



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 needed to leave something(s) behind to be a follower of Jesus? What happened, and how did this experience shape you?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 138

I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;
**I bow down towards your holy temple, and give thanks
to your name for your steadfast love and faithfulness;**
for you have exalted your name and your word
above everything.

**On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of soul.**

All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord,
for they have heard the words of your mouth.

**They shall sing of the ways of the Lord,
for great is the glory of the Lord.**

For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly;
but the haughty he perceives from far away.

**Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;**
you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me.

The Lord will fulfil his purpose for me;

your steadfast love, O Lord, endures for ever.

Do not forsake the work of your hands.

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 abundance, who calls and equips us as we follow,
we bring to you that in our lives and in the life of the world
in need of your renewal and restoration:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the times we've failed to love one another:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the injustices and oppression in our world:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the failings and disunity of your Church:
Restore us and heal us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of transformation and hope,
you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.
Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and call us ever forward on the way. **Amen**

Readings Isaiah 6:1 – 13
 Luke 5:1 – 11

Sermon

I wonder if you've ever experienced something which took you very much by surprise, and changed the direction of your life? For some, God's calling does indeed take place in rather dramatic and sudden fashion, such as with Paul's experience of being blinded on the road to Damascus. This turned him from someone who'd persecuted the earliest churches zealously, into a passionate apostle of Christ. Yet, in the aftermath of his roadside meeting with the Risen Jesus, it took several years for him to be properly prepared to start his missionary journeys. Working out what it means to follow Jesus takes time, and requires discernment, whether we've had a 'conversion experience' like Paul or been through a more gradual process. For me, years of wrestling with God and struggling against it all preceded deciding to candidate, and I expected somebody to turn around and tell me that I was being daft. However, no-one did, and so here I am now!

Today's lectionary readings present us with two examples of people being called by God and given jobs to do. On the face of it, they are quite different stories – Isaiah's vision is awe-inspiring and dramatic in equal measure, whereas Simon Peter's meeting with Jesus takes place in the midst of everyday life. However, upon closer inspection,

there are several connections between the two, despite the roughly eight-hundred-year interval in between Isaiah's heavenly vision and Peter's surprising fishing trip. Let's take a look at four such links.

Firstly, both were called in challenging circumstances for the people of God. We can date Isaiah's vision because of the reference within its first verse to the death of King Uzziah from the southern kingdom of Judah, in 742 BCE. A couple of years later, the Assyrians initiated forced resettlements of citizens from the northern kingdom of Israel, culminating in the destruction of their capital city – Samaria – in 722 BCE. The backdrop to this account of Isaiah's calling (or maybe his recommissioning depending on what one makes of it coming as late as chapter six) was thus a period of huge turbulence. What is more, it was probably written down just before or around the time at which Judah was also carried off into exile, in Babylon, and the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed for the first time – approximately six-hundred years before the events described in our passage from Luke. God's people were once again enduring occupation, this time round at the hands of the Roman Empire, and Peter's ministry took place against this backdrop of ongoing difficult times.

Secondly, both experiences were more than a little unexpected, and unusual. Isaiah's vision starts out taking place right in the very heart of the Jerusalem Temple, in the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest was normally permitted to venture. However, it soon became a heavenly vision of the glory of God, in which God's holiness needs to be pictured in terms of God's being set apart from sin and impurity rather than in terms of ethical behaviour. Presented with this, Isaiah recognises both his own shortcomings and those of the people, and yet his lips are made clean with a burning hot coal from the altar. It reminds me of the image of 'refiner's fire' in Malachi, and given how words were a prophet's stock-in-trade, it suggests the words of God were burnt onto Isaiah's lips. I wonder how many of us can honestly say that God's word is burnt onto our lips?

Turning to our New Testament reading invites us into a story of what began as an ordinary day for Peter, James and John, albeit a rather disappointing one. Despite their knowledge of familiar home waters, and all their skills as fishermen, a long night's hard work had yielded nothing in return. They encountered Jesus in teaching mode, being followed by large crowds. Indeed, Peter allowed Jesus to make use of his boat as a teaching platform, before being told to head out into deep waters, and let their nets down one more time. I imagine Peter and company being really tired, and reluctant to do this, but deciding that they had nothing to lose by giving it a go. As it was, they caught so many fish that both boats working together struggled to cope with their payload. It's interesting that, by telling us this story, Luke builds significantly upon its earlier parallel in Mark's Gospel, and it appears that the superabundance of fish is a part of the symbolism – just like the feeding of the five thousand, there's something here that's about the abundance and overflowing richness of the kingdom of God. So, both these stories depict out-of-the-ordinary events.

Thirdly, both calling narratives point toward God's grace. Faced with the holiness and majesty of God's glory, the prophet Isaiah was able to recognise not just the people's failings, but his own shortcomings, too. In my experience, it is far easier to spot the faults of others than to recognise one's own – I guess that is why Jesus taught about not highlighting the specks in our neighbour's eyes when there is a dirty great big plank in our own! Talking of Jesus, I imagine Peter, James and John being both amazed and scared by their miraculous catch, and wondering just who this Jesus was, as they did when he calmed the storm. While it would be a fair while later when Peter proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, he nonetheless realised that he was sharing his boat with somebody extraordinary, because he recognised there and then his own shortcomings and failings. I wonder if what we are looking at here is a story prefiguring his later threefold denial of even knowing Jesus? Either way, Isaiah and Peter each knew their need

of God's grace, having glimpsed the glories of God in their particular ways.

Fourthly and finally, both were given difficult tasks to do by God. It's notable that the first eight verses of our Isaiah reading are frequently used, not least the part in which Isaiah offers to be sent out for God; indeed, this is one of those suggested readings for use in ordination services. However, we usually stop at verse eight, and leave out the really hard verses in the rest of the chapter that seem to point ahead towards exile, and desolation. Perhaps this happens because we're uncomfortable with texts about God's judgment, or because we just prefer the more hopeful sentiments recounted in the Advent season in particular. Yet, if we miss out the tough verses then we lose a key aspect of our calling as Christians – sometimes, faithfulness to God means saying things which those around us don't wish to hear. Note that Isaiah says little in response – this is about God, not him.

Having been told by Jesus not to be afraid, Peter's calling to fish for people (Luke 5:10) might well sound far easier than the task allotted to the Prophet Isaiah. However, reading on in Luke's Gospel shows us how this was not the case; having left everything behind to follow Jesus, Peter and his friends would have their worldview challenged deeply by the things Jesus said and did. He crossed the boundaries separating people considered 'outcasts' from those whose certainty that they were part of God's 'in-crowd' blinded them to God's grace. He told them stories which fired their imaginations – just as they still have the power to do today! – and he refused to turn from his course when his words and deeds generated hostility. Finally, he turned all their (and our) ideas about God's almightiness upside down through revealing the fullness of God's love with arms outstretched upon the cross. There was nothing easy about fishing for people with Jesus!

So, what are we to make of all this today? Well, there is much which one might say. Like both Isaiah and Peter, we're living through times

of turbulence and change, where the future is not certain. Like them, many of us have experienced God's calling at work in our own lives, often in ways we couldn't have predicted. And, like them, God might well give us challenging tasks to do. After all, amidst an increasingly polarised society, standing for social justice and upholding the value of all people in the eyes of God was never going to be an easy task! However, for today, I would like to focus on God's grace. Both Isaiah and Peter knew their need of grace, and were aware of their failings and faults. Yet, God was able to use them both to make a difference in the world. Like them, none of us is perfect and contrary to popular expectations on occasion, this also includes the clergy – if anything, I have become more aware of my need of God's grace over time.

Friends, the 'bottom line' here is that we cannot do anything to make God love us any less, and we cannot do anything to make God love us any more than God already does. Whether we know it or not and whether we like it or not, we're simply held by a love that will not let us go, and because of what God's done for us in Jesus Christ, we're able to be caught up in a movement of forgiveness, and growth, that refines us and frees us to fish for people. Some of us may well have experienced this calling as a dramatic event, like some of those we have explored today, while other people might have found a gradual unfolding of God's purpose within our lives. Either way, God's grace goes before us, and calls us onward. Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

God of immeasurable love, who brings wholeness and hope,
we bring our prayers for others to you.

Where there is war, conflict and bitterness,
we call upon you to bring true peace and reconciliation.

Where there is injustice, hatred and division,
we call upon you to make real justice rain down upon us.

Where there is misuse of, and a lack of care for, your world,
we call upon you to open our eyes and change our hearts.

Where there is abuse of power and exploitation of the poor,
we call upon you to humble the mighty, and lift up the lowly.

Where there is suffering, pain and disease,
we call upon you to empower us to bring care, skill and relief.

Where there is stagnation and fear of change in your Church,
we call upon you to renew us, and transform us for good.

And now, in a time of quiet and stillness,
we lift the concerns of our hearts this day to you, loving God.

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**