



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

If somebody asked you to sum up what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in one or two sentences, what would you say?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of all goodness and blessing,
you invite us to come to you just as we are,
but knowing you love us too much to leave us where we are.
We praise you because, in your Son Jesus Christ,
we can find new life, wholeness and transformation.
Thank you that you know us better than we know ourselves,
and love us completely and unconditionally.

May we respond in turn by loving you with all we have,
and loving others with that same passion you pour out.
In the name of Jesus, who shows us what it is to be human,
and in the power of the Holy Spirit who holds us close to you.

Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 1 (Singing the Faith 800)

Happy are those who do not follow
the advice of the wicked,
**or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;**
their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
their leaves do not wither.

In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so,
they are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

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

Reading Matthew 22:34 – 46

Sermon

Have you ever had to make an elevator pitch? The basic idea is that you have the time it takes for a lift to travel from the ground floor to

the top floor of a tall building, so about thirty seconds, to sell an idea to somebody with the influence, resources and connections to make it happen. You wouldn't mess around in that situation if you had any sense, but would get straight to the heart of what you wanted to say. What is your idea, why is it a good idea, and why should this person back it? Today's reading sees Jesus effectively asked to make such a pitch, by a hostile group of Pharisees, but rather than an invention or book proposal being scrutinised, it was Jesus himself.

These past few weeks have seen us work our way through a section of Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus has been placed under intense pressure. While teaching in the Jerusalem Temple, throughout what we now call Holy Week, he'd been challenged by the establishment, by representatives of the two major schools of Jewish thought in his day, and by lackies from Herod's puppet government, whose strings were pulled by the occupying Roman Empire. Now, we are told that a group of Pharisees had decided to have one last throw of the dice, and put Jesus to the test by getting a lawyer – which, in that context, meant an expert in the Law of Moses – to ask Jesus about which of the six-hundred-and-thirteen commandments within the written Law was the greatest. This was actually a fairly standard question to ask a Rabbi, and so it's hard to see how it was much of a 'test' (Matthew 22:35). Jesus's equivalent of an elevator pitch summed up what, for him, underpinned and unified not just the Law of Moses but the work of the Prophets, too. In other words, the two pillars of Judaism (Law and Prophets) were, as Tom Wright puts it, commentary on the two great commandments – love God with all you've got, and love other people as you love yourself (Matthew 22:37 – 40).

To get to grips with the vision Jesus was pitching, and which shaped how he was redefining what it meant to be the people of God and a light to the nations, we need to both look at the background of these two commandments and understand how they relate to one another as a 'unit'. The first selection comes from Deuteronomy 6:1 – 9, and

forms part of the *Shema* prayer that Jews recited twice daily. It goes like this, 'Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone; you shall love the LORD your God with all of your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength' (Deuteronomy 6:5). Note that, in this worldview, the heart is the source of the intellect, will and intentions, the soul's the centre of vitality, consciousness and emotion, and the Hebrew translated 'strength' means 'greatly' or 'exceedingly'. Thus, this verse means, 'Love the LORD your God with total commitment, with your whole self and to complete excess'. Matthew makes a little change, swapping Deuteronomy's 'strength' for 'mind'. Yet, the core message remains the same; love for God is a disposition and a way of life. It is all-consuming, and is demonstrated in words and actions.

The second commandment comes from Leviticus 19:18. It points to a world in which holiness is characterised by both social justice and practical care for one another, and by quoting this one verse, Jesus arguably imports the wider context of Leviticus 19. It covers a range of concerns such as adequate food provision for the poorest and for resident aliens within Israel, the needs for honesty and integrity, not reviling disabled people, or giving biased or corrupt judgments, and not seeking vengeance. In other words, love for neighbour is shown to connect to a passion for justice and practical concerns. In neither commandment does Jesus intend a focus upon warm fuzzy feelings either for God or other people, but instead he looks to address those issues of exclusion and injustices in Israel. They were called, in the words of Micah, to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. Jesus's choice of commandments very much reflects this.

How do they fit together? Well, as the late John Hull argued, though they're not identical, because the latter fulfils the former, they're two sides of the same coin. To look at this another way, the former is a vertical relationship and the latter a horizontal relationship, which in practice lead to us the same centre. Put together, they demonstrate that loving service and pursuing social justice on the one hand, and

proclaiming Christ as Lord and Saviour on the other, aren't mutually exclusive, but reflections of the same commitment to God. Bringing these two texts together places, to quote John Hull, an "unqualified, one-directional, non-theological obligation" on us. In other words, to love Christ *is* to love our neighbour, without expecting anything back in return, and without applying cop-outs or selectivity.

So, Jesus was pitching an all-encompassing vision for what it meant to belong to the people of God. A total commitment to God and total commitment to others are two sides of the same coin; they both link up with the vision of the Kingdom of God, which was breaking in via Jesus's very person. Love is lived faithfulness, and love is an active compassion (Carter). It isn't a retreat from the world, and as we see as we read on in the journey of Holy Week, it is a bodily commitment as much as a spiritual one. It is worth noting that the commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves is sometimes read as saying that we need to love ourselves, which is a notion that makes sense amid the individualised world we now live, but would not have made much sense within the Hebrew mindset. The latter was collective in nature and worked on something like the African principle of *ubuntu* – 'I am because we are'. What we can say is that we are called to recognise how much God loves us, and that when our world doesn't reflect the justice of God, then we all have a collective responsibility to change. Certainly, looking at Jesus himself shows the value that God places on every single person, without exception or qualification.

So, there was a lot packed into that elevator pitch Jesus gave to the Pharisees who sought to test him. I wonder, if you were asked to do something similar and sum up in a few words what faith is about for you, what would you say? For me, encountering Christ and learning to trust that I am indeed lovable was life changing. I'd grown up with a residual belief that I was basically a bad person, something which was reinforced by later experiences of abuse. It took me a long time to learn to trust that God's love is real, and that there is not a 'hidden

agenda' at work with God. I have some days where I really struggle; I can't pretend that everything is now rainbows and roses. However, I do know that no matter what happens, I am a beloved child of God, and nobody can take that away from me; that would form my version of an elevator pitch, or a brief summary of why I bother with this faith business in a world that often doesn't get it.

What would you say?

Prayers of Renewal

You're invited to use the hymn 'Show Me How to Stand for Justice' (StF 713) as a prompt for prayer, particularly in relation to your own commitment to seeking justice.

Recommended Resource of the Week

The 2014 film *Selma* is the story of Martin Luther King Jr. and of the campaign for civil rights in 1960s America.

Prayers of Intercession

God of courage and imagination,
we bring our prayers for the world you have created to you,
trusting in the power of your love to renew and make whole.
God of justice, **hear our prayer.**

For all people surviving in places of war and conflict,
we pray for sanctuary, peace and the courage to keep going.
God of justice, **hear our prayer.**

For all people living in regions blighted by natural disasters,
we pray for timely aid, safety and the strength to rebuild.
God of justice, **hear our prayer.**

For all people exercising power and authority over others,
we pray for wisdom, compassion and selfless service.
God of justice, **hear our prayer.**

For all people without a safe home in which to live and rest,
we pray for good housing, freedom from abuse and hope.
God of justice, **hear our prayer.**

For all people who cannot find peace due to mental ill health,
we pray for security, calm and the support needed to recover.
God of justice, **hear our prayer.**

For all people seeking to share the good news of God's love,
we pray for commitment, resilience and integrity of living.
God of justice, **hear our prayer.**

For all people facing illness, anxiety or loneliness today,
we pray for healing, comfort and meaningful connection.
God of justice, **hear our prayer.**

In a time of quiet, we offer our own personal prayers...

Lord's Prayer

Blessing