



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 comes to mind for you when thinking about being called to be salt and light? Are these helpful images for you?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Loving God, your very nature is overflowing love,
grounded in a community of relationship and difference;
we praise you that you call us to season the world with love,
and light the way for those stumbling in darkness.
Help us to put flesh on the bones
of the fullness of life you came to bring,
so that others may taste and see that you are good.

We ask this in the name of Jesus,
the salt of the earth and light of the world. **Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 112:1 – 9

Praise the Lord! Happy are those who fear the Lord,
who greatly delight in his commandments.

**Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.**

Wealth and riches are in their houses,
and their righteousness endures for ever.

**They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;
they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.**

It is well with those who deal generously and lend,
who conduct their affairs with justice.

**For the righteous will never be moved;
they will be remembered for ever.**

They are not afraid of evil tidings;
their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord.

**Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;
in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.**

They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;
**their righteousness endures for ever;
their horn is exalted in honour.**

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

Prayers of Renewal

God of transformation and change,
in Jesus Christ, you challenged our ideas
of what faithfulness and justice look like,

and called us to be salt and light in the world.
Let us therefore bring to you those things in need of renewal:

For the words and actions for which we're sorry,
grant us your forgiveness.

For the burdens we carry and the sorrows we bear,
bring us your comfort.

For the struggles we may experience to trust we are loved,
offer us your assurance.

For the injustice and oppression which blights our world,
inspire us to respond courageously.

For the failings and disunity of your Church,
make us ready to change.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of transformation and change,
we offer our whole selves to you today,
in the knowledge that you forgive us and restore us,
so that we might be salt and light in the world.

Amen

Reading Matthew 5:13 – 20

Sermon

“Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfil” (Matthew 5:17). Jesus’ words seem uncompromising, and reflect the difficult balance he sought to strike between faithfulness to what Israel had believed and longed for, on the one hand, and the revolutionary nature of the movement he was inaugurating, on the other. He was neither the great Jewish teacher

offering more of the same, nor the radical throwing away everything that’d come previously. But, if both these depictions are inadequate, then what exactly was Jesus doing? Moreover, how does Matthew’s particular take on these events, as the Gospel writer most obviously grounded in what we now call ‘Second Temple Judaism’, impact his presentation of Jesus’ teaching on the Law and Prophets? And how might we as modern readers of this text interpret these stark words, especially in the context both of rising antisemitism?

A good reading of the Bible needs to bring three elements together, and hold them in balance. These are the historical context of a given passage (which, in this case, relates to how Jesus likely understood himself in relation to the people of Israel), the intention of the author, and our perspectives as readers, with the lenses we all look through as we wrestle with the Scriptures. The emphases we place on each of these three components will vary, but when our readings become skewed too heavily in any one direction or another, they risk ending up being unbalanced, pulling the text ‘out of shape’ and distorting it, rather than allowing it to come to life, and speak into our context. In the most extreme cases, a lack of proper attention to all three areas runs the risk of creating ‘texts of terror’ (to borrow a phrase from the great feminist theologian Phyllis Tribble) which must be challenged. Readings violating the fundamental principle that everyone matters to God fall short of the standards of ‘good reading’ to which we must endeavour to hold ourselves. As an example, consider clericalwear.

When it came to buying my clerical shirts, in my final few months at theological college, I allowed myself to be talked into purchasing six hundred-percent cotton shirts. They are indeed quite comfortable in the cooler months of the year, as the fabric is pretty thick, but they’re most definitely not breathable, and are a pain in the backside to iron all year round! With hindsight, I would have chosen to plump for six polycotton shirts instead, which are much easier to care for, and far more breathable. However, Leviticus 19:19 makes it quite clear that

mixed fibre clothing is forbidden (though there is no set punishment for wearing thus). If Jesus intended the Law of Moses as detailed in Leviticus, and revised later on in Deuteronomy, to be followed to the letter, then surely consistency demands that all preachers deeming Levitical purity laws around human sexuality to be binding for today should ditch their polycotton shirts at once? I am yet to hear of such a course of action being followed, so I assume that there aren't any clergy 'picking and choosing' the parts of the Law of Moses to focus on. So, now we have cleared that up, what actually does it mean to say that Jesus fulfils the Law and the Prophets?

Well, we'll need to keep in mind as we read the New Testament that Jesus understood himself as embodying the calling of the people of Israel to be the salt of the earth and the light to the nations (Matthew 5:13 – 16). The symbolism of his baptism in the Jordan, in the same water Israel once crossed to enter the Promised Land, together with his mountainside meeting with Moses and Elijah, points to Jesus as the One bringing Israel's story up to that point to its conclusion, and starting the next chapter by inaugurating a new creation through his death and resurrection. In other words, the promises that God made throughout the history of Israel would come true, in his very person; yet, at the same time, the vision was being enlarged, encompassing not just one people, but the whole creation. He revealed what it truly means to 'loosen the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and offer genuine hospitality to homeless people, so that God's light might break forth as the dawn' (Isaiah 58:6 – 8). He therefore fulfilled the prophetic visions of Isaiah and others, and Matthew 5:21 – 48 will go on to explain how exactly he also fulfilled the Law of Moses, as we'll see in the coming weeks.

Thus, when Jesus uses the exaggerated (and hyperbolic) language of 'not even one stroke of a letter' being dropped before heaven and earth have passed away, which is a reference to how Hebrew letters were distinguished from each other, he's making the point that none

of the Law is unimportant. Yet, his own teaching proves this doesn't mean that re-interpretation is ruled out. Moreover, he would go on to sum up the Law and the Prophets, in just two commandments: love God with all you are, and love your neighbours as yourself (Matthew 22:36 – 40), because they are two sides of the same coin. If we take this as the interpretive lens through which we see Jesus' interaction with the Law of Moses, it puts a very different slant upon things than we get from arguing about which verses from Leviticus we can keep or ignore. Perhaps, then, polycotton clerical shirts are fine after all!

So, that's the historical context, but what about Matthew's particular authorial viewpoint in this most Jewish of Gospels? Today's reading ends with a highly demanding injunction: unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and Scribes, you may never enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5:20). Did he really mean this? I think he did. We can easily forget that the Judaism of his day, and indeed ours, was far from monolithic; there was much lively internal debate taking place, and 'thrashing out' of where the heart of the identity of God's people lay. Jesus had much in common with the Pharisees – both wanted to take the Law seriously, and believed it applied to all of life. They differed, as we see time and again in Matthew's Gospel, on the place of oral law in interpreting and applying what was written down. Yet, the Pharisees were perceived (so says Josephus) by the people as embodying the 'gold standard' for righteousness. Hence, when Matthew recalls Jesus saying 'you have heard it said, but now I tell you ...' in relation to loving our enemies, for example, he shows what this greater righteousness looks like. His authority, as Messiah and God's Son, exceeds even that of the Law, and as he himself is quoted as saying, his words will never pass away (Matthew 14:35).

Thus far, then, we've explored the historical context of Jesus' words and Matthew's slant on them, as someone speaking into the internal debates going on in Judaism, which were especially important when he was writing, after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the

Romans in 70 CE, with all that then meant for Jewish identity. What, then, of the place of the modern reader in the contexts of a shocking and disgraceful rise in antisemitism, and indeed a saddening range of other prejudices? Any attempt to speak about how Christians and Jews might have a dialogue on Mosaic law requires repentance on our part as our starting point. For too long, the Church has asserted that God has finished with Judaism, and proceeded to treat brothers and sisters in Abraham with contempt at best and murderous hatred at worst. Recognising that God continues to enjoy a covenant bond with the Jewish people is the second step to reconciliation. We may even stand half a chance of engaging with today's passage *together* if we can truly be salt and light, by putting love of others into practice whether or not we agree with them (and the same is true with Islam).

That does not mean we have to agree on how to interpret Scripture, but it does mean we do not get to opt out of Jesus's commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves because of any disagreements. So, as we wrestle with this and other challenging texts in the coming weeks, may we hold fast to the principle that Love is the law of God, for these words of Jesus will never pass away. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Dan Kimball's 2020 work *How Not to Read the Bible* explores some ways of making sense of difficult texts.

Prayers of Intercession

If you have a copy of Singing the Faith to hand, you're invited to use Have you heard God's voice? (StF 662) as a prayer prompt.

Lord's Prayer

Blessing