



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 of a time when somebody else helped you out, without asking for anything in return. How did this make you feel, and why?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Merciful and gracious God,
you call us to embody your incomprehensible love,
which turns our ideas about what it means to be human
upside down and inside out.
You equip us and strengthen us through your Holy Spirit,
so that we can do good, share blessings and offer prayers,

even in the hardest and most adverse of circumstances.
Following the example of your Son, Jesus Christ,
you call us to seek forgiveness over revenge,
new beginnings over being stuck in unjust ways of being,
hope in the midst of the darkness that comes before dawn.
We thank you that invite us to embrace Kingdom life,
always offering us the opportunity to begin again with you,
and comforting and upholding us when we have been hurt.

**Merciful and gracious God,
receive our thanks and praises. Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 37:1 – 11

Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of wrongdoers,
**for they will soon fade like the grass,
and wither like the green herb.**
Trust in the Lord, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.

**Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.**
Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.

**He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.**
Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him;
**do not fret over those who prosper in their way,
over those who carry out evil devices.**

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.
Do not fret – it leads only to evil.
**For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.**

Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look diligently for their place,

they will not be there.

**But the meek shall inherit the land,
and delight in abundant prosperity.**

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're invited to reflect upon those things within your life and in the life of the world in need of renewal , after which the following is said:

God of all goodness and blessings,
thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and equip us to be your disciples.
Amen

Reading Luke 6:27 – 38

Sermon

The late atheistic commentator, Christopher Hitchens, once caused controversy with his remarks in relation to Islamic terrorism, and the injunction in both Matthew and Luke's Gospels to love our enemies. He wrote, "Love your enemies – there is another immoral injunction. My enemies are the theocratic fascists. I do not love them; I want to destroy them". His comments highlight the tensions which we might encounter, as we seek to apply Jesus' teaching from today's Gospel passage. The disciples to whom he spoke on that 'level place' were called to love their enemies, which meant doing good, blessing, and praying for them (Luke 6:27 – 28). They were to move beyond wider cultural ideas about reciprocal relationships and thus to love others, seek good and lend without expecting anything in return (6:32 – 35). Embracing forgiveness whilst not judging or condemning other folks (6:37 – 38), and giving to those who beg (6:30), also formed part of

what it meant to be merciful just as God the Father is merciful (6:36). Now, the vision presented here is highly countercultural; it has been branded unrealistic and naïve, and one commentary described it as incomprehensible! This begs the question: what should we make of this challenging text, and how might we respond to those who share Hitchens' scepticism about this difficult teaching?

The context of these sayings of Jesus is the Sermon upon the Plain, which we began examining last week by looking at the series of four blessings and four woes in 6:17 – 26. Within Hebrew thought, plains or 'level places' were ambiguous spaces associated with desolation and salvation, much like the now-and-not-yet of the Kingdom of God that Jesus was embodying and proclaiming. This resonated with the situation which Luke's predominantly Gentile faith community faced as they dealt with hostility from the religious and secular authorities, while holding onto the hope in Christ they had embraced. They were being called to respond to this with nonviolence, meeting hatred and abuses with love, blessings, prayers and seeking the practical good of the other. As Jesus said, their Kingdom rewards for this would be great (6:38), even as their present experience at the hands of those described therein as ungrateful and wicked (6:35) would be difficult. In short, they were tasked with exemplifying the life of the Kingdom, and thus pointing towards a radically different way to be, even down to giving of themselves without expecting returns. Now, we don't get to hear how Jesus' disciples and the wider crowd responded to this, but I imagine they found all it pretty daunting. In its context, this was a lot to ask of that particular faith community.

For us today, as readers in a quite different setting where we do not face the same sort of hostility for being faithful to Christ, these words may also leave us feeling daunted. Moreover, they do need to come with a health warning attached. Jesus was *not* saying that people in abusive situations should remain with their abuser, or that pressure should be placed upon survivors of abuse to forgive the people who

have hurt them. Not putting ourselves into danger – physical, sexual or psychological – is eminently sensible and does not represent any kind of spiritual failure no matter what some misguided pastors have claimed! This passage illustrates the importance of putting readings into context, rather than ‘plucking’ verses out and weaponising them for our own ends. Moreover, given what we now know of the original setting, it is interesting that Luke included the line about ‘turning the other cheek’, which was not about being a ‘doormat’, but was an act of defiance, forcing someone to treat the other person as their equal if they were to strike them again. Clearly, very little is straightforward here, and hence it is unsurprising that debates continue on subjects such as ‘just war theory’ that have drawn upon this passage.

Against this backdrop, perhaps the best we can look to do is commit ourselves to wrestling with what we find here and exploring what an approach to dealing with oppression based upon nonviolence looks like in practice. Much prayer is needed if we are to grapple with what Luke’s Jesus is saying to us here, and in particular the thorny issues of forgiveness and loving enemies. Christopher Hitchens isn’t alone in being sceptical of the teaching in the Sermon upon the Plain, and it undoubtedly raises tough questions when we engage with real life situations. However, to belong to the Kingdom of God is to embrace a countercultural ‘way of being’ that turns conventional views upside down and inside out, and so we should probably expect a challenge of this kind to come along if we want to be disciples of Jesus. Hence, as we go into the coming week, I hope you will be able to find space and time to ponder this passage in more depth, and to embrace that amazing, world-changing vision Jesus embodied and taught. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

The Forgiveness Project (2016) is a collection of stories from victim and perpetrator of crime alike, on the power and challenge of setting aside revenge and seeking forgiveness instead.

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**