

## **Be angry but do not sin**

A sermon preached by *Dr Tony Lemon* at 8.00am and 10.00am at St Peter's, Wolvercote, on Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> August, 2012.

Ephesians, 4, v.26 *Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.*

We are all angry sometimes, though some of us may find it easier to contain our anger than others. Some people are angry quite often, and there are even those who seem to live in a perpetual state of anger. Anger seems to be one of the most basic elements of the human condition. If anger is a sin, then it is perhaps the most obvious pointer we have to so-called original sin – for haven't we all heard babies cry in a way that plainly indicates the anger of frustration rather than suffering? They are usually angry because they are denied some immediate form of gratification. As we grow older, our anger assumes many other forms – personal, institutional, political – as the complex web of relationships, concerns and involvements which each one of us weaves gradually develops.

But Paul's words to the Ephesians suggest that there may be a place for anger in the Christian life: '*Be angry but do not sin*'. If there is a place for anger, when and how can it be right for us to be angry? There is certainly one kind of anger without which the world would be a poorer place, namely anger against injustice and unnecessary suffering. If we think of some of the famous figures who have fought for justice, they have this kind of anger in common – an anger that fed their zeal to overcome, their struggle to change the society in which they lived: think of the anger of Wilberforce against the slave trade, of Shaftesbury against the labour conditions of Victorian England. Many of us will remember Bishop Trevor Huddleston who campaigned tirelessly against apartheid in South Africa: his humanity and his Christian faith moved him to an anger which was very apparent in his sermons and speeches. It is a measure of the greatness of Archbishop Desmond Tutu that he characteristically manages to inject a note of humour into the anger that he so clearly feels – attacking both the former and present governments of South Africa – as when he famously observed, angered by the corruption of the post-apartheid government, that the gravy train had stopped just long enough for the new rulers to get on it. Anger directed against social injustice springs ultimately from love – love of humanity – which is profoundly Christian. It is probably true to say that we all feel something of this anger when we confront inequality and oppression, both at home and abroad. But it often takes an immediate experience close to home to activate such anger – this was the case on the rare occasions in the Gospels in which Jesus' own anger is recorded: when he found the scribes and Pharisees watching to see if he would heal the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath day, for instance, or when he railed against the moneylenders in the temple.

To be effective, it is probably true that anger must be selfless. Only an anger which is aroused by concern for others can be disciplined into the service of Christ and our fellow human beings. If we can summon up this kind of anger, it is potentially a dynamic force, which can achieve great things. When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, it was not the Pharisees' criticism of himself which made him angry, but rather the rigidity of their orthodoxy which put man-made rules before the healing of the sick and the relief of suffering. At the present time, the underlying anger of Kofi Annan as he sought to bring peace in Syria was not hard to detect – again we were seeing the

anger of a man whose fundamental concern was for others, but whose peacemaking efforts were wilfully frustrated.

But in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul is primarily concerned with the kind of anger with which we are all more familiar – the anger which is selfish and uncontrolled, even if based on genuine grievance, the anger which manifests itself in irritability and loss of temper, in shouting, insults or overstatement. Most of us would, I suspect, recognise from experience that the moment we raise our voice in an argument, that is the moment to stop – though of course it may not be easy, because that is precisely the moment when we are beginning to lose self-control: to continue may mean that we say things we come to regret. Even if we are basically in the right, we shall not do justice to our case, and every word we say may leave our opponent even more convinced that he is right. Then we feel bitter because we know we have lost the argument – or certainly not won it – and because we know we have lost face by our display of anger, all the more so if there were bystanders at the time. Such bitterness is destructive: it gnaws away at us as we go over and over the argument, and may magnify our resentment against the other person.

How very sound, then, is Paul's advice – 'do not let the sun go down on your anger'. How much better to end the day on a positive note – not to let our anger and bitterness give us, and probably the other person, a bad night's sleep. More important, in the longer term, is the fact that the longer we postpone mending a quarrel, the less likely it is that we ever shall. If there is trouble between us and anyone else, or indeed trouble in a church, a fellowship or society, a committee or at the workplace, the longer it is left to fester, the deeper and more enduring the rift is likely to become. In families, in churches, even in wider communities like Northern Ireland, the events of months or years or even centuries ago can remain a source of division and hatred. If we have been in the wrong, we must pray to God to give us grace to admit the fact; if we have been right – or at least we continue to think so – we must pray to God to give us the graciousness which will enable us to take the first step towards putting matters right, even if this goes against the grain.

The two kinds of anger we have been thinking about seem quite distinct, and the guidelines encouragingly clear – simple to grasp, if much less simple to follow in practice. But, as with most things in life, there are always difficult situations where the distinction is blurred. We may indeed be angry over a question of principle, and our anger may be motivated by genuine concern for fairness or to follow the course of action which seems best. But so often our anger will be in part generated by the *person* who argues against us: especially if we think that he is not being honest, that he is seeking to cloak personal interest in issues of principle – academics are past masters at that! Can Paul's advice help us here? I think it can, because we have to be on our guard, making sure that personal antipathy does not distort our view and accentuate our anger – otherwise it will backfire and achieve nothing. We also have to recognise that there may be occasions when an element of pragmatism or even calculation is important: it may be unwise to press an issue too far, lest it weaken our argument on future occasions: how important is the present issue, in the longer-term context?

Anger can be communal as well as individual, and we have seen several instances of that recently. The riots in our cities a year ago have been subjected to much analysis

and argument, but most people would agree that anger played a part for many of the participants: anger or frustration arising from what they felt they were missing out on, or simply from lives that contained little real interest, little chance of achieving anything worthwhile. Violent xenophobic attacks on migrants working in South African cities represented an outpouring of frustration and anger on the part of people whose lives have improved little since the end of apartheid, for whom jobs have become more difficult to get and promised improvements in housing and education have not materialised. Their anger fell on the foreign migrants living among them because they offered a ready scapegoat. Anger has also been very visible in many of the events of the Arab spring, as people who have been repressed for decades have in some cases used their new freedoms to vent their anger on the easiest and closest targets. In all these cases there are elements of justification for the anger itself, but the violent way it is expressed and its direction against innocent parties is wholly destructive. Such societies offer great challenges to governments, whose aim must be to target the energies and abilities of those concerned so as to give them genuine hope of something better to live for.

Paul sums up his advice to the Ephesians by telling them to be kind – something defined by the Greeks as a disposition of mind which thinks as much of its neighbours' affairs as it does of its own – looking outwards not inwards. Perhaps that is the best test when we find ourselves getting angry: is it an anger that consumes us or an anger that releases us to do good? When we reflect on our anger, we can never do better than ask how it would stand in the eyes of Jesus. In our Gospel today, Jesus invites us to feed on him in our hearts – to feed our hearts and souls and minds on his humanity. There is perhaps no better time to try and do this than when we find ourselves consumed by anger.

Amen