

3.4.22 St Stephen's (9.30) & 11. Eph 4: 26,(29-32)

Anger

"If you are angry, do not be led into sin; do not let sunset find you nursing your anger; and give no foothold to the devil."

This morning, in order to finish off our series on the 7 Deadly Sins, we have the last one to be covered, Anger.

Anger or wrath, is a defensive reaction which springs from our time as cave dwellers and prepared us to face whatever danger confronted us. This is clearly not such a desirable reaction today, yet all of us have been angry at some time or other, some of us more prone to react in this way than others.

There's a path which the arising of anger follows: it often begins with a feeling of impatience as something we wanted to do is frustrated, may be as simple as a delayed bus. If not controlled, this can lead to anger and spur one on to retaliate, such as shouting at the bus driver for the delay. If we do not resolve our anger, it can lead to a burning resentment against the bus company, which in more extreme cases can begin to blight a person's life. As the Persians say: "The ill-humoured man is a prisoner at the mercy of an enemy from whom he can never escape."

Anger can also arise because we have been found out in something underhand; or from hurt pride; or when we're threatened; or when we failed to achieve or obtain what we wanted; or even another's success in place of us. When anger bursts out, it dulls the other senses, leading us to say or do things which we'll later regret.

I remember a visit to the Sure office in town, wanting to put some money on my mobile. They recently changed their systems and I had to do this on line, and when I was told this, I became angry and gave the poor girl a bad moment, though it clearly was nothing to do with her, but company policy. Luckily, a friend who was nearby gently remonstrated with me so that I was able to apologise to her – though still somewhat miffed at Sure.

Anger, therefore, is generally sinful, because it springs from the thwarting of selfish desires, defending the indefensible, or seeking to achieve by foul means what is otherwise denied, and is generally destructive of relationships. The Russian attack on Ukraine illustrates this well, simply arising from Putin's hubris.

Sadly, the expression of anger has become a norm of behaviour in society today with little or no attempt to deal with the frustrations of modern life constructively. In his "Meditation on the A30", John Betjeman wrote:

"You're barmy or plastered I'll pass you, you bastard –
 I *will* overtake you, I *will*!
 As he clenches his pipe, his moment is ripe
 And the coroner's accepting the kill."

I suspect that a great deal of adult anger springs from a failure in learning to deal with this in childhood. This leaning should be part of the training parents give their growing children, especially when they are toddlers, when life can be so frustrating. It is not enough simply to bottle it up, but they should help develop ways of dealing with the frustration. Interestingly, there was an article on just this in The Times Saturday colour supplement in February on helping children to dissipate their anger and frustration in various ways; and as adults we should seek to do this, by finding ways of discharging anger without damage, and learning not to jump in before thinking. We should aim for a disposition where we have a greater self-understanding and a greater openness to God; an angry person is often a denial of the Christian faith.

There was ablaze is a two-story apartment building. As the fire brigade drew up, people were leaving the building in their pyjamas, underwear, or even in blankets. One young woman was screaming at a second floor window, & then, in response to a young man's cry, she jumped and fell with a thud. A man and woman stumbled out, their clothes alight, and people ran to cover them with blankets, and started to lead them to waiting ambulances. "No! no! I can't go," screamed the woman, "My baby is in there and I must get her out." By then the whole building was an inferno and there was no chance to saving the child. It was many hours later that the body of a 15 month old little girl was discovered. Before discovering the body, the authorities had learnt the horrible truth about the cause of the fire. A man, angry that someone would not pay him \$8 he was owed, shot a flare gun into the building, igniting some inflammable material. The building burnt to the ground; 48 people were homeless, seven were in hospital, and one child died.

There is another form of anger which can be justified, though remaining under control, and this is the anger we feel at the injustice and cruelty suffered by others, and especially if they are not in a position to defend themselves. This anger can be a spur to action by us on their behalf. A good example of this is our Lord's attack on the money-changers and animal sellers camped out in the Court of the Gentiles, thus turning what should have been a place of prayer for all humanity into a market place. His anger was under control and directed against a specific target to make a particular point.

Mayor LaGuardia, Mayor of New York during the late 20s & 30s, turned up in the night court, dismissed the judge, and replaced him on the bench. A tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told him, that she had been deserted, her daughter was sick and her grandchildren were starving. The shopkeeper refused to drop the charge. "It's a bad neighbourhood, your Honour," the man said. "She must be punished to teach others around a lesson."

The Mayor turned to the woman and said: "I've got to punish you, the law makes no exceptions – 10\$ or 10 days in jail." As he said this, he took out a \$10 bill, saying: "Here's the \$10 fine which I am now going to remit and, furthermore, I'm going to fine everyone in this courtroom 50cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread to feed her grandchildren.....Mr Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant." The bewildered old woman was given \$47 50cents, and the Mayor received a standing ovation!

Righteous anger on behalf of others can achieve great things, such as the setting up of Christian Aid and Oxfam; but it can degenerate into more sinister and destructive ends with the propensity of people to turn events for their own ends.

A specific form of anger is hatred – anger directed against a single person, which is wholly destructive, particularly for the hater, and is the opposite of love, which is creative and life enhancing. This love is directed three ways – to God, to our neighbour and to self, and the three are indivisible. Hate one, and the others become tainted.

We have the disturbing habit of explaining away our failures, of finding excuses why there should be extenuating circumstances in our case; that though acknowledging something is sinful, it's not doing anyone any harm and gives us some pleasure. Archbishop McGee, after having soup poured down his collar by a waiter, exclaimed: "Is there a layman here who will express my feelings?" Unfortunately, we under a mighty delusion – though we might be blind to the blemish in our character, God see it and unless we do something about it, this will end up badly. And it is also true that we are often angry against God, and displace this towards someone else - too often our unfortunate partner.

We can only come to the foot of the Cross and ask for help in overcoming our weakness. We should never forget that Jesus ended on the Cross because of the hatred felt for him by the Jewish Establishment, who couldn't face the truth he proclaimed and tried to destroy him in their anger and frustration. It didn't have to end that way; they could have repented themselves and embraced their Messiah. As a result of their failure, the way was opened for all of us receive God's grace – to choose life.

Here's a thought to end with: "No form of vice, not worldliness, not greed or gold, not drunkenness itself, does more to un-Christianise society than an evil temper. For embittering life, for breaking up communities, for destroying the most sacred relationships, devastating homes, for withering up men and women, for taking the bloom off childhood; in short, for sheer gratuitous misery-producing power, this influence stands alone." (Henry Drummond)