and species loss? Those other six-hundred-and-eleven commands may be commentary on the two greatest ones, as Rabbi Hillel wrote around the same time Jesus taught, but they are necessary to flesh out what they mean in practice. Ask the Pharisees questioning him, and they would've replied that Jesus needed to give more attention to the layers of oral law and tradition on top of that! The bottom line, I think, is that loving God with our minds means doing the hard work

of wrestling with the various implications of God's love for all people. So, as we go forward into the rest of this week, and seek to live out those things we have been reminded of today, here are some words of John Wesley to keep in mind:



Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

God of all goodness and mercy,
who shows us what it means to love one another,
we bring our prayers for others to you.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those places and people beset by conflict,
especially those in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen and Myanmar.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for all who have been recently bereaved,
and all those who are unwell in mind, body or spirit.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for all who have lost livelihoods and businesses,

and all who are struggling to keep a roof over their heads.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for all who work in our emergency services,
in the NHS and in social care, as winter pressures grow.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for all who struggle with temptation or addiction,
and for all who are isolated, lonely, or despairing.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for the Church throughout the world,
that we would be open to interruptions and new insights.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

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**