



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 you have been looked down upon because of how someone else perceived you. How did you react to this?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of overflowing love,
in the beginning there was nothing,
but you called the universe into being
and saw that it was good.
We praise you, God of life!

In the fullness of time,
you made human beings in your image,
and in Jesus Christ,

showed us what it means to be fully human, fully alive.
We praise you, God of life!

Now your Holy Spirit dwells within us
and guides us as we seek to follow where you lead us,
so that through us the whole of your creation
can flourish and blossom as you intended.
We praise you, God of life!

God of overflowing love,
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

Prayers of Renewal

God of renewal and fresh hope,
who makes all things new and sets creation free,
we bring to you all in our own lives and within our world
in need of your refreshment and renewal.

When we've looked down our noses at other people,
Christ, forgive us.

When we've assumed that you share our prejudices,
Christ, challenge us.

When we've been hurt by unjust words or actions,
Christ, comfort us.

When systems have been used to exclude or harm,
Christ, rebuke us.

When your Church has lost its passion for justice,
Christ, renew us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of renewal and fresh hope,
thank you that you forgive us when we have made mistakes,
renew us when we are hurting, lost or feeling isolated,
and set us free to live for you.

Amen

Readings Proverbs 22:1 – 2, 8 – 9, 22 – 23

James 2:1 – 10

Sermon

The question 'does your talk match your walk?' takes us to the heart of the three readings for today, if we include the psalm we had as a prayer earlier. Do our actions reflect a commitment to God's justice, following the commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves, or do we treat people with greater wealth more favourably? Do we look down on those at the bottom of the financial pile, or do we recognise the value of every person regardless of how much money they have in their pocket? The direction of travel of the dominant political ways of thinking nowadays suggests that we value people in terms of their economic potential. That means that those seen as not 'contributing to society' – unemployed people, people unable to work because of health problems or disability, the elderly, stay-at-home parents, and so on – aren't always treated with much respect.

It's easy to lay the blame at the door of whichever party happens to be in government, and indeed there's undoubtedly plenty to criticise about an increasingly punitive benefits framework, not least 'fitness to work' assessments which often seem to be impervious to medical evidence and client distress. And yet, blaming our politicians simply won't do. Policies such as those implemented by the Department of Work and Pensions are pursued because they enjoy enough public support both to make them politically viable, and render challenging them extremely difficult. In other words, it is because society fails to value the poorest and most vulnerable that these kinds of situations arise. Collectively, we're arguably a part of the problem, but we can also be a part of the solution.

Liberation Theology has its origins in Latin America in the 1950s, in contexts of extreme poverty and oppression. Gustavo Gutierrez, for example, was working out of a country, Peru, where the ruling class

controlled the vast majority of the wealth, and ruthlessly suppressed any dissent. Expressions of liberation theology are grounded within a particular context, and aim for liberation in a 'holistic sense' – from poverty and injustice, from all that limits human dignity, and from sin and selfishness. Thus, the famous phrase associated with liberation theologies from this period – preferential option for the poor – brings together openness to God, commitment to each other, and standing against poverty, but can also be applied to other forms of exclusion. The aim is to change, and transform, all those involved within unjust structures, revealing 'blind spots' in the worldview of the oppressor, and enabling everybody to live together well. A consequence of this, identified in a rather different context by the former President of the Methodist Conference, Dr Barbara Glasson, is that our relationships to power matter: letting go of pride is necessary for the powerful but claiming abundant life in Christ is the task of the powerless.

Now, there're some perfectly valid critiques to be made of Liberation Theology. For example, it tends to divide people up into 'oppressed' and 'oppressors', but clearly discerning which 'side' of the divide we are on isn't always straightforward. Glasson was writing about work with survivors of abuse, in which the distinction is clear. but in much of what we encounter in the course of everyday life, things are often far less clear. In our prayers of renewal, there was space to bring to God both actions for which we're sorry, and actions which have hurt us; in other words, we recognise that we're simultaneously 'sinners', and the 'sinned against'. It is readily possible to be both complicit in and subjected to dynamics which lead to marginalisation of various kinds, and so we need to nuance the claims of Liberation Theology.

However, there is an important point here: God is deeply concerned with economic justice in the here-and-now, as well as salvation in a spiritual sense. Hence, as the author of Psalm 146 wrote, our God's a God who executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to hungry people, sets prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, and lifts up

the vulnerable (Psalm 146:7 – 9). This is just one example of exactly this passionate commitment in the Bible, especially in the Prophets. In Britain, social class is one of those thorny issues which frequently impacts on the assumptions we make, but which we don't really talk about. As our reading from Proverbs reminds us, God is the God of both the rich and the poor. However, class divides us in ways which are highly unhelpful. The classic comedy sketch in which a working-class Ronnie Corbet looks up to a middle-class Ronnie Barker, who in turn looks down on him and up to an upper-class John Cleese, is as funny as it is even decades after it was first seen because it sums up much of how our society works. We judge based on social class.

Thinking about how we judge people brings us finally to our reading from James, which reminds us how tackling the undervaluing of the poor and vulnerable in our society starts in everyday life. Writing to a community made up mostly of Jewish Christians, the author of the letter challenges the dynamics at work among them. It appears that preferential treatment was being given to obviously wealthy people, and derogatory treatment served up to clearly impoverished people, even though this church suffered at the hands of the richest. James calls them out on their judgmental behaviour; loving other people in the way God does leaves no room for looking down on them.

So, putting all of this together means, I would argue, that addressing those dynamics in our society that marginalise people, and enacting the justice and freedom of God, begins with considering (prayerfully and carefully!) how we treat those people we come into contact with on a daily basis. Churches are communities in which a different way to live should be modelled, founded on the love of God for all without concern for the size of a person's bank balance. After all, we cannot hold those in power to account with integrity if we don't walk the talk in our own lives. The 'preferential option for the poor' holds together openness to God, a commitment to each other and standing against poverty. That commitment to one another means looking beyond an

oppressive class system, and recognising that there's no such thing as a person who doesn't matter to God. To quote the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, "Being Christian starts with Jesus' lesson that all people matter equally, and that justice in our society matters. That's why I don't believe we should continue with an economy that works so badly for so many". If things are to change in the aftermath of all the disruption of the pandemic, then shouting at politicians isn't likely to achieve that much. Putting a more hopeful way of being into practice just might.

Friends, churches have a role to play in standing alongside the most vulnerable, and proclaiming how God's love makes a real, practical difference. This work has a clear Biblical mandate. When the people of Israel arrived in the Promised Land after wandering around in the wilderness for forty years, the Laws they were given through Moses reminded them of their obligation to care for the foreigners, orphans and widows in their midst – in other words, the vulnerable. Time and again, the Prophets pulled up the people of Israel for failing to watch out for the poorest and the most marginalised people. Finally, Jesus repeatedly aligned himself with people branded as 'outsiders' by the oppressive powers of his day. No-one got crucified for simply telling people to be nice to one another; rather, it was a death reserved for rebels and for radicals. Jesus refused to go along with the structures that excluded people from relationship with God or their community, and he ultimately paid the price for being 'too hot' for the authorities – both religious and secular – to handle. Jesus's resurrection points towards where we are headed, to a reality where suffering and pain and tears are no more. He is the signpost to where not just humanity but all of creation is ultimately headed.

Hence, given our knowledge of the destination, the Church's role in the here-and-now has to include building a more just world, and our acts of love and kindness are never wasted. So, let us pray that we may have the courage to do this, starting in everyday life. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

God of all goodness and justice,
hear our prayers for your world today.
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For places beset by wars, conflicts and strife,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For those at the sharp end of climate change,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For political leaders carrying heavy responsibilities,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For people working to keep our basic services running,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For those anxious about a lack of work and opportunities,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For your Church, as we seek to discern your call afresh,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For all who are unwell in body, mind or spirit,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For those who will die today and all who are bereaved,
Bringer of hope, **hear our prayer.**

In a time of silence, we bring our own prayers to you...

Lord's Prayer

Blessing