

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So, I'm going to ask you to use your imagination a little as I set the scene for this sermon. There is a richness in the readings this week, which requires us to do more than sit back and listen. Rather they beckon us into the crowd that day. So in the style of Ignatius of Loyola, I want you to move into the crowd and become a part of the story. Monitor your responses and your reactions and your willingness to participate.

Are you ready?

First of all, I want you to imagine standing in a great crowd of people, you've been gathering for a while now. You've heard Jesus speak before. You can feel the tension building, a revolution is coming, maybe even a war. You know you are sitting right on the cusp of something radical and amazing. You can feel that the world is holding its breath, just waiting in anticipation. It's coming! Its almost here.

This Jesus is beginning. You can see him preparing. He looks calm. You've heard of his speeches of radical changes in the status quo and God knows, we need some radical changes. You see, you're living on the edge of society, you are quite disenfranchised with the machine; the powers that be, that are running the place. You don't agree with their methods, their ethos, or even their approach. It seems to you, that there are two kinds of people, the ones

who are 'in' and seem to have access to everything good, even God, and those who are 'out' and seem to have no access to anything worth anything, including God, or at least the 'in crowds' idea of God. You're feeling a little angry at your lot in life. You wonder, are you always going to be the one who gets the short end of the stick, the one who misses out on the best job, the best house, the best life. You know you deserve more. You actually feel a little like Joseph's brothers, who deserted their brother to slave traders to be rid of him. They thought he got what he deserved. You're so ready to remove your obstacles. Ready to do something radical and even previously unthinkable, in order to gain a fairer life. So you've come along to listen to this charismatic guy you've heard about. The rest of the crowd are buzzing with whispers and innuendo too. Who is Jesus really? Could he really be their promised messiah; God's anointed. And if he is, could this messiah be for everyone, or just the 'in' crowd. Is it even possible? That a man can come directly from God and change the world. I mean, after all, he is one of those 'in' crowd people, but you've heard a bit about him. You know he's different to all the other Jews who claim to be coming to start the revolution.

So, you're ready to fight, maybe even die, so that your life can be better. Bring it on you say, as you take your place in the open field where he will speak. You're ready, you've even brought your short club and your long handled knife, its strapped to your back under your tunic, so the authorities

wont know that this supposedly peaceful rally is going to be the start of the new revolution. You can feel it. The air palpates with it.

Can you feel it? Can you feel the excitement building? Can you feel the hundreds, or maybe thousands of souls pressing in around you, waiting in anticipation to hear Jesus speak, and get you all moving for change? Can you feel the tension thats building?

Are you ready?

Jesus speaks. He talks about blessings to start with. He says those who are poor, hungry, crying, and persecuted, are actually blessed. Great. You want to be blessed. The tension is building with each word Jesus says.

Then Jesus says, woe to those who're already fed, rich, laughing, and part of the 'in crowd', they've already had their blessings and they wont be part of this time. Again, 'great' you think, its about time, the outsiders get a look in. In fact you look around you at the crowd which is murmuring about the prophesied one. Could Jesus really be that one that all the old scripture talks about? He certainly is changing things, you've never been in a crowd of Jews and Gentiles mixed together before, there are even a few sly romans and Pharisees there, although they don't want you to know they're there.

Maybe you're assessment of 'in' and 'out' crowds is a little wrong. Why would Jews need to hear Jesus, except that well he is a Jew. Come to think of it, why does Jesus want to talk to Gentiles like yourself? You think all these things to yourself. You don't know for sure, but you are definitely one of those who are poor. God knows you've literally got nothing. You're even one of those who's hungry. More times than you can count, you've gone to bed with no dinner. You're definitely one of those who weeps. Your lot in life seems set. You're an outsider and you'll always be an outsider and they have it rough. And you're one of the persecuted, by the Jews as well as Rome. You're not allowed to change and become who you think you're meant to be. You just know God has other plans for you, but you're constantly held down by someone else's idea of idealism, or the system, or the machine. Bring it on, Jesus, you think!

Yet?

No, no, you're still ready to fight. Surely that's what this Jesus guy is asking of you. He wants you to get your swords out and fight, doesn't he? Surely this is the beginning of the social revolution that's coming? You touch the knife on your back, the club in your hand, you're ready to pull the mighty from their thrones and lift up the lowly. You feel the crowd's anticipation rising, palpable.

But hang on a minute, what's Jesus saying now?

“Love your enemies!” Wait, what?

What, love your enemies.

‘Wait. What did you say Jesus?’

“Love your enemies,” Jesus repeats. “Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you.”

What? Hang on a minute. Aren’t we going to fight, you think to yourself.

Someone yells out to Jesus. “Can you be a bit more specific?”

“Sure, no worries” Jesus replies.

“If someone hits you in the face, turn your cheek and let them do it again.

And, if anyone takes away your coat, give them your shirt too. Give to anyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your stuff, don’t ask for it back.

Wait, what? What is Jesus saying. What kind of revolution is he talking about.

Jesus continues, louder than before. “Do to others as you would have them do to you; treat others how you want to be treated”.

Now hang on just a darn minute. Surely you’ve misheard him.

But no. The tone of the crowd has changed. Some of that pent up tension is dissipating. It’s like the crowd’s collective breath is being let go.

The next words out of Jesus’ mouth seem to cement to you and the crowd, what he’s really meaning and wanting you all to know.

Jesus says, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from those who’ll give in return, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners to receive their reward. But I say, love your enemies, do good, and lend to everyone, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God the Father, is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, just as he is kind to the mighty and great and the sad and downtrodden. Be merciful, as your Father is merciful.”

This is hard to get your head around, but you start to realise what Jesus is doing and saying? He is setting up a dichotomy between those sinners who do good because they expect to be rewarded, and those children of God who do good just because that’s what they have seen their Father do. “God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked,” Jesus says. So be like that. Be more than nice. Be merciful, as your Father is merciful. Be compassionate and enter into their pain”.

“What! I’m supposed to have merciful for those who have made my life hell for well, years. Hang on a minute. I’m supposed to lend and give, even to those who have everything and I have nothing. I’m supposed to let another smack me and then turn and let them smack me again. What does this mean?”

“Well Jesus did say that God loves even sinners as well as us downtrodden. Maybe, I’m not just the downtrodden, maybe I’m also a sinner. I love my family, but not those who persecute me. I lend to my friends, cause I know I’ll get something back, even if it takes a while. Could I lend to the soldiers, or a Jew? Would they lend to me? And I’ve been smacked plenty of times by those filthy soldiers. Does God really want me to stand there and let them hit me twice? This is tough!”

How am I supposed to be merciful; compassionate? How do I “feel not only for you, but with you and in you”: this compassion is a visceral sharing of another’s pain. I think this is what Jesus is asking of us. He even says that this is what God does, and is doing. We should do this.

As a side note, Jesus says that God feels everyone’s pain?

Jesus concludes, “Love your enemies”. I don’t know if I can do this one. ‘Love your enemies’, as God already does.

Paul says in Romans that “while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” And what he means is that when we were the enemies of God, God felt our pain, and suffered along with us, and was moved to do something radical. He didn’t punish us, that doesn’t work. What he did was send his son Jesus, who took the hammer-blows of our anger. And he took them like he knew they weren’t really meant for him. He knew they were the blows of all the rage and sorrow

and hatred and fear we have ever felt, and even though those blows nailed him to the cross and killed him, in the end, with our rage wrung out like a dishcloth, we fell into the arms of the one we had killed and find ourselves saved in his embrace.

It is not a social revolution Jesus has in mind when he preaches this sermon on the plain, or the call to arms of an army, its the kind, compassionate and everlasting establishment of God's Kingdom. It's the new 'in' where actually there isn't an 'out'. We are all already a part of this kingdom, because thats why Christ died and was resurrected in the first place, the last place and the only place, so that we don't have to be. We don't have to be part of groups, of in or out people. Jesus did good to those who hated him. He blessed those who cursed him. He prayed for those who abused him. He was a chip off the old divine block, and he calls us to be the same.

Jesus says, "Don't judge and you won't be judged, Don't condemn and you won't be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given back to you. For the measure you give will be the measure you get." Or to put it another way, "what goes around comes around." But don't be misled. Jesus isn't saying that what goes around to others is what will come around from them. It's not karma, or revenge, or even spite. No, he is saying let love go around to others no matter what comes around to you, even if what comes around to you is crucifixion. Because what you give to others is what God

gives to you. If you can “feel with” others, even your enemies—then what you get back from God will be a God-sized share of the same.

At least, that’s what Jesus says as he gathers those around him, for a new kind of revolution.

And he—above anyone else—should know.

Amen.