

“But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again” St. Luke 6. 42.

In the name of the ✠ Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

I wonder how many of us have heard this line before: “kill them with kindness”. I know that it’s something my grandfather always used to say, and I always found it a bit weird. If we’re wanting to be genuinely kind to somebody, why would we kill them? Isn’t killing somebody the opposite of being kind to them? Of course, I understand the sentiment he meant behind that phrase: just because somebody wrongs you, doesn’t mean that you react in kind, instead you take the moral high road and treat them better than they treated you.

This idea, “kill them with kindness”, is an example of “Magnanimity” – something which the Greek philosopher Aristotle described as being so much better than everyone else, you are responding to a situation better than others would be expected to. It was literally that this person had a great – if not superior – soul. It was a display of pride, that the magnanimous hero would not consciously stoop to such depths of pettiness but instead would recognize a situation and maintain the moral high ground and be *better*. Pride was a great virtue for the Greeks, and the hero could and *should* take great pride in being triumphant. As I mentioned, this concept of “magnanimity”, for Aristotle, meant that the magnanimous one was “great souled”. The “Great-Souled man is justified...” in many things, he said. He had great control and range of emotions, he was rightly proud because he was indeed a great man, he does not bear a grudge, he knows the importance of the Truth, he speaks and acts openly, since he despises other men, he is outspoken and frank.”¹ These are all examples of the Aristotelian concept of “magnanimity”.

There is also another version of “magnanimity” which is more recent. Rather than a fact that somebody *is* great-souled, the modern concept is more of a characteristic. Somebody who rushes into danger to save somebody, who volunteers themselves freely, is dignified in presence, *et cetera* is seen to be magnanimous. Aristotle’s version is almost a conscious birthright, that the great-souled man *knows* he is great-souled and thus acts upon it, whereas the more modern concept is an unconscious display of greatness of soul.

To “kill them with kindness”, then, is more a display of the Aristotelian, *prideful*, version of magnanimity. We *know* this is what we should do, so we do it, sometimes just to get under the skin of the other person. It makes us feel good that we disarmed the other with almost an “*aha! Gotcha!*” amount of kindness. But, of course, that is not the idea that my grandfather was trying to convey. Instead, I know that what he meant was to instill some of the teachings of Jesus into his children from a young age.

In our Gospel reading for today, we read the part of the Sermon on the Plain that comes just before our passage from two weeks ago. Jesus tells the people gathered, “do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you.” All that he says in this passage runs against the Aristotelian concept of magnanimity we were talking about just a few moments ago. Instead, what Jesus is teaching is a *reduction* of pride, not an increase of arrogance. In many ways, what Jesus is suggesting is embarrassing – offer your other cheek to those who hit you already, don’t ask for your things back, give to everyone who asks.

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* IV.3 “megalopsychia”, trans. H. Rackham (Loeb Classical Library).

This was different than what the people gathered to hear Jesus expected to hear. They'd been brought up under the influence of the Greek philosophers and the Romans, so being strong in body and in mind, and *showing* that strength were important societal markers. What Jesus is suggesting is to be submissive and passive. *Surely*, this can't be what he really wants to be saying, right?

But, the next part of this passage is the key to the reading: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For 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" (6.32-33). Jesus is trying to explain a way to change the status quo. If you love those who already love you, that doesn't change anything, he says, because that relationship of love was always there. And if you only do good to those who do good to you, what difference does that make? Jesus wants a change in the economy of love! He says, "Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (6.35-36). Rather than doing good things where good things were already going to happen, do good things also where bad things were going to happen! Love where there wasn't going to be any love. Each time, there is more love in the world, and you will be more like God the Father who is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.

In this light, then, how much better that phrase, "kill them with kindness" sounds. Jesus wants us to love where there was no love already, and that's the idea my grandfather was trying to convey. Love your enemies and those who wrong you. Maybe they're expecting you to reply in-kind with meanness but responding in love catches them off-guard. Rather than perpetuating a cycle of hate, we can inject love and change the balance of the scale.

What Jesus teaches on the plain is that you don't need to have an Aristotelian "great soul" in order to do great things. These things are not just reserved for those who were born with "greatness" in their beings but are freely available to all people who love God.

St. Paul tells us in our Epistle today that we have died with Christ in our baptisms, and that we are raised again in His resurrection to new life in Christ. Jesus "died unto sin once", and we are to "likewise reckon [ourselves] to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 6.10-11). In his Epistle to the Galatians, St. Paul also writes that "those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" and "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit" (Gal 5.25-26). By dying and rising again with Christ in our Baptisms, and by receiving the Holy Spirit, we can receive the fruits of the Spirit, that our lives may possess "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5.22-23).

So, when Jesus asks us to love our enemies and do good expecting nothing in return, he is not necessarily expecting that we do this consciously. Of course, he does want us to show love to everyone we meet, but He also expects that we put all of our faith and love and trust in God that *He* might work in us to do all these things. By loving God and loving our neighbour, the fruits of the Spirit are ours to enjoy, and those fruits defeat our own Pride by making us know that it is not us, but the Grace of God which lets us do these great things.

As we go forward from this building today, thinking about how to love our enemies and love Jesus more, there is no better prayer to ask than our Collect appointed for today, so as we remain seated, let us pray:

O GOD, who hast prepared for them that love thee such good things as pass man's understanding: Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we, loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for Trinity VI)