



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

Have you ever been commissioned for a given role in some way? If so, what happened and was it special to you?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Glory to the Father, the God of love,
who created us; who continually preserves and sustains us;
who has loved us with an everlasting love,
and given us the light of the knowledge of his glory
in the face of Jesus Christ.

Blessèd be God forever.

Glory to Jesus Christ our Saviour,
who proclaimed the good news of the kingdom,
and was obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross;
who was raised from the dead and is alive for ever,
and has opened the kingdom to all who trust in him;
who is seated at God's right hand in glory,
and will come to be our judge.

Blessèd be God forever.

Glory to the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
by whom we are born into the family of God,
and made members of the Body of Christ;
whose witness confirms us;
whose wisdom teaches us;
whose power enables us;
who will do for us more than we can ask or think.

Blessèd be God forever.

Silence is kept for a few moments

To the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be praise and glory for ever.

Amen

Reading Matthew 3:13 – 17

Sermon

There are relatively few stories from the life of Jesus that appear in all four of the Canonical Gospels, but while each brings its particular perspective to bear upon the subject, Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan is one such event. Matthew's account was the second to be written, and it hinges upon a difficult phrase both to translate and to interpret. In 3:13 – 14, we learn that Jesus travelled all the way from

Galilee to Judea in order to be baptised by his cousin, but John was reluctant to consent. Yet, in 3:16 – 17, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove, right after he had climbed out of the River Jordan, and a heavenly voice affirmed him as God's beloved Son. What was it that changed John the Baptist's mind? The answer comes in 3:15, in which Jesus responds to his cousin's initial hesitancy by assuring him that proceeding with this baptism would 'fulfil all righteousness', but it is not immediately clear what this means. If we are to make at least a degree of sense out of this, we need to take a step back and examine the background to John the Baptist and his role in the story of God's people, as described in Matthew 3:1 – 12.

In 3:1 – 6, we're introduced to John as a mysterious figure operating in the Judean wilderness and offering his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In this, he was the one preparing the way of the Lord, and making the pathway of God straight. Everything about John the Baptist was deliberate and symbolic. A high-protein diet of locusts and wild honey, and his camel's hair outfit accessorised with a leather belt, were purposefully reminiscent of Elijah, whose return was anticipated immediately before the coming of the Messiah. The stationing of John's ministry out in the Judean wilderness served to keep him at a safe distance from the authorities in Jerusalem whose sacrificial system he subverted. It also evoked memories of the days of Moses, and of Israel's forty years of wilderness wandering before they entered the Promised Land. A further connection with the story of the exodus becomes apparent when we note that the Jordan was the same river the people crossed before entering the land, and that is also why it was only *after* Jesus climbed out of its waters that the Holy Spirit descended upon him (3:16).

Bringing this together shows how John's calling was aimed at *Israel*, and not just individuals within the nation. By himself embodying the life of God's people, Jesus was undertaking a baptism in the Jordan *on their behalf*. That is why, despite not needing to repent, he made

the long journey from Galilee to Judea; this was not an accident but a purposeful act. John's initial reluctance to decide to baptise Jesus reflects the former's teaching when he condemned those Pharisees and Sadducees flocking to him, telling them that though he baptised with water, the one coming after him would baptise with fire and with the Holy Spirit (3:11). He felt he needed to receive this fiery baptism from Jesus (3:14) as a gift from someone so much greater than him. Despite gathering Israel's salvation history up to that point together, John knew he wasn't fit to untie his younger cousin's sandals (3:12). His baptism had prepared the ground for Jesus as the Messiah who would bring God's righteous judgement to bear. I think that is key to making sense of Jesus's request and John's acceptance (3:15).

There is, therefore, something at the heart of today's passage about renewal. Time and again, from the age of Moses onward, Israel had failed to live up to its calling to be a light to the nations through which all the peoples would be blessed. The covenant made between God and Moses on behalf of Israel had been renewed several times, but things kept going awry. Now, Jesus was bringing in a new covenant, by embodying the calling of Israel himself. Hence, the coming of the Holy Spirit to anoint him for public ministry and the divine affirmation that he was truly God's beloved Son (3:16 – 17), was preparing the ground for this weighty task. Jesus's undertaking John's baptism on behalf of the people of Israel marked a point of renewal, of cleansing and new hope, as he prepared to enact God's righteousness in both word and deed, after spending forty days out in the wilderness being tested (4:1 – 11). That is why he did what he did, and why the words of love from the heavenly voice were important. The new covenant, whose consummation came with Jesus's cross and resurrection, is that which we enter into today as we say the Covenant Prayer.

The Methodist Covenant Service is one of the greatest gifts that the Methodist people have given to the wider Church, and it reflects the same demanding commitment Jesus displayed as he formed a new

covenant through his baptism. Yet, like Jesus, the affirmation which God made in that scene is also spoken to us: we are God's beloved. I wonder what your reaction to knowing that you are God's beloved child, with whom God is well-pleased, might be? Some of you might feel you know this already deep down in your being and if that's you, it's wonderful to have the affirmation this brings. However, for many of us, accepting that we are God's beloved children is far from easy. Hence, today's reading is very important, and if there is an essential message here, it is that you're loved, no matter what life throws your way. So, in the coming week, I'd like to invite you to imagine yourself into that scene, and if you can, preface the words the Father's voice spoke to Jesus with your own name. Friends, God's love is real. We can have the benefit of hearing those amazing words said to Jesus: 'You're my beloved child, and I am really pleased with you'. May we all know this reality in our hearts. Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God made a covenant with the people of Israel,
calling them to be a holy nation,
chosen to bear witness to his steadfast love
by finding delight in the Law of Moses.
The covenant was renewed in Jesus Christ our Lord,
in his living, loving, dying and rising again from the dead.
In him, all people may be set free from sin and its power,
and united in love and obedience.
In this covenant, God promises us new life in Christ,
and we promise to live no longer for ourselves, but for God.
We meet, therefore, as generations have met before us,
to renew the covenant which bound them, and binds us,
to God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit.
Let us bring to God those things which hold us back
from giving God all that we have been, are, and will become:

On the thoughts, words and deeds for which we're sorry,
let your light shine.

On the hurts, griefs and burdens we carry,
let your light shine.

On the injustices and inequalities of our broken world,
let your light shine.

On the failings of your Church, and the disunity of your Body,
let your light shine.

On the poverty of our worship and selfishness of our prayers,
let your light shine.

On the exploitation of your world, and our lack of care for it,
let your light shine.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of renewal,
you have broken the yokes that burden your people,
and through your Son,
you draw us to yourself once again,
making us your holy people.
Thank you that you forgive our mistakes, heal our wounds,
and inspire us to live in the light of your love. **Amen**

Covenant Prayer (*MWB*, pg.289 – Prayer **B**)

Beloved in Christ, let us again claim for ourselves
the covenant which God has made with his people,
and take upon us the yoke of Christ.
This means that we are content
that he appoint us our place and work,
and that he himself be our reward.

Christ has many services to be done:
some are easy, others are difficult;
some bring honour, others bring reproach;
some are suitable to our natural inclinations
and material interests,
some are contrary to both;
in some we may please Christ and please ourselves;
in others we cannot please Christ
except by denying ourselves.
Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ,
who strengthens us.

Therefore, let us make this covenant with God our own.
Let us give ourselves to him,
trusting in his promises, and relying on this grace.

Lord God, holy Father,
since you have called us through Christ
to share in this gracious covenant,
we take upon ourselves with joy the yoke of obedience
and, for love of you,
engage ourselves to seek and do your perfect will.
We are no longer our own, but yours.

**I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing;**

**I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen**

Prayers of Intercession

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**