



## 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

If you had to list the three most important priorities in your life today, what are they, and where does your faith fit in?

## Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of costly and self-giving love,  
you created the world and everything in it.  
In the fullness of time, you made human beings,  
creatures fashioned for prayer and for praise.  
We thank you that you took the risk of giving us freedom,  
and that all the good gifts we enjoy come from you.

Though we know we sometimes falter and fail,  
you never give up on us, and keep on calling us to follow.  
We rejoice in being swept up by the winds of change,  
as the Holy Spirit blows where she will,  
and bids us join in the divine dance in your very heart.

God of all creation, **receive our thanks and praises! Amen**

## Collect for the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time

O God, you bear your people ever on your heart and mind.  
Watch over us in your protecting love,  
that, strengthened by your grace and led by your Spirit,  
we may not miss your way for us  
but enter into your glory,  
made ready for all in Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**Reading** Luke 14:25 – 33

## Sermon

There are some hymns and songs that have come to be associated with particular seasons of the Church's year, and even with one day, such as Christmas Day or Easter Day. One famous hymn has come to be linked strongly with Good Friday. Charles Wesley was reputed to have told its composer, Isaac Watts, that he would have given up all those hymns he himself wrote to have penned this classic. *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* is full of rich imagery, and feels deeply poignant every time I sing it, especially on that most solemn of days in the Christian year. It also offers us a useful lens through which to make sense of today's Gospel reading. Jesus was making a journey from Galilee towards Jerusalem, and to what he knew would be his death on the cross. As he and his disciples walked along, crowds in the thousands followed them (12:1), desperate to hear what he had to say and to receive healing. After a dinner at the home of a leading

Pharisee, during which Jesus challenged his host and fellow guests to go against the culture of the day and embrace humility, he began once again to teach the crowds (14:25).

Jesus's teaching divides into three sections: a pair of sayings, a unit of two short parables, and a final commandment. Nothing we find in these few verses is easy or straightforward to grapple with, and thus it helps to look at them using the aforementioned hymn to help bring a sense of perspective and inform our interpretation. In some ways, the first of Jesus's opening pair of sayings is the most difficult of all. He declares that anyone who comes to Jesus and doesn't hate their parents, spouse, children and siblings – and even life itself – cannot be a disciple (14:26). This would have been deeply shocking for the crowds who heard it, and indeed for Luke's first readers, around fifty years later. Commitment to one's extended family wasn't just a part of the popular culture of the people of Israel, but was understood to mirror their relationship with God; yet, here was a teacher appearing to undermine this. What was going on? Well, at this point it helps to turn to the first verse of our hymn:

*When I survey the wondrous cross,  
on which the Prince of Glory died,  
my richest gain I count but loss,  
and pour contempt on all my pride.*

When we think about what is most important to us, for many of us it is our relationships, whether that's with a biological family or chosen family. Indeed, we may well consider this our richest gain. When we see Jesus using exaggerated and hyperbolic language about hating those closest to us, he is not suggesting we literally need to turn on them, but is saying that our commitment to him must be so profound that it trumps not only these concerns, but our love of life itself. It is a matter of one's perspective and priorities; where does our ultimate

loyalty lie? A similar question emerges when we jump ahead toward the final verse of today's passage, about being willing to give up our possessions if we wish to become a disciple (14:33). Again, my take on this verse is that Jesus is using hyperbolic language to make his point very forcibly. It is very easy to become attached to the material things of this life to the extent that they become our masters, turning us away from seeking God's Kingdom as our top priority. Verse two of our hymn captures this:

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast  
save in the death of Christ my God;  
all the vain things that charm me most,  
I sacrifice them to his blood.*

The 'vain things that charm us most' are exactly the possessions to which Jesus commands us to sit lightly. Now, this is challenging and countercultural within a capitalist society, where we are encouraged to measure our worth as people by the things we can afford. Hence, the temptation is to water this down, as if Jesus didn't actually mean what he said, or that it somehow does not apply to us. However, we need to avoid this, and so the question becomes how could we learn to sit lightly to material possessions, so that they don't become idols seducing us away from God? Prayer is certainly a part of the answer to this, insofar as there is one to be offered, as it helps us to maintain focus on God. The third verse of our hymn reveals another piece of the jigsaw, which relates to the importance of keeping the cross and the love it lays bare firmly in our sight, if we are to take seriously the words of Jesus in 14:27 about taking up our crosses:

*See from his head, his hands, his feet,  
sorrow and love flow mingled down;  
did e'er such love and sorrow meet,  
or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

The gut-wrenching depth of God's love for us is unmistakable, when we see that potent mixture of care and sorrow present when Jesus's arms were outstretched on the cross, embracing a broken world. An adventure that embraces the dynamic of death and resurrection into which God calls us will not be without costs. Luke's faith community knew this only too well, as they grappled with being disciples amidst harassment and persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. As we live in a country where we're very unlikely to be martyred for our Christian faith, it is easy to forget that for some of our siblings across the world, the risks they take to follow Jesus are really that extreme. Yet, even for us as disciples in twenty-first century Britain, there are costs associated to remaining faithful to Christ. Going against social norms to pursue God's justice, as there is no such thing as a person who does not matter to God, brings costs. Loving those people who the rest of the world rejects, and pushes into the margins of society, brings costs. Sharing our faith stories brings with it a risk of rejection and that is costly. Yet, these things are core to discipleship and they bring us to the final verse of our hymn, which chimes with those two short parables in 14:28 – 32:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
that were an offering far too small;  
love so amazing, so divine,  
demands my soul, my life, my all.*

In the first story, Jesus talks of someone setting out to build a tower, and needing to evaluate the potential costs so that their project does not flounder after only the foundations have been laid, to the ridicule of the would-be builder (14:28 – 30). The second parable speaks of a warmongering king who wishes to attack another, who has double the troop numbers at their disposal. They need to evaluate whether victory against the odds is possible, and if not, sue for peace before danger looms (14:31 – 32). In short, both illustrations invite potential

new followers of Jesus in the crowds to count the costs before going on a journey that they may not be able to see through. It is better to refrain from discipleship than to start out and later give up! Perhaps, the harshness of the language Jesus uses throughout this passage, compared to similar verses in Matthew's Gospel, reflects the setting in which Jesus found himself, talking to the wider crowds rather than just to his friends and existing followers. Either way, as Isaac Watts' beautiful verse makes clear, responding to God's love in Christ calls for giving all we have – our souls, our lives, our all.

So, as we pull all of this together, we find ourselves dealing with the costs of discipleship being laid bare. In my view, this reading should make us feel uncomfortable precisely because it is so unflinching in how it spells these things out. Are we willing to commit ourselves to God in such a way that following Jesus is our top priority, more than our family and friends, all our possessions, and even life itself? Dare we embark upon the journey as people aware of the costs but willing to go anyway? After all, as the hymn reminds us, God *demands* our everything; God doesn't ask nicely! Undoubtedly, this passage pulls no punches. Yet, the vision of the Kingdom we find, as we read both what comes before and after, is nothing less than the reign of Jesus, as the one who embodies the love of God, even to the point of death upon a cruel cross. So, yes there are costs, but there are also many blessings to be found here, and ultimately life itself. May we all have the courage to walk this challenging road and to give God our souls, our lives, and our all. Amen

### **Prayers of Renewal**

Let us pray:

Gracious God, you call us to make you our top priority,  
but we find this very hard to do,  
and so trusting in your forgiveness, we make our confession:

For the times when we've been too busy to notice you,  
too focused on ourselves,  
we say sorry and ask for your forgiving love.  
Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

For the times when other things distract us  
and pull us away from you,  
we say sorry and ask for your forgiving love.  
Christ, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

For the times when we've gone it alone  
and decided that we know best,  
we say sorry and ask for your forgiving love.  
Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

*Silence is kept for a few moments...*

Gracious God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
you love us more than we can imagine,  
and we can trust that all our sins are forgiven.  
Renew us and remake us in the image of Jesus Christ,  
our Lord and Saviour. **Amen**

### **Recommended Resource of the Week**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic work *The Cost of Discipleship* ponders what full-bodied discipleship looks like, and how the cheap grace of watered-down alternatives needs to be challenged.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

#### **Lord's Prayer**

#### **Blessing**