

Before we go to the plain to continue to hear what Jesus has to say to the crowds from last week, I have a question. Do you ever read those signs or labels on things, those warning signs and labels? Some of them are simply fascinating. Some of them make you stop and wonder just why they have been put there.

For example, that sign unique to Australia which on highways says “Wrong Way Go Back” I have to admit that every time I notice that sign in my rear-view mirror, a lot of images go through my head! Or the label on the pushchair that says, “Remove child before folding.” Are you like me and just have to wonder what made it necessary for that sign and label? Or maybe the warning on the jet ski that says, “Never use a lit match to check fuel level.” Or one of my favourites is the warning label on a bottle of dog medication for my pet dog Eddy that read, “May cause drowsiness. Use care when operating a car.” Or one closer to home on our Memorial Garden which used to say: DOGS, KEEP OF THE GRASS. I never realised Kew dogs were so intelligent that they could read!

The reason I am thinking about these is because today’s scripture comes with a deadly serious warning label of its own and before we go to the Gospel, I want you to be aware of the warning that reads, “Hearing and thinking about this passage may lead to feelings of restlessness and loss of sleep.” With that said, let’s go back to the Gospel.

We remember from last week that the crowd had come to the plain to hear Jesus and as usual was a wide mix of people. There were people from nearby towns, as well as foreign travellers who had come from the nearby trade route just a few miles to the north. There were poor people and there were rich people. There were people of power, standing in the front of the crowd wearing their robes with their servants nearby, and there were the poor, sick, and powerless, who struggled to find the energy to stand in the rear of the crowd. Jesus has been talking with them, and the last thing he said about woes which we heard last week has really angered those powerful people; you can see it very clearly in their faces. Some of them are so angry they have stormed away.

When the commotion has settled, Jesus gets ready to speak again. And this time he seems to be looking more at the other group, the powerless group, the people who have suffered, and right now are feeling pretty good after hearing Jesus tell those big shots they were doomed. Some are smiling for the first time in a long time, soaking up the warm feeling of, even in a small way, getting even. They are waiting to hear Jesus hit them again.

And then Jesus speaks to them. I’ll paraphrase it just a bit. “To those of you of who are still listening, I say this: you need to love your enemies and be good to those who hate you. Say a prayer for those who curse you and mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, don’t get angry or hit them back, but stay calm and do not let them cause you to do them harm. If someone takes your coat, offer to give them your shirt too. If someone asks you for help, give them help, no matter who they are. And if anyone takes something that belongs to you, don’t let them make you angry and do harm, but just let them have it. Remember, think about how you want other people to treat you, and be sure that you treat them that same way.”

Now, let’s step back a second. Can you see the faces? They were expecting either another attack aimed at those people in the robes, or at least some words of praise for those of who have suffered so much. They look confused. We can hear, “What’s this? Love them? *Them*? You don’t mean

*them?* You can't be serious. Not that group over there that was in the big cart that passed me on the way here this morning and almost ran over me. They made me jump into the ditch and didn't even care. You can't be talking about them. Pray for them? Be serious."

Then Jesus continued, and again, I'll paraphrase just a bit. "If you love those people who love you, what credit should you get for that? Even sinners love the people who love them. And if you do good things to those people who do good things to you, what credit should you get for that? Even sinners do that. And if you only lend something to someone you know is going to pay you back with interest, what credit should you get for that? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But I'll say it again. Love your enemies. Do good to them and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. If you do that your reward will be great, and you will be a child of God. Because remember, God is kind to the ungrateful and wicked, and you are to be merciful, just as God is merciful." Can you hear the reaction? "You have got to be kidding me. This all sounds very nice but it just isn't reality. What kind of fool would lend money and not expect to be paid back? And how big of an idiot would I be if someone hits me on the cheek, and I just stand there and let them do it again? You see, this is where Jesus just makes no sense at all. Okay, I understand the part about praying for them, or even doing my best to be nice to them when they are around. But there has to be a limit somewhere."

To be honest, I'm not sure if I'm hearing those things said from the plain or from here with us this morning. But they are fair words, and fair feelings. Is Jesus serious about this? There have to be limits to how much we take, don't there?

Yes, there are limits to what we take. And let me be clear, because I have heard this passage be used to tell people living in abusive situations that they need to stay in those situations. It may be a family relationship, or even a relationship at work, but I have heard people tell someone they should stay in that situation. That is not what Jesus is saying here. Be very clear: Jesus is not suggesting that someone who is being abused or mistreated should stay one more moment in that situation.

There will be times that we have to act, but the question is: how do we act? We do it not by trying to repay hurt with hurt but by separating ourselves from those doing the hurting. We leave. We escape. We do not allow the other person to control how we react and allow them to convince us to become like they are. We walk away. Is it easy? Absolutely not. But it allows us stay in control of our own life and be the kind of person we believe we want to be, and not become what someone else wants us to be. It may take finding help. It will certainly take courage and faith. But never misunderstand and believe that God wants anyone to remain in an abusive situation.

Sometimes, as foolish as it may sound, the greatest act of love may be to walk away. I imagine the crowd on the plain had the same thoughts some of us may be having right now, and I imagine Jesus knew that. So he explained that it was very important that they be careful to not judge others, or condemn others, but to make sure to forgive those others. He said that was most important because the reality is that we get what we give. In our modern understanding, I wonder if he might have said it is important because what we do now, is what defines the person we will be. If we spend our time hating others, even if we believe those others deserve it, we will become no more than a hater and user. If we spend our time judging others and dividing people into categories, we will become nothing more than a judge and divider. But if we spend our time, even when it goes against everything in our mind, we will be doing what God asks us to do and will become a child of God.

But remember that forgiving and loving does not mean that we need to play the fool and ignore what someone may be doing. As my mentor Fr Geoffrey Milton God rest his soul, used to say, priests must be as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves (Matthew 10:16). We do not ignore their words and behaviour, and we do not have to live with them, but we try to see the life that is living somewhere underneath, perhaps beaten down, perhaps terrified, and that seed of a new way of living is what we care about, what we try to be kind to, and what we pray about.

This is difficult. Let it speak to you, and make you feel restless, and wake you up in the middle of the night. Let it haunt you and keep reminding you that the ultimate goal for us is not judge between friend and enemy, us and them. Because the only reason to judge anything is to separate things, to divide things. And God has called us to unite things, to bring people together.

Fr Robert Newton