



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 faced a situation where you have been embarrassed to admit to following Jesus? How did this leave you feeling?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

You are invited to bring your own thanksgivings and praises to God, and to use the following as a concluding prayer:

Faithful and lifegiving God,
giver of all good gifts and source of all beauty,
receive our thanks and praises. Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 86:1 – 10, 16 – 17

Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.

**Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you;
save your servant who trusts in you.**

You are my God; be gracious to me, O Lord,
for to you do I cry all day long.

**Gladden the soul of your servant,
for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.**

For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving,
abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.

Give ear to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication.

In the day of my trouble, I call on you, for you will answer me.

**There is none like you among the gods, O Lord,
nor are there any works like yours.**

All the nations you have made shall come and bow down
before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.

**For you are great and do wondrous things;
you alone are God.**

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

God of faithfulness and loving-kindness,
as we approach you in prayer and humility,
aware of the many burdens on our hearts and minds,
we bring to you those things in need of renewal:

For the words and actions for which we're sorry,
grant us your forgiveness.

For the burdens we carry and the sorrows we bear,
bring us your comfort.

For the struggles we may experience to trust we are loved,
offer us your assurance.

For the injustice and oppression which blights our world,
inspire us to respond courageously.

For the failings and disunity of your Church,
make us ready to change.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of faithfulness and loving-kindness,
thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,
heal our wounds and transform our world. **Amen**

Reading Matthew 10:24 – 39

Sermon

Sometimes, when I first look at the set readings for a given Sunday, what I find inspires me, and ideas for what I might say in the sermon flow easily. Other times, however, I have to confess that my reading them fills me with a degree of dread! Today's text falls firmly into the second category. Its depictions of disciples being maligned by being accused of demon-possession (10:24 – 25), physical dangers to be overcome by courageous proclamations (10:26 – 31), and infighting within families (10:32 – 39) are the opposite of a comfortable Gospel reading to cheer the heart! The temptation when faced with this kind of passage is simply to steer clear, focusing instead upon one of the other set texts, or even choosing to ignore the lectionary altogether. However, there is something to be said for facing the difficult biblical texts head-on, not least because the strong emotions they generate

can point us to important truths, about ourselves and about our God. So, as we take a look at today's reading, it is important that we allow ourselves to experience the discomfort it brings.

If we are going to make some sense of it, we need both to put it into context and to recognise the difference between that setting and the situation we find ourselves in, as disciples within twenty-first century Britain. Matthew's Gospel was the second of the canonical Gospels to be written, probably around 75 to 80 CE, for a collection of people who found themselves under siege. It is impossible to overstate the impact which the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE had upon the identity of the Jewish people. The slaughter and starvation were accompanied by the raising to the ground of the place believed to house the very presence of God, and they had to work out afresh what it meant to be the people of Israel. Not surprisingly, this caused tensions to grow, and church and synagogue increasingly diverged. To add to that, the Romans viciously persecuted Christians through that period, most notably in Nero's scapegoating of them for the fire that devastated Rome in 64 CE, but also on an everyday level. What was more, Matthew's faith community were wrestling with their own internal disagreements. Put all of this together, and we can see why today's text would have been so helpful; it functioned as a reminder of God's providential care in the face of danger and conflict.

That is why, having just called the twelve who formed the core group of his disciples, Jesus spoke of sending his friends out like sheep in the midst of wolves (10:16), and proceeded to warn them that they'd face opposition from both the Jewish authorities (10:17) and secular powers (10:18), and even from within their own families (10:21), due to their loyalty to him (10:22). Today's reading develops this further, with the first part focusing upon not being afraid to speak in the light and from the rooftops (10:24 – 33) and the latter on coping with their own families rejecting them for their faithfulness to him (10:34 – 39). Matthew pulled this preaching together into one of the five blocks of

Jesus' teaching found within this Gospel to encourage his struggling community, by naming their fears, and holding the care and the love of God before them.

Now, one of the temptations we face in reading the New Testament is to automatically identify ourselves with those being addressed, in this case the Twelve friends receiving their commission from Jesus. However, at least with this example, the identification does not hold. The Church of that period formed a small and vulnerable minority in the Roman Empire who knew what it was to be on the receiving end of violent persecution. However, that is not our story; following many centuries of Christendom, ours is a country in which the culture and laws and traditions have been shaped profoundly by Christian faith, in which the secular state and ecclesiastical powers have long been intertwined, and with an Established Church whose bishops occupy seats in the House of Lords by right. Indeed, one may well read the history of the churches in these islands as littered with examples of *our* being the persecutors, whether by upholding slavery back in the day, or failing to condemn the cruel imposition of capital punishment for being gay in Uganda today, to list just two instances. When some complain Christians in this country are being persecuted, they really seem to mean they are angry about a loss of privileged status.

So, one thing we can take away from our grappling with today's text is the dual reminder that the decline of Christendom is not the same as being persecuted for following Jesus, and that we do our siblings in Christ who do put their lives on the line in various contexts a great disservice when we equate the two. Praying for those facing violent hatred because of their discipleship is important, and not something to which we always give sufficient attention. In addition, whether we do or do not face danger to practice our faith, we all face times when we are fearful for some reason or another. Life throws curveballs at us, and so confronting our fear becomes necessary. The good news here is that God cares for us, and we do not face fears alone. Jesus

told his friends that God cares for the sparrows despite their lacking any great material value, and therefore God will care even more for them as those of much greater worth (10:29 – 31). The same is true for us, in that God knows us better than we know ourselves (10:30), and loves us more than we could ever imagine. Our discipleship will be more real and helpful for others if we are willing to be vulnerable, not hiding those parts of ourselves away and pretending everything is fine. So, with God's help, may we too be faithful witnesses. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Rowan Williams' 2019 *Luminaries: Twenty Lives that Illuminate the Christian Way* offers examples of great faith in challenging contexts.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing