

Session 1: The Loved Sinner

The first session of a series of four podcast reflections on the life of St Ignatius Loyola as seen through The Spiritual Exercises.

The year is 1522. The place is Spain, a little way outside a small market town. In a cave above a river sits a man dressed in rags. He's unshaven, dirty, and probably rather smelly. Perhaps surprisingly, he's writing in a book. As you approach him, he tries to draw you into conversation about what is most important to you in your life at the moment. How do you respond to him?

The man tells you that he has decided to give his life to God. He has not always looked the way he does now. Until a couple of years ago, he was a proud nobleman, well-dressed and courteous. But now he's doing penance for all the bad things he's done in his life. Only in this way, he feels, can he be sure that God will forgive him. He asks you what you think of what he's doing. What's your honest answer?

Six months later, you pass that way again. To your surprise, the same man is still there. But now he's clean, dressed plainly but presentably, and has cut his hair and trimmed his nails. When you ask him what has happened, he tells you that he has come to realise that God loves him just as he is. He doesn't need to undertake arduous penances, or spend hours asking for God's forgiveness. Tell him what you think of his change of heart.

In this first section of the Spiritual Exercises, you are invited at the outset to let God show you in some detail how you fail to live up to your own highest ideals. Naturally, this feels uncomfortable. Can you nevertheless take a moment now to recognise one or two of the ways in which you fall short of being the person you'd like to be?

The aim of all this isn't to stop at the point where you feel bad about yourself. It's to let you know, through your own experience, that even in that place, God loves you. God accepts you, and doesn't ask for elaborate repentance. Like the man in the cave - Ignatius in his time at Manresa - you can move on in your life, confident that God is with you. The awareness of God's loving presence even in the darkest areas of your life is intended to be a liberating one. For the last few moments of this time of prayer, see whether that rings true in your own life. If you have experience of God's heartfelt forgiveness, take the time to thank God for this. If you don't have that experience, but would like it, ask God now for what you need.