

Anger and kindness

Ephesians 4.25-5.2

Let me ask you a simple question. I will give you a few moments to decide your answer – but don't fret, I am not going to ask you to tell everyone what your answer is. The question is: 'What makes you angry?' I please note, I don't mean 'What irritates you' or 'what makes you cross' I mean 'angry'.

Over the years I have spent many hours as a school governor, in Comprehensive, Primary, Infant and Special schools. I have been involved in literally hundreds of job interview for teachers. That question is the curve ball question I have asked at virtually all of them. 'What makes you angry?' The answer reveals a great deal about the person. When anyone said 'Nothing really makes me angry' then they slipped down to the bottom of the pile in my estimation. Do I want children to be taught by people who aren't angry about injustice, or child abuse, and countless other things of real significance? It is saying there is no depth to them, nothing that really moves them. Churchill said 'A man is as big as the things that make him angry.'

But Christians have a problem with anger. Many Christians think it isn't a mark of Christian character to be angry, and so they push strong feelings away. Having been unkind about creeping American usages, let me quote favourably a great American c.19th preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, whose was very forceful on this topic: 'A man who does not know how to be angry does not know how to be good. A man who does not know how to be shaken to his heart's core with indignation over things evil is either a fungus or a wicked man.' Maybe it is that we are all the victims of Victorian hymns – 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild' 'Christian children all should be mild obedient, good like he.' I have chosen a hymn by Percy Dearmer which almost falls into that category as our offertory hymn today. But I have taken the liberty of adding an extra verse:

'Jesus, man of righteous anger,
zeal, not temper's noisy clangour;
rouse us from pathetic languor,
Make us angry for your sake.'

In today's reading from Ephesians we have three references to anger:

'Be angry, but do not sin.' 'Do not let the sun go down on your anger'. 'Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger'.

Those seem almost contradictory. But that isn't really so. There is a place for anger – righteous anger we might call it. But anger can also become a problem and negative. There are two words for

anger in the Greek of the New Testament. They are almost interchangeable - one which expressed a sudden burst of anger, like a haystack catching fire — and the other the long-lasting anger which has greater depth. Both words are used in today's reading. If we have the right sort of anger it will lead us to pray and to act to do something about whatever it is. That is not letting the sun go down on it. If it is the wrong sort it will turn us into ourselves and we will fail to reflect the love of God whilst maybe thinking we are reflecting the anger of God. A theologian once said that God's anger is always under the control of God's love. The same should be true for us as well. If not, then it becomes sinful.

There are few hymns which touch on this. But there is a splendid one from the Iona community which puts it face-on, and combines that love and anger I have just mentioned, and challenges us to do something positive with it. Here is part of it:

Inspired by love and anger, disturbed by endless pain,
aware of God's own bias, we ask him once again:

'How long must some folk suffer? How long can few folk mind?

How long dare vain self interest turn prayer and pity blind?'

To God, who through the prophets proclaimed a different age,
we offer earth's indifference, its agony and rage:

When will the wrong be righted? When will the kingdom come?

When will the world be generous to all instead of some?

God asks: 'Who will go for me? Who will extend my reach?

And who, when few will listen, will prophesy and preach?

And who, when few bid welcome, will offer all they know?

And who, when few dare follow, will walk the road I show?'

Going back to the 'Gentle Jesus meek and mild' problem: it isn't true. Jesus was angry. He was angry with the Scribes and Pharisees about their attitude to healing on the Sabbath. Jesus was angry. He was angry with the Scribes and Pharisees about their attitude to healing on the Sabbath. It was utterly wrong, and reflected a wrong view of God and men. He was angry with the money changers in the Temple-court for prostituting something good for their own ends. Was he wrong? I don't think we can say that. The anger of men which reflects God's righteous anger about sin is something profoundly holy. If we have the mind of Christ - if we are learning, however imperfectly, to see things his way, then there will be money-changers tables for us to overthrow. There will be righteous anger we have a Christian responsibility to show. How much longer would slavery have gone on if it had not been for the righteous anger of Wilberforce and his friends? How much more money would have been made by mill-owners at the expense of the men, women and children who sweated in the 19th century if it had not been for Shaftesbury? We need people of righteous anger,

people who are angry with what God is angry with. Anger is a reality. Can we not channel it in ourselves, so that we hate what God hates, and not the things which happen to displease us, because they make us uncomfortable, or threaten our position or our security? Martin Luther said 'I never work better than when I am inspired by anger, *for when I am angry I can write, pray and preach well.*' What an interesting thought – that righteous anger can help us to pray better!

But we have to avoid becoming simply angry people. That is no commendation of the Gospel of God's love. We are not to be like the 'angry young men' playwrights of the 1950s and 60s, or angry old men like Victor Meldrew in 'One Foot in the Grave.' There is a place for the right sort of anger, But the last words of the Epistle today give the balance. We are to put away the wrong kind of anger, and bitterness and slander and malice, but instead we are to be 'kind to one another, tender-hearted.'

Fifty years ago in Manchester we had a Reader in our parish - an elderly man from Cornwall. A real character, who in his boyhood had sailed on a tea-clipper: it must have been at the very end of their days. He kept his connections with the sea by his attachment to the Missions to Seamen -though the Port of Manchester must have seemed very different from the ports of his childhood. He died, at a ripe old age whilst I was there. At his funeral, I took my text, not from the Bible, but from a spontaneous epitaph from one of the Wardens. He described Charles Collins as "a most kindly man". It was so apt, so accurate. And if I had wanted a Biblical text, there would have been no problem – today's Epistle and 'be kind to one another.'

We are thinking about the text as we celebrate the Feast of St :Laurence, our Patron Saint. I guess he showed this balance of both anger and kindness. The violence and the antagonism of the authorities that had murdered his Bishop, Pope Sixtus just a few days earlier, and now wanted him to hand over the church's treasures was matched by the obvious tender-heartedness he had towards the people he said were the church's real treasures – the sick and elderly.

So I come back to my original question; what makes you angry? I hope there are things that do. And then another question: Are you kind and tender-hearted? I hope that is true as well. The challenge of today's' reading is that at the same time we should be people who can be angry about the right things, and do something positive with that anger, but to do so in the context of of being kind and tender-hearted. That is no small challenge, but one for us to rise to.