

Every Day is New

PRAYERS & REFLECTIONS
FOR ORDINARY TIME

MICHAEL MCGIRR



*For Sr Angela Slattery and Sr Jane Kelly –
seekers of truth and doers of justice*

This book was written on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation.
The author and publisher pay their respects to elders past and present.



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Introduction

One Life, a movie directed by James Hawes (2023), tells the true story of Nicholas Winton, the kind of figure who gives us all hope. There isn't a spark of glamour or a moment of self-promotion in his entire life. He is the kind of person you would never notice on the bus. Nevertheless, he managed to save over 690 Jewish children from Prague in the days of Nazi horror. The film shows how Winton created community, a network of tenacious people who made this possible. For all his modesty, he was not easily deterred.

At one time, Winton says, 'I am an ordinary man, and we are an army of the ordinary.'

An army of the ordinary can achieve far more than a parade of people with an inflated sense of their own importance. We are fed by the baker who turns up every day at 4 am while most of us are still asleep, not by the celebrity with a carefully crafted image.

The Christian community mostly comprises ordinary people. Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to yeast in bread (Matt 13:33). You never notice the yeast itself, but it makes the whole loaf rise and become lighter. It is spread throughout the mixture, not kept in one sealed-off section of it. Jesus was a poet with a gift for wonderful imagery: the seed, the pearl, the treasure, the fish and so on. Yeast is a terrific image. It makes me think of people who faithfully serve the community, year in and year out. Ordinary people can be quite extraordinary.

When we consider the Christian year, this is not quite the meaning that gives rise to the expression 'ordinary time'. Ordinary Time refers to the 33 or 34 weeks of the year that are neither Advent, Lent nor Easter time. It is not fair to think of Ordinary Time as the leftovers. After all,

Ordinary Time includes over half the year and embraces all sorts of special days and feasts, including the Season of Creation in September.

In this context, the word 'ordinary' means 'in order', reflecting our belief that the orderly marking of time is one of the ways we prevent life from falling into random chaos. Every year, our Easter candle has an *alpha* and *omega* inscribed on it, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. They represent the first and last moments of time. In between is inscribed the current year, a mere whistlestop on the long journey from the beginning to the end of the universe. We use time to find our place, to celebrate order.

This is a natural thing to do and extends far beyond religious communities: birthdays, anniversaries and even monthly meetings are among the ways nearly everyone makes order around the world. It is also part of our living in tune with the sun, moon and stars. Seasons come and go; no sooner has one year ended than another begins. We are all creatures, and our sense of natural order helps us recognise our small part in creation. Ordinary Time is a celebration of our creatureliness.

Nevertheless, there is still something profound about the very experience of ordinariness. In one of his best-known poems, George Herbert (1593–1633) conjures up many images of prayer. One of them is 'heaven in ordinary'. Our faith begins with an ordinary young woman, in an ordinary house, in an ordinary town saying yes to the most outlandish invitation. It continues with our own daily experience of God, a subtle, elusive and beautiful presence. God sits with us, eats with us, walks with us and works with us. Every

breath renews God's gift of life to us. We have a deep need for a daily stillness that allows us to recognise this, even if only for a few minutes. The singer and activist, Bono, writes beautifully about prayer in his memoir, *Surrender* (2022):

It's an extraordinary thing the moment of surrender. To get down on your knees and ask the silence to save you, to reveal itself to you. To kneel down, to implore, to throw yourself out into space, to quietly whisper or roar your insignificance. To fall prostrate and ask to be carried. To humble yourself with your family, your bandmates, and to discover if there's a face or name to that silence.

Prayer is soil

The poet Mia Anderson has been at different times an actor, a shepherd and a priest. She has a wonderful work called, 'Prayer Is Scrubbing'. It ends with the line, 'Prayer is soil.' That gets me thinking.

Like soil, prayer is a place from which things grow. It is also a place we get dirty: when we pray, we get down on our knees, take off our gloves and put our hands deep into the earth of life and mystery. Prayer, like soil, must be protected. It can easily be blown away by the winds of busyness and preoccupation. It also takes time, as does compost. None of our experiences of life should go into landfill. Nor should they necessarily be recycled. It is better to put them all in the compost bin and allow the worms of grace to transform them into something that gives life.

There is nothing ordinary about this. But it happens in Ordinary Time.

How you might use this book

For years, I have used the same simple structure for daily prayer. It has five steps.

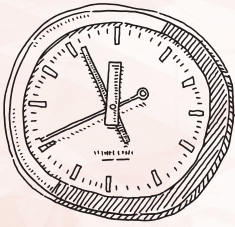
- Be still. Time to switch off.
- Be grateful. This day and everything in it is a gift.
- Be open. Read the scripture slowly, listening deeply.
- Be honest. Respond from your heart.
- Be hopeful. Let your prayer travel with you as you leave.

This small book is an invitation to surrender by taking a little time on the weekdays in Ordinary Time to read the Gospel of the day and take stock of where God might be at work and at play in the ordinary experience of the day. Luckily, the Gospels for the weekdays in Ordinary Time are the same from year to year. You need a copy of the New Testament to go alongside this book. Rather, this book goes alongside the New Testament.

This book is written in the belief that *every day is new*, that God might be humming a slightly different tune in your ear than yesterday or tomorrow. God fills the present with a song, a fragrance, a whisper, a touch. We are blessed if we can appreciate God's more subtle flavours. That is what prayer is for.

There are plenty of reflections available for Advent, Lent and Easter, and many of them are terrific. There are not so many available for Ordinary Time. Hence this book, which comes as much from my need to find a structure for prayer as from anywhere else.

Each week contains a simple image. These are all pictures of graffiti and street art, some of them simple and others more elaborate. They are reminders that we are part of a broader community in which everyone is trying to create an environment of meaning. Many of these works are here today and gone tomorrow. They are included as an invitation to keep looking outwards as well as inwards.



Week 2

It's only a short time since we made our new year's resolutions. Perhaps you don't take part in that kind of thing. Perhaps you've made so many resolutions over the years and haven't kept them. You have lived inside your own head and heart for a long time and now you are ready to laugh a little at your own unrealistic expectations of yourself. Maybe this year, at long last, you are ready to leave some of the decisions to God.

In a laneway behind a shopping centre, somebody has painted the words 'Good' and 'thanks'. They have taken time over it. The words are colourful and bright, cheering up the area behind the shops where there is no need for window dressing and signs with special offers. There is welcome among the weeds.

These two words could be a great resolution for the year. To see the good in the world and in people. To taste the good in every meal. To feel the good in every hug. To hear the good in what people are really trying to say, even when it comes out wrong. And, above all, to give thanks. Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good.

Mark's Gospel, our companion in these days, is an endless stream of encounters with people and places. Jesus moved around at a colossal speed. He found good everywhere. He was grateful for it.



Monday
Mark 2:19–22

‘New wine into fresh skins!’

Jesus calls us to take a risk. The Pharisees, who were good people, became stuck in a narrow and inflexible way of understanding God. Jesus believed that there are times to live in the moment, to celebrate the opportunities life presents us, whether that is the new beginning of a wedding or just a glass of wine! Let us venture boldly into the arms of an adventurous God.

Tuesday
Mark 2:23–28

‘Have you never read ...’

Jesus really knew Scripture. The story of David spoke to him powerfully. Jesus understood that there is much more in Scripture than rules and regulations. There are moments of breathtaking freedom and creativity. The Pharisees seemed to have forgotten that. They found Jesus threatening, as – to be honest – we sometimes do as well.

Wednesday
Mark 3:1–6

‘... grieved to find them so obstinate ...’

The Sabbath is a great idea. It’s more than a month since Christmas, and maybe some of us already need a bit of time off to ourselves to recharge the batteries. The wisdom of the Scriptures is terrific: life needs a rhythm, and, from the creation of the world, part of that rhythm is rest. The people Jesus met didn’t seem to understand this. Surely getting angry and plotting a murder is work. It is certainly exhausting. They couldn’t let go.

Thursday
Mark 3:7–12

‘... all who were afflicted in any way ...’

Many of us don’t like crowds, but there are plenty of ways in which we are all part of a crowd. We share more with people we don’t like than we often care to admit. We are all afflicted, and to be honest, we don’t mind pushing our way to get what we want. Let’s imagine we get a moment with Jesus to tell him about what we truly need, deep down. What would we say?

Friday

Mark 3:13–19

‘... they were to be his companions ...’

The list of names of Jesus’ closest friends is wonderful. It reminds us that nobody is just a number in the Kingdom of God. There is no recorded message saying ‘your call is important to us’ while we wait for 45 minutes to speak to a person. There is no ChatGPT to tell our story or to write our prayers. It is all personal. Jesus loved friendship. He also expected his friends to make a difference. The same applies to us this very day.

Saturday

Mark 3:20–21

‘... they said, “He is out of his mind.”’

It helps to know that even Jesus had problems with his relatives. If we haven’t argued with a relation, or been misunderstood or frustrated by one, then we don’t really know the meaning of the word ‘family’. Family is both one of God’s greatest blessings and one of his most serious challenges. Yet Scripture tells us that Jesus went home. His father, Joseph, probably made the kitchen table. It must have heard many stories.

Prayer for Week 2

God of my diary,

Help me to make time for you.

To order my life

So that the important things come first

And we spend simple time together.

Amen.