



### 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

Do you consider yourself to be a 'glass half empty' or 'glass half full' person? Why do you think that is?

### Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 145:8 – 9, 14 – 21

The Lord is gracious and merciful,  
**slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**  
The Lord is good to all,  
**and his compassion is over all that he has made.**  
The Lord upholds all who are falling,  
**and raises up all who are bowed down.**

The eyes of all look to you,  
**and you give them their food in due season.**

You open your hand,  
**satisfying the desire of every living thing.**

The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.

**The Lord is near to all who call on him,  
to all who call on him in truth.**

He fulfils the desire of all who fear him;  
**he also hears their cry, and saves them.**

The Lord watches over all who love him,  
but all the wicked he will destroy.

**My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,  
and all flesh will bless his holy name for ever and ever.**

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

Generous and life-giving God,  
all creation stems from your overflowing love,  
poured out as your Spirit hovered above the waters,  
and in Jesus Christ, you came to bring abundant life.

We confess that we too often live like this is not the case.

When we have allowed the narrative of economic scarcity  
to make us inward-looking and selfish people,  
generous God, **open up our hearts and fill us with love.**

When we have treated Kingdom life like a zero-sum game,  
and ignored the cries of our siblings who face injustice,  
generous God, **open up our hearts and fill us with love.**

When we have acted as though love is in short supply, and treated others unkindly or without compassion, generous God, **open up our hearts and fill us with love.**

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

Generous and life-giving God,  
forgive us our sins  
and set us free to seek your Kingdom.  
**Amen**

**Readings** Isaiah 55:1 – 5  
Matthew 14:13 – 21

### **Sermon**

I became a Christian back in my early twenties as an undergraduate student, having been a vehement atheist in my teenage years. One of the things that led me to change my views was reading the stories of Jesus for myself, rather than just hearing them second-hand from school assemblies, and discovering the depth and breadth of God's love through what he said and did. Among the many qualities which impressed and attracted me was the patience and compassion that he demonstrated even amid the most challenging of circumstances, and when it must have been personally costly. Today's Gospel is a good example, coming as it does in Matthew's account immediately after Jesus had received some distressing news. John the Baptist's ministry laid the foundations for his, by calling God's people to wake up to the inbreaking of God's Kingdom and hence to repent. Indeed, some commentators argue that Jesus had probably been a disciple of his older cousin before launching himself onto the stage following John's arrest (Matthew 4:12). Herod did not appreciate being called to account for having married his brother's wife (14:3 – 4); her desire for vengeance led to John being brutally beheaded (14:6 – 11). After his disciples had recovered the body, they went to Jesus (14:12).

Not surprisingly, Jesus needed some space to process this dreadful news, which was not so easy to find given how his fame had spread throughout the region of Galilee, and he was being followed by large crowds everywhere he went (13:2). Hence, he got into a boat which took him across the Sea of Galilee, and out to the wilderness, where he hoped to find some solitude (14:13a). However, he was spotted, and some of the crowd followed him on foot (14:13b), in a gathering containing five-thousand men besides women and children (14:21). When he finally came ashore, they were waiting for him on a grassy expanse (14:19). Now, in my opinion, Jesus would have been within his rights to feel irritated, if not thoroughly exasperated, at this sight; after all, he was grieving the loss of his cousin, and possibly mentor, and we know he took time out to pray amid the many demands upon him, in order to stay connected with the Father. My own experiences of ministry have taught me it is not unusual for umpteen demanding situations to arise at once, and the risk is that stress manifests itself as grumpiness! However, despite how he was likely feeling, Jesus's response was to show compassion (cf. 9:36), and he cured all those in the crowd who were sick (14:14).

What happened as evening closed in is one of the most well-known of the miracle stories of Jesus, in which the huge crowd were fed in that wilderness from just five small loaves and two fish (14:15 – 20), with enough broken pieces left over to fill twelve big bakery baskets. This event, usually called the 'Feeding of the Five-Thousand', is one of only a handful appearing in all four of the Canonical Gospels (see Mark 6:32 – 44, Luke 9:10 – 17 and John 6:1 – 13); moreover, Mark and Matthew both tell of a similar feast, with a slightly smaller crowd, later on in their accounts (see Matthew 15:32 – 39). Whole volumes have been written on this miracle, which continues to be a cause of controversy as scholars from differing theological standpoints argue about what really happened. In my view, such debates usually miss the point by getting drawn into pitting divine supernaturalism against

a liberal desire to 'explain away' anything to which the label 'miracle' might be attached. It is far more interesting to look at the symbolism at work, and what Matthew is telling us here about who Jesus is and exactly why he matters.

As there is more to say than befits a sermon as opposed to a biblical studies lecture, you will be relieved to know that I will confine myself to three observations! Firstly, the wilderness setting of this meal tells us a great deal about Jesus's identity. Matthew's Gospel is the most overtly grounded in what is often termed 'Second Temple Judaism'; that is, Jewish experience after returning from Babylonian exile and before everything was again destroyed, this time by the Romans in 70 CE. A thread running through this Gospel is the link between the great figure of the Hebrew Scriptures, Moses, and Jesus as the one picking up the baton from him. When the people of Israel were freed from oppression in Egypt and led into the wilderness by Moses, God supplied manna in the desert to sustain them (Exodus 16), and thus Jesus doing something similar shows he is also a liberator of Israel, setting them free to thrive. Secondly, shared meals are key through the long story of God's people; in particular, the Kingdom of God is imagined as a feast, as the heavenly banquet. The prophetic picture of nations flocking to a people glorified by God, and feasting without price upon the best food and drink (Isaiah 55), comes to the fore as the bread of life embodied by Jesus (John 6:9) feeds allcomers.

Thirdly and finally, the abundance and generosity of the Kingdom is revealed by the vast amount of leftovers even when everybody had eaten their fill. Perhaps it was Jesus's compassion which prompted the crowd to share what they had brought themselves, but whatever led to the extravagant excess, the overflowing and exuberant divine love that Jesus spoke of and enacted meant all were nourished and all valued. When he took, blessed and broke bread as we do in Holy Communion, Jesus gave those gathered a glimpse of that heavenly banquet to which his mission and ministry were directed. For me, it

is here that the heart of the miracle lies. We live in a context in which we are constantly told that scarcity determines everything that really matters and that we are locked into competition with each other just to survive, let alone to thrive. This is true economically and politically as we can see just by turning on the news, but it also risks becoming the dominant narrative in the Church. As the world around us shifts, and individual local churches face the challenges of growing smaller and older on average, it is tempting to submit to nostalgia for a time past, even as our memories of it may be somewhat rose-tinted, and most of the issues we face are not new. Yet, the Kingdom of God is still one of abundant and overflowing love, and there is always hope for the future even as there is also a need to embrace change.

It is natural to feel weighed down or even overwhelmed at points by the demands upon us, and no doubt Jesus felt the same way as he looked at the vast crowds on the shore. However, God is a God who brings liberation to the oppressed, who feeds and nourishes us with rich food and drink because *we are worth nourishing*, and who calls us to open our eyes to the richness, abundance and blessing of life in the Kingdom of God. Perhaps especially if you feel weighed down right now as you carry heavy burdens, I'd like to invite you to take a little time out this week to rest in the presence of God and enjoy the nourishment for body, mind and spirit that Jesus shares with us. We are all different, and what this looks like in practice will vary for each person, but the principle is the same. You are worth nourishing, and nobody can sustain being a disciple without receiving from God. So, friends, may you come to Jesus and join the great feast, eating and drinking of the best God offers without price. Amen

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Generous God, we bring to you the places and people in need of your love and care.

God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

For those places with conflict and without peace,  
God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

For those places with extreme weather and without shelter,  
God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

For those places with despair and without hope,  
God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

For those people with anxiety and without safety,  
God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

For those people with burdens and without rest,  
God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

For those people with sickness and without good health,  
God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

Generous God, in a time of silence,  
we bring to you the people and situations on our hearts...

## **Lord's Prayer**

## **Blessing**