Years ago, someone in the Church of England thought that what would really get the young kids back would be to make Jesus more edgy. And so, they came out with a campaign featuring Jesus gussied up to look like Che Guevara and featuring a slogan which read, “Meek. Mild. As if.” Maybe it sounded more awesome when it came out back in 1999 but with age it seems to have all the edginess of the time when Gidget’s band on the old 60’s TV show went gothic (season 1, episode 19 if you want to watch). The ad campaign makes fun of itself so I won’t pile on except to point out how warped our view can be about the revolutionary nature of Jesus’ ministry. To be revolutionary you don’t have to wear a beret, read Lenin, or shoot people in the back of the head as Che liked to do. In fact, I would say some of the most revolutionary words of Jesus may actually fall into the meek and mild description that the Church of England was trying so hard to distance itself from.

For example, in today’s Gospel we have some of those words from Jesus and they seem pretty counter cultural, which in a sense makes them revolutionary. The passage comes from the Sermon on the Plain which is Luke’s less famous version of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says among other things, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.” He is basically telling us to not do all of the things we love doing so much; the things that we may know are wrong but have become so good at justifying we are not even sure if they are bad. But if we actually followed these words, social media would probably collapse, because if you can’t condemn and judge what it the point of participating in social media. Those companies can’t survive solely on people making their lives look more interesting than they actually are. But beyond the economic ramifications of the three seemingly meek and mild things that Jesus lays out for us, they are also probably some of the most difficult things to do and would be truly revolutionary if we actually did them. If Jesus’ admonitions were an Olympic Sport, besides the Russians finding a way to cheat, the degree of difficulty would be a ten. It is so hard to not judge, to not condemn and to forgive. And I don’t specifically know that there is one comprehensive explanation why this is so difficult, I do think part of the reason starts with the fact that all of the things Jesus is asking of us are solely dependent on us. It is something over which we seemingly have one hundred percent control – our thoughts and our speech. If Jesus said in the sermon on the plain that we all needed to go out and run a four-minute mile then we could rightly say that is something we cannot do. Because only a very small portion of this earth is genetically capable of doing so. But there is no such impediment to forgiving, to not judging and to not condemning. The only impediment comes from us. But it is a really big impediment. And so why is this? Why don’t we like to forgive or to stop condemning and judging? I think besides it being solely our responsibility another major part of it comes down to the ways in which we perceive faults in ourselves and faults in others. Jesus identified this phenomenon when he said, “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye?” Other people’s faults are so much more fun than our own. Partly because pointing out others faults really does not cost us anything and it can have the added bonus of making us feel better about ourselves. Because if everyone else is horrible then we look pretty good. It’s like the guy who gets pulled over for speeding who asks the policeman, “Why are you harassing me and not out capturing the real criminals?” As humans we love to measure our self-worth in comparison to others and the cheapest way to raise our status is in the same way Jeff Gillooly sought to increase Tonya Harding’s chances for gold. We may not actually whack Nancy Kerrigan’s right thigh with a telescopic baton but the idea is the same. We can rise up or we can make everyone else sink. Judging, condemning and not forgiving are all ways to signal that someone’s worth is lower than ours. So how do we make the pivot, how do we switch from worrying about everyone else and the wrongs they have done to forgiving and not condemning?

In Ancient Greece and Rome there was a school of philosophy known as Stoicism. One of their central teachings was that we should only concern ourselves with the things we could control and the two things we had most control over were our thoughts and our feelings. They went further and said that said we really needed to shed ourselves of the feelings part because it distorted our ability to think. I don’t fully agree with the Stoics, as I believe that emotion is part of what makes us human, but I do think that it is often emotion that can get in the way of our ability to let things go. We somehow feel that if we forgive or fail to condemn, we are letting someone get away with something. And we simply cannot have that. The reason for why we can’t have it can be a little murky but our emotions tell us that it is a really big deal. My emotions tell me that it is incredibly important for me to still be mad at Tony Stamolis for something he did back in 6th grade. Even though I have not seen him since the mid 80’s and am not entirely sure that he is still alive. We have all heard the clichés and medical research about why we should follow Jesus’ admonitions and so I don’t think anyone needs persuading that it is the right thing to do, the problem is putting it into practice. And part of the problem is that the instinct to resist is a very old one. If you look at what the serpent dangled in front of Eve it was not a new set of steak knives but was rather the ability to know good from evil and to be like God. Knowing good from evil, or at least the belief that we know it, is the key to being able to judge and condemn. And the reason we want it, is because on some level we want to be like God, we want to say how the world should be run. But ultimately, being like God is a responsibility we are not capable of fulfilling because we neither have perfect knowledge nor an ability to disconnect our emotions from our judgements. Putting us in charge of judgement is to paraphrase the late great P.J. O’Rourke like giving whiskey and car keys to teenage boys.

I wish I could give three magic steps to get us to follow Jesus’ admonition today, but I cannot. I can explain why I think we have so much trouble doing and the ramifications for us not doing it, but the actual doing is very hard. But that does not mean that it is not worth pursuing. I will end with one little suggestion that I picked up from Frances de Sales in his book *Introduction to the Devout Life*. He said at the end of every day we should do a spiritual inventory and ask ourselves what we did well and what needs some help. And those things that we find need some help pray for God’s grace and God’s guidance so we can be his, this day and forevermore.