

Healing the Deadly Sin of Anger
(Evensong at St. Luke's, April 3rd, 2011)

It probably was inspiration, but at the time it felt like desperation: "What do I have to lose, I'll give up Anger for Lent." The words had barely left my lips when I began cringing at what I thought would be my wife Denise's derisive response; but she didn't say anything; she just smiled in a way that said, "don't talk about it, just do it."

My desperation was spurred by my increasingly volatile reactions to my nine year old son who I imagined to be very strong willed and defiant. My own childhood interactions with my father had ingrained in me that the parent should never let the child "win." It was deeply embedded that will must be overcome with stronger will. As a result when a conflict would break out I would find myself boiling over and cowering my son into obedience; within a few minutes I'd feel awful and go and ask his forgiveness.

I'd gone to a counsellor who told me I was blessed with a "hair-trigger temper." We worked on delaying techniques and they helped occasionally but whenever I would fail I would tailspin into a great deal of shame at my lack of self-control. And though my anger wasn't physical I worried a lot about the effects of our ongoing battles of will. I had tried prayer for the healing of memories, counselling and scripture meditation. As Lent approached I was casting about for a fast when with just a sliver of hope the thought came, "Give up anger for Lent."

Now I wouldn't be practicing good rhetorical technique if I told you what happened immediately so...here's the body of the sermon.

When Fr. Christopher asked me if I would consider taking this topic as part of this series I thought, "yes I'd love an opportunity to think through this issue from the perspective of the Bible and the Great Tradition and then offer some personal and practical points that would hopefully connect with our lives in a way that was helpful." Of course, it's naive to think one could even come close to that in one sermon, even a lengthy one, so I'm only going to give you a smidgeon of the data from the Bible and the Tradition, yet I hope what *is* offered can stand, in some way, for the whole.

The Bible as a whole has a tremendous amount to say about anger; sometimes it says it indirectly through stories giving examples of the results of anger both positive and negative. Sometimes what it has to say is more direct; I'm thinking particularly of the book of Proverbs where we read things like "one who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city" (16:32). Indeed just flipping through Proverbs and looking at all the texts that mention anger gives one the strong impression that controlling one's temper is a skill worth having almost above all others.

The material relating to anger in the prophets is almost entirely about the Lord's anger, the anger of judgement. Probably it's this material, more than any other that seems to colour in the popular depiction God in the OT as a "God of wrath."

The juxtaposition of these materials already gives us the sense of some considerable ambivalence when it comes to the Bible's depiction of anger and its expression. On one hand God seems quite angry though of course, and this is often not noted in popular depictions, God's loving faithfulness is far more prominent in the materials than God's anger.

Be that as it may, God *does* exercise anger and yet, in contrast, anger exercised by humans, created in God's image we might add, almost always leads to disaster and so those who are wise seek to control it in very stringent ways.

When it comes to the NT the ambivalence is still present; it is not true to say that in the NT we have a God of love, exclusively. God's anger is noted in all the different genres of the NT and we remember that at points Jesus' anger burns against the religious authorities. Human expression of anger in the NT it is portrayed paradoxically; I allow the following two texts, found within the same paragraph to illustrate:

"Put away from you *all* (my emphasis) all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Eph 4:31-32).

"Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil" (Eph 4:26-27).

So, anger is a unique case; unlike the other six deadly sins, it is *not* exclusively a sin; it is exercised by God and it is *commanded* of us, though in a way that will ultimately completely redefine what we generally mean by it.

The Great Tradition has generally echoed the Biblical approach to anger, recognizing that there is both holy wrath and righteous indignation while still focusing on the dire problems caused by anger as they come home to roost in our lives and relationships.

Thomas Aquinas stands in for the tradition as a whole when in the *Summa Theologica* anger is a type of emotional force of resistance or attack that wells up within us when something blocks our way to something good. It attacks obstacles so that we can successfully reach a good goal; this means it's a complex emotion; it dislikes the obstacle (we could say the cause of injustice, usually a person) but it's also passionately devoted to the good (we could say the just cause, whether that's towards us, others or our environment in some way).

When things go well we seek to redress wrongs as something that is good to do. That is, even when someone is punished or harmed in order to clear the obstacle to justice, the harm is

inflicted for the sake of the good. Righteous anger, then, uses punishment, not because it likes it, but because it's the only way to make things right.

It's a testimony to the power of our motivation towards justice that even a person who is wrongly angered tries to justify it in terms of some good. Recall my justification for anger in the opening story; I rationalized it as ultimately helpful for my son even though it wasn't.

All the deadly sins begin as desires for good things: food, sex, respect, justice. In all cases they become deadly sins or vices because when pursued wrongly or selfishly they create a cascade of evil in our lives and in the lives of people around us.

As we all know anger is a passion that we experience physically and can thus be difficult to hide – our faces get red, our adrenaline surges and our hearts beat faster. It is the “fight” in “fight or flight” and helps us face difficulties that need to be addressed. Someone who would normally not speak out may need the push of anger to do so. A complacent congregation may need anger to lift it out of indifference and mobilize it into action. Aquinas goes so far to say that in certain situations the lack of anger is a sin because it indicates a failure to engage in life. His view, reflecting biblical theology, is that the call to character and virtue is a holistic one; we are embodied beings and therefore a concern for justice should engage our passions, will and body.

The problem, of course, is that in the vast majority of cases, it's precisely our expression of anger that is the problem! Most of the time our anger is an expression of selfishness as we seek to control a situation or someone for our own ends.

All of us have either inflicted or experienced inappropriate anger, either anger that comes too quickly (my example); too much anger for the situation (that is raging); or anger that lasts too long (the classic smouldering resentment)

It is instructive to compare our typical human misuse of anger for selfish ends with a text that reappears verbatim time and time again in the OT, “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” In opposition to most human anger, God's anger is a holy emotion, with infinite wisdom it has justice as its object and love as its root.

When we begin to ask the question, “well what can we do to rid ourselves of bad expressions of human anger” it is, surprisingly, but first, a turning to God's anger that will ultimately help us turn away from our own ill use.

What do I mean? Well if we begin to entrust our lives to God's holy passions we come to understand that nobody desires justice for the world and thus for us as much as the Lord. This desire for justice is rooted in unimaginably deep draughts of love as they to ultimate expression in Christ's sacrifice for us. As trust grows, we really can let go, let go of our need to control everything, to secure our future, which, truth be told is an illusory enterprise, as Stanley

Hauerwas is fond of saying, all our silly efforts at control are our prideful attempts to get out of life alive!

God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our lives! It's certainly a cliché but, unlike so many clichés, this one is at the heart of all revelation. Believing it, living into its implications, is the great challenge and privilege of this phase of our existence.

Back to my story, Lent thirteen years ago. My fast was primarily about beginning to agree in my will and heart with that which I intellectually had assented to. To "agree" I needed for a time to give up all anger before I was ready to learn whether I could take the more mature step of occasionally expressing it righteously.

For a person with a hairtrigger temper giving up anger for forty day was equivalent to a miracle. And yet, truth be told, it wasn't difficult! I realized *that* Lent that to be "in Christ" actually *does* allow us to participate in Christ's death and resurrection. Even when I began to get irritated or felt like lashing out there was some inner space, some distancing that now allowed me a choice, a choice I hadn't known to be there previously!

After Lent I still had some of the same struggles but now I knew that I didn't have to be angry. Now I was being called onto a path and a journey wherein I was being asked to only forsake most anger as a legitimate tool in disciplining my son, but a journey on which I was to learn to let go of the shame and anxiety that were at its root. This process continues.

I can think of two times in 13 years where I've experienced the grace of righteous anger; in both cases my conversations resulted in the repentance of wayward parishioners; in one case, the parishioner ended up becoming ordained in the Anglican Church of Canada.

Most of the time however, "our anger does not produce God's righteousness" to quote the letter of James directly. Counselling can help, meditation can calm our nerves; living a balanced life, listening to good music, reading good books and having stimulating conversations; all these things stay anger's hand. But ultimately we become gentle when we find ourselves in the company of the one who is gentle and humble in heart. Gentleness and humility are signs that faith is growing in us; that more and more we are trusting that mysterious combination of justice and mercy that is God's way of setting things right.

In our baptism, God has included us in his comprehensive "Yes" to the cosmos. God's stance towards everything is not ultimately defined by wrath but by love. From that place of inclusion we find that we have a role in confronting injustice; and within that role we find that our anger can have rightful, though very limited, place.

It is this trust that allows us to flee inappropriate anger which is an expression of us wanting our own way; in contrast, as we learn to help each other in the discipline of self-mastery as we pray "Thy will be done." Amen.