



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 felt let down by God because what you hoped for did not work out? How do you feel about this now?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise (*Gloria* by Christopher Idle)

Glory in the highest to the God of heaven!
Peace to all your people through the earth be given!
Mighty God and Father, thanks and praise we bring,
singing hallelujah to our heavenly king.

Jesus Christ is risen, God the Father's Son!
With the Holy Spirit, you are Lord alone!
Lamb once killed for sinners, all our guilt to bear,
show us now your mercy, now receive our prayer.

Christ the world's true Saviour, high and holy One,
seated now and reigning from your Father's throne:
Lord and God, we praise you! Highest heaven adores:
in the Father's glory, all the praise be yours!

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 116:1 – 15 (Singing the Faith 828)

I love God as he has heard the voice of my supplication;
because he inclined his ear to me when I called to him.
The snares of death encompassed me;
the pains of hell took hold of me;
by grief and sorrow was I held.
then I called upon the name of the Lord:
'O Lord, I beg you, deliver my soul.'
Gracious is the Lord and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.
The Lord watches over the simple;
I was brought very low and he saved me.
Turn again to your rest, O my soul;
for the Lord has been gracious to you.
For you have delivered my soul from death;
my eyes from tears and my feet from falling.
I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living.
I believed that I should perish for I was sorely troubled;
and I said in my alarm, 'Everyone is a liar.'
How shall I repay the Lord
for all the benefits he has given to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call upon the name of the Lord.
I will fulfil my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.
Precious in the sight of the Lord is
the death of his faithful servants. O Lord, I am your servant,

your servant, the child of your handmaid;
you have freed me from my bonds.
I will offer to you a sacrifice of thanksgiving
and call upon the name of the Lord.

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

You are invited to bring your prayers for renewal in your life, and the world, to God. At the end of this time, the following prayer is offered:

Gracious God,
you long for all you have made to flourish.
Thank you that you forgive us when we make mistakes,
heal us when we are hurt by the sins of others,
and set us free to proclaim your kingdom of love. **Amen**

Reading Mark 8:27 – 9:1

Sermon

One my favourite television programmes of the last few years is the award-winning sitcom *This Country*. Set in a small Cotswold village, it follows the misadventures of two young adults – Kerry and Kurtan – who are best friends, and cousins. In one episode, Kerry imagines that her father, Martin, will get her a good birthday present and card. However, as usual, Martin is not interested, and cannot be bothered to write more than just 'M' on the card which Kurtan takes around to him. To prevent Kerry being let down and hurt yet again, Kurtan fills in the card, gets her the soda machine she really wants, and leaves them on her doorstep, thus convincing her that Martin remembered her birthday after all. Much of the comedy here comes from Kurtan's other efforts to make Kerry's birthday special, those that she knows

are from him, going rather spectacularly wrong! Now, obviously, this is a fictional story, and so exaggerated for comic effect. However, it illustrates a serious point; when our expectations aren't met, even if they weren't terribly realistic, it can cause a lot of hurt.

I suspect most of us have, at some point, experienced a situation in which we felt let down because our expectations were not met. This could be due to an individual, an organisation or a structural system falling short of what we had hoped for. In some cases, we can obtain a degree of redress when this happens to us. If a company sells us a faulty product, we might complain to Trading Standards. If we find ourselves being a victim of injustice, we could seek to join others to campaign for changes. Even when we have been hurt by somebody with whom we had a close relationship, therapy and mediation may be able to help us in finding healing and restoration. However, what can we do if we feel that *God* has let us down? Where might we turn to when our expectations of God have not been met?

This scenario, of disappointment and confusion amid unfulfilled and perhaps challenged expectations, runs through our passage for this week. We have reached the 'pivot point' in Mark's Gospel where the action swings decisively away from Galilee and towards Jerusalem. Those various rhythms of noisy opposition, unsustainable demands and polarised reactions came together and reached a crescendo as it became impossible for Jesus to lie low even in quiet Gentile towns (7:24 – 30), or to keep his healing miracles under wraps (7:31 – 37). His powerful proclamation of the Kingdom of God now being at hand in his very being (1:15) – backed up by multiple healings, exorcisms, teaching of huge crowds and miraculous meals – made it necessary for Jesus and his closest friends to face up to where this was going. So, on the long walk from Bethsaida to Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples about who others were saying that he was (8:27). Their replies reveal some of the expectations people had of Jesus. Some believed he was his cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist, who'd

been out in the wilderness calling the people of Israel to repentance, and whom the puppet ruler Herod thought had been raised from the dead following his brutal execution (6:14 – 29). Others reckoned he was Elijah, the greatest of the Hebrew prophets who hadn't died but been carried up to heaven in a fiery chariot, and whose return it was believed would herald the long-awaited coming of the Messiah. Still others thought that he was another in the long line of said prophets.

These claims all pointed to that pregnant sense of expectation, held by many, that now was the time God would act decisively to redeem Israel, by cleansing and renewing the Jerusalem Temple, defeating Israel's enemies and thus finally liberating them from the occupying Roman forces, and bringing in God's just and peace-filled reign. So, when the disciples were asked the crunch question, and Jesus said, "And what about you? Who do you say that I am?", Peter replied on behalf of them by calling him the Messiah, God's Anointed One, the true King of Israel and rightful heir to the 'Throne of David'. No doubt he had various of these expectations of Jesus in mind when he said all this, some of which may have resonated with popular ideas about a military Messiah or the purification of Israel's national religious life, but Peter's understanding would soon be turned on its head. In new teaching (8:31a), made possible by this declaration, Jesus gave the first of three statements about what his being Israel's Messiah – the Son of Man who would suffer on behalf of God's people before then being lifted up and vindicated at the last – would actually mean. He wouldn't just be walking right into danger, but knowingly going to his death (8:31b), and he was asking the disciples to come with him on this journey. Peter sometimes gets given a hard time for his reaction (8:32), but having left everything safe and secure to follow Jesus, I personally feel his response was entirely understandable, reflecting as it did commonly-held expectations. Yet, he was way off the mark.

To follow Jesus meant and means taking up our cross and following him, losing our life in order to save it (8:34 – 37). In other words, this

meant crucifixion and resurrection, repentance and transformation, denial and renewal. His question thus cuts to the heart of our being.

So, what of us today, then? Who might we say Jesus is, in the midst of a global pandemic in which many of our expectations of God have been challenged? A significant part of my work in this past eighteen months has centred around funeral ministry. Whilst I might normally expect to take about four or five such services in a typical year, I've led twenty-seven since the first UK lockdown began in March 2020. This has all proven particularly difficult, and not just because of their sheer volume. Many involved significant levels of trauma, especially in the early days of the pandemic, when families were unable to be with loved ones if they died in hospital. Arranging funerals by phone, as was necessary most of the way through, meant there was little I could do when people became distressed; I could not even pass the tissues. Having limited numbers able to attend meant many families faced heartbreaking deliberation about who to invite, and people not being allowed to sit together and comfort each other during services was highly upsetting to witness. Many of us were moved by the sight of the Queen sat all by herself in the vastness of Westminster Abbey at the Duke of Edinburgh's funeral; I witnessed many similar things.

In the midst of this situation, it is unsurprising that I was asked some particularly anguished questions. Why did God allow this to happen, and why didn't God answer our prayers for healing? How can a God of love permit so many to die alone in hospital like that? These were all excruciatingly painful examples of unmet expectations, of people feeling profoundly let down by God, and it is hard even now to know how to answer these questions. Perhaps there are not any answers. However, as things have (thankfully) calmed down somewhat and I have had a little time to process it, I have found myself coming back to a book that's now almost twenty years old but still very meaningful for me, called *Writing in the Dust*. Written by Rowan Williams, in the aftermath of the September 11th terror attacks, during which he had

been in New York and found himself caught up in events, it contains lots of insightful observations. Reflecting on religious language and symbolism, Williams notes that many of those last phone calls made by passengers from the doomed planes to their loved ones reflected what the Christian faith is at its core about – the triumph of pointless, gratuitous love, love that remains stubbornly present, even when all hope is lost and there is nothing to be done.

At first glance, it might sound odd to refer to God's love as pointless, but if you think about it, this takes us right to the heart of the paradox at the centre of our faith. It is when Jesus was nailed upon the cross, utterly exposed and vulnerable, that the width and length and depth and height of God's love was laid bare (Ephesians 3:18) for all of us to see. The crucifixion takes all our thinking, all our deeply ingrained expectation about what power and strength and almightiness mean, and turns it all upside down. God is, within that moment of supreme power, in a very real sense, utterly useless. For my part, as I've had time to reflect upon my funeral ministry during the pandemic, I have realised that God called me to exercise a ministry of uselessness – in other words, a ministry of simply going on being there, when there was nothing to be done, and hope seemed lost. It was a painful and costly place to be, and one that does not lend itself to telling ministry "Success Stories" or counting up and shouting about the number of people reached by one's efforts. However, perhaps all that shouldn't be surprising given how we follow a crucified God. Maybe God won't always meet our expectations, but we can still know that God never leaves us to walk through the darkest valleys alone. For that simple, yet amazing, truth, thanks be to God. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Reconciling and endlessly creative God,
we bring before you our prayers for others.

In the power of your Spirit,
help us to come before you with open hands and hearts.
O Lord, hear our prayer:

You created everything there was, is, and ever will be,
and you crafted human beings in your image.
We confess our failure to care for what you have made,
and pray for all those working to nurture our environment
and campaigning for climate justice.
O Lord, hear our prayer.

You created human beings to live together well,
but so often we turn against one another instead.
We confess our complicity in the fracturing of communities,
and pray for all those working to sow seeds of hope,
especially among children and young people.
O Lord, hear our prayer.

You made yourself vulnerable in Jesus Christ,
and came to show us how to love one another.
We confess our struggles to follow his example,
and pray for all those who have nurtured us in faith,
and inspire us to be the best version of ourselves.
O Lord, hear our prayer.

You came that we might have life in all its fullness,
and appreciate all the colours of life.
We confess that this isn't always easy to do,
and pray for those we know who're struggling at the moment
in body, mind or spirit, laying our own needs before you, too.
O Lord, hear our prayer.

Lord's Prayer

Blessing