



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 found being unfairly judged? What happened to you, and why do you think that situation emerged?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Thank you, Lord God, for the opportunity of worship,
for the freedom to be among your community,
for being able to meet together in your presence,
and in the warmth of your embrace.

Thank you that, in worship, we can put aside,
the uncertainties of this world and rest
upon the certainties of the Kingdom,

for your promises are not changeable
and your love never wavers.

Thank you that we can bring to your feet
all the hurts and fears that trouble us, and leave them there,
knowing that your strength and assurance
are all that we require

Thank you that as we draw near in worship,
we are transported from a world of concerns and fears,
to a place where we can be at peace in your presence,
find healing, wholeness and refreshment.

Thank you Lord God for the opportunity of worship. **Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 65

Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion;
and to you shall vows be performed.

O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come.

When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,

you forgive our transgressions.

Happy are those whom you choose and bring near
to live in your courts.

**We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,
your holy temple.**

By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,
O God of our salvation;

**you are the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas.**

By your strength you established the mountains;
you are girded with might.

**You silence the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.**

Those who live at earth's farthest bounds

are awed by your signs;
**you make the gateways of the morning and the evening
shout for joy.**

You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.

You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges,
softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.

**You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.**

The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
**the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.**

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 spend time reflecting on those things for which you want to say sorry to God, and how you might address them, before using the following prayer as a conclusion:

Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent,
have mercy upon us,
pardon and deliver us from all our sins,
confirm and strengthen us in all goodness,
and keep us in life eternal;
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen

Reading Luke 18:9 – 14

Sermon

The day wasn't going quite as planned! It was a Saturday in Central London, and I was looking to join the anti-austerity march on its way to Hyde Park. However, I'd gotten the time wrong and instead found myself emerging from Green Park Tube station right at the front end of the march. Thus, I spent my afternoon attending the rally instead. As an act of 'teenage rebellion' against the opinions of my politically conservative parents, at sixteen, I had joined the Socialist Workers. It meant that going to rallies wasn't a new experience. However, this time, it was different. It was back in 2011, and so wasn't all that long after the financial crises of 2008. The anger present in the aftermath of that crisis was reflected in the way in which speaker after speaker spoke about bankers. If I tell you that one of the nicest things uttered was that 'bankers are the scum of the earth', you get the picture! I'd been in my job as a Risk Analyst at Santander for around six months at that point, and it was pretty scary to be a part of the group on the receiving end of so much hatred. I decided that it wasn't a good idea to 'let on' to anyone there what I did for a living!

Fast forward around a year, and I was at an exploration day, hosted by the Northampton District, for people considering candidating and becoming Methodist presbyters. The first person I met that day was a teacher, who refused to speak to me any further, when I'd told her what I did for a living. It wasn't the first time I had been blanked after confessing to working in finance. Jumping forwards again to my first term at theological college in Birmingham. I got myself in trouble for challenging my tutors. We were told we had to go into the centre of Birmingham, and sing revised versions of Christmas carols that had lyrics trying to speak about social justice issues. One of these began 'bankers in the realms of money', and went on to talk about bankers as being 'pigs with their snouts in the trough'. Apparently, it's alright

to use that kind of dehumanising language when it's directed toward powerful groups, or so my tutor told us. I wonder, therefore, if Jesus had been ministering in today's context, whether he would have told the 'Parable of the College Tutor and the Banker'...

The temptation to 'look down' on other people, and to stereotype an entire section of society, can be very strong regardless of where the 'other' comes in the 'social hierarchy'. In the case of the parable told by Jesus, the Pharisee appears to have forgotten all that stuff within the Law of Moses about loving others, and decides instead to sneer at the Tax Collector. On the 'holiness scale', it doesn't take much in the way of imagination to spot that their contemporaries would have ranked the Pharisee way above someone whose job involved taking money off Jewish folk, and giving it to the occupying forces, all while pocketing a little extra themselves. Consequently, his parable would have shocked Jesus's hearers. It was the apparently unholy person who would be going home justified – that is, made right with God – and the respected religious official who needed to change his ways. The former recognised their need of God's mercy and graciousness in that instant, and responded accordingly, whilst the latter was sure that their outward religiosity made them better than others.

So, is the point of this sermon that we should be less judgmental to people we may be tempted to look down on, whether that's bankers, or benefit claimants? Well, that would certainly be a good thing, not least because Jesus also tells us that we need to stop fixating about the specks in somebody else's eye, when there's a dirty great plank in our own! However, there's more going on than may be addressed by a plea for greater kindness toward those routinely blamed for our difficulties. We cannot escape the fact that the Pharisee and the tax collector he disparaged were both 'caught up' in serving corrupt and unjust systems. The religious system of Israel excluded many of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in that society, and placed barriers between God, and anybody on the 'outside' of said system.

The Tax Collector served an occupying power which maintained the peace by violently repressing any dissent, and made life miserable for those forced to live under it. When we're all caught up in systems that are, for want of a better term, sinful systems, what might it mean to do what my college tutors tried to do, and act prophetically?

Part of the 'answer', I think, has to do with addressing anxiety. Ours is a deeply anxious society in which, as Ann Morisy argues, we have become so used to this being 'normal' that we often fail to recognise what's going on. When faced with prolonged and chronic anxiety of the sort around currently, our 'fight or flight' survival instinct kicks in. So, we *react* to events, rather than *responding* to them with anything like calm reflection. There is plenty of research which shows up just how skewed our perceptions can become under circumstances that generate anxiety, and the swings to political extremes (on both right and left) seen across the world are a symptom of our malaise. When we're anxious, we're more likely to scapegoat minority groups, such as benefit claimants, Muslims, LGBT+ people, and so on. Moreover, we're also much more likely to blame an entire group for the real or perceived misdemeanours of a minority of them, something which I would argue happened with bankers, and is happening to refugees, trans people, and various other minority groups in our society, amid a cost-of-living crisis which does not have any easy solutions. What is more, the rise of populism around the world shows that this is not a peculiarly British issue, but something in need of all our attention.

How might we begin to move beyond all this and into a better place? Well, if I had the answer, I would be a rich man indeed! However, it seems to me that the first step has to be naming the 'beast' for what it is. Reflecting on his time as a chaplain working within an intensive care unit, Ewan Kelly describes experiencing deep uneasiness with the sense of helplessness he felt when waiting with the patients and their families. Yet, he eventually began to realise that giving himself 'permission' to acknowledge those perfectly normal feelings was an

essential step to being able to be a non-anxious presence providing effective pastoral care in the “liminal space” of profound uncertainty. If we’re going to be a non-anxious presence as a church community, it is important we can admit the present situation is overwhelming.

Moreover, we need to be willing to embrace what Ann Morisy terms ‘systems thinking’, which sees the causes of real-world situations in the round. When the then President of the Methodist Conference – Barbara Glasson – noted in an article in *The Times*, the issues we’re facing in society are complicated and multi-layered. This means that taking decisions based upon simplistic soundbites, and burying our collective heads in the sand when confronted with complex realities, does not ultimately serve anybody. Returning to the response of my theological college tutor to being challenged about the stereotyping of bankers, it seems to me that real conversation about the systemic problems in that sector was not what they wanted – why bother with that, when you can simply brand others as evil, and feel smug about yourself? If Morisy is right, then we’ll need to get past those sorts of behaviours which stereotype and dehumanise others so that we are able to grapple with complicated problems and to reach an effective and just solution.

So, I find myself thinking that one of the most prophetic and counter-cultural things we can do at the moment is simply to stop and reflect. Reflect on what is going on and the multi-layered factors causing all these things. so that we can play our parts by responding with grace rather than fear, with hopeful actions rather than kneejerk reactions. Neither the Pharisee nor the Tax Collector were in a position to look down on others, and yet one of them did just that. May we have the wisdom to avoid simply repeating their mistake, the humility to admit our need of God’s mercy, love and grace is great, and the vision to pursue real justice, that holds fast to the value of all people – college tutors, bankers and all. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Samuel Wells’ 2016 work *How Then Shall We Live?* explores major political and social issues, and how we might respond to them.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord’s Prayer

Blessing