



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 Luke 3:15 – 17, 21 – 22

Sermon

At first glance, it may seem a little odd that today's reading is neither one of the set readings for a Methodist Covenant Service, nor a text that we haven't seen for a while. Indeed, we heard the earlier verses of this passage on the Third Sunday of Advent. However, looking at this from the perspective of Jesus's baptism, as the Church does in this particular week, puts a slightly different complexion on what we

might wish to say about John the Baptist. This was something of an uncomfortable text for the early Church, because on one level it fails to make sense. We know that John was operating in the wilderness, beyond the river Jordan, drawing in crowds from Jerusalem and the surrounding Judean countryside, and that he proclaimed a 'baptism of repentance' which sought to get the people of Israel ready for the new thing God was doing. However, while John was concerned with forgiveness of sins and being set right with God, Jesus was the one person who didn't need this! So, why did the latter travel all the way from Nazareth in Galilee to be baptised, to receive something which wasn't necessary for him?

Well, I imagine we can be pretty certain these events did take place, precisely because they were embarrassing and awkward for people who found themselves having to explain why a sinless man took up a baptism of repentance. I think we can also be sure that this meant that the cousins were singing from the same hymn sheet, and Jesus supported John's efforts to wake Israel up ready for the new chapter that was beginning to unfold. Yet, while it is true that Jesus appears to have understood himself as representing God's people, and thus may have undergone his baptism on their behalf, there's an element of mystery here, which is quite delightful. I once had the privilege of visiting an Eastern Orthodox church that contained an ikon of Jesus sanctifying the water as he entered the river, and there is something rather wonderful about what that tells us about creation. Yet, Luke's Gospel is clear that it was after Jesus *had emerged* from the waters that the Spirit descended (Luke 3:22).

At this moment, it was as if an invisible curtain separating earth and heaven was opened up, and the wonder of the divine broke through. There's an echo here of the promise of a New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31 – 33, which focused upon the establishment of true peace, of Shalom. Moreover, it is telling that this follows on from the arrest of John the Baptist, illustrating the cost he and his younger cousin paid

for embracing God's renewal of the people of Israel and challenging power (3:18 – 20). In other words, whatever the reasons behind his baptism, everything fundamentally changed forever for Jesus in that moment. There are multiple echoes of the Old Testament just below the surface here – the breaking in of heaven connects back to Isaiah 64:2, and a desperate longing for the skies to be rendered asunder; the Spirit taking the bodily likeness of a dove might well be linked to the hovering over the waters of creation in Genesis 1:2, or to Noah's sending out a dove to look for dry land after the flood (Genesis 8:8); and the Father's words to Jesus pick up on references to Psalm 2:7, and Isaiah 42:1, thus linking him with the Suffering Servant.

What we have, therefore, is a carefully crafted story, that reveals an enormous amount about who Jesus is, and why he matters. He has been commissioned as both the Son-Servant, and Israel's Messiah, with his unique calling signposted by language about being pleased which was usually reserved for an only son (see Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22:2, as an example). There is no sense of his somehow being 'adopted' by God, because this fits with what John the Baptist makes clear to us (Luke 3:16) about his younger cousin's greatness in relation to everyone that had come before, including him. Instead, the descent of the Spirit, and those amazing words spoken to Jesus, were an affirmation of who he was and had always been. In him, an ancient promise of a New Covenant was coming true, and renewed hope was dawning. However, the most amazing thing about Jesus's baptism is that, because we can call God our Father through Jesus, we can stand in the same place as he did, and hear the same words being said to us: 'You are my beloved child. I am pleased with you'.

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 says to Jesus with your own name. The mystery of why Jesus chose to accept John's baptism might still remain, but we can trust that the love poured out onto him is also there for us. God's love is real, and whatever embarrassment the Early Church may have felt about this story, we can have the benefit of hearing those amazing words said to Jesus: 'You're my beloved child, and I'm really pleased with you'. May we 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.

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**

Recommended Resource of the Week

The compilation *How to Pray: The Best of John Wesley* looks at the Covenant service and other valuable gifts from Methodist tradition.

Prayers of Intercession

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

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**