

WEEK 1: MONDAY

The worst mistake we can make about this famous and stunning passage is to see it as a list of rules (you've got to try hard to be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, and so on). It isn't. It's a royal announcement that God is turning the world upside down — or, rather, the right way up.

Come with me into the crowd that has followed Jesus away from the villages and up onto the hillside. What are we hearing? What does it mean to us?

We've been longing for this moment, you see, but we didn't know what it was going to be like. For generations we've all been taught that one day our God, the maker of heaven and earth, would come back to us and set everything right. But as time has gone on it's looked more and more as though he's forgotten us. Arrogant foreign soldiers have pushed their way into our land. Other nations, with their strange and lurid cultures, have taken over some of our towns and changed them into places where decent people wouldn't want to go. And the taxes they make us pay! Anyone would think we were still slaves, instead of God's free people.

But nobody quite knew what it would look like when God came back to us. Some people have said it would be like a great pillar of cloud and fire. Some have said he'd come riding at the head of a great army to defeat the horrible people who are making our lives miserable. Some have even said that we'd better not wait any longer, that perhaps God wants us to act first and then he'll come and help us.

So when we heard about this prophet who was going round the villages healing people and saying that the sovereign rule of heaven was now on the way, we were really excited. What's his plan? What's he saying is going to happen?

And now he's telling us that God is indeed on the move — and that people like us are going to come out on top! We've had our spirits crushed all right; we've been sorrowful, we've been longing for God's way to triumph. It's been a hunger eating away at us inside. And now he's saying that the poor in spirit will inherit heaven's kingdom, that the sorrowful will be comforted, that the hungry will be satisfied. All right! This is what we've been waiting for! But how will it happen? What do we have to do? What are his plans for making it happen?

Well, he's saying some other things, too. He's saying that it's the meek who will inherit the earth — not the rich, the powerful, the violent or the pushy. Some people in the crowd don't like that. It sounds like a cop-out to them. And he's saying that the merciful and the peacemakers are the ones who will receive God's mercy, who will be called God's children (we think all the people of Israel are God's children; it sounds as though he's saying that God is reshaping Israel itself!). That's not going to please those who want to fight and kill to make God's will happen.

And then he's saying that it's going to be tough. People are going to hate us and persecute us. Well, we've had plenty of that already, so what's new? It sounds as though he's saying that God is doing a new thing — and that like the ancient prophets many of our own people won't like it. He wants us to follow him, even though it's going to be unpopular.

I don't know where this is leading. But I've never heard any- one speaking like this before. It's a

whole new way of being God's people. It's a whole new way of being human. Well, we've tried everything else. Maybe, after all, this is what it's going to look like when God comes back to rescue us. I'm ready to sign up. What about you?

TODAY

Lord Jesus, help us to hear your voice, to accept your challenge, and to follow you in the way of your kingdom.