



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Does anyone actually care?

Part 5: When you just feel angry

By Rev Dr Keith Garner

6 October 2013

Ephesians 4:26

“In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry”

You join us for the fifth in this series of seven addresses looking at significant pastoral matters. As we arrive at the fifth issue, it almost stands apart from the rest ... for we may be led to feel extremely negative about it.

The use of the word makes us pause ... Anger! Yet to experience anger is a familiar characteristic of life. Whilst having the well-known destructive forms such as physical and emotional violence, anger has positive outcomes that have resulted in the protection of freedoms, both as individuals and as a society.

Christian people face the challenge of seeking to use the energy of anger without ultimately ruining all our relationships and our health ... and even our lives.

It was Aristotle who penned the secret: “Anybody can become angry—that is easy; but to be angry with the right person, and to the right degree, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not within everybody’s power and is not easy.”

Our difficulty with anger may be related to unhelpful expressions of it. The 1960s were years of angry protest around the world—evils were identified and attacked; the rape of the environment needed to be corrected; in America, the war in Vietnam brought massive demonstrations; Peter, Paul and Mary made hits of their peace songs; injustice was attacked and people rallied for civil rights. The rhetoric of radical revolution was in the air—bombs were thrown and buildings burned. The evil was named and there was always somebody ready for angry protest!

This emphasis produced an equally powerful opposite reaction and ‘flower power and peace at any cost’ was echoed.

These reactions were not the way of the Gospel, yet they were supported by some Christians. This evening, I will talk about the reaction of anger that can be said to be positive.

During one of my visits to Ireland, I took time off from preaching to watch Glentoran, the East Belfast football team—and sat in the directors’ box with two well-known Ulster footballers of a past age—Billy Bingham and Billy Neill. Billy Bingham had his antique business in England, but he was part-time manager of the Northern Ireland team. Sitting with us were two armed ‘minders’—because anger was such that it could give expression to violence ... there were many tit-for-tat killings in the Province.

Anger cannot be dismissed as being entirely unhelpful in life. Most of us are inclined to consider anger as an unbecoming, undesirable and uncomplimentary emotion. Just for a moment, I want to remind you of the New Testament, where we see Jesus as a man who exhibited anger:

- He was angry with the Scribes and Pharisees ...

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.” (Matthew 23:13)

- He was certainly irritated to the point of anger with the mother of James and John, when she sought favouritism for them (Mark 10:38–39)
- He could be considered to be angry with Simon when he began to sit in judgement on the woman of the streets (Luke 7:40)
- We are familiar with the anger which is evident in the Cleansing of the Temple—recorded in each of the four gospels (John 2)
- Of course, there is a danger of misinterpretation and misapplication—and the Cleansing of the Temple, for example, has been misunderstood
- Jerome, greatest biblical scholar in the ancient Church, said Jesus could not possibly have used a whip
- Others have used it as justification for taking up arms against others
- Still others are naïve enough to believe it is really about the fact that we should not sell fruit cakes and coffee in church!

We are dealing with a fundamental characteristic of God’s nature which is revealed in Jesus Christ, who is full of compassion and grace—but also expressed anger. Let us keep this in mind as we hear the words of Paul:

Text: Ephesians 4:26

“In your anger do not sin.”

These words are found as the Apostle deals with the essential nature of the Christian life. He begins by saying there ought to be no falsehood in our lives—there are more kinds of falsehood than simply speech—for example, there is the lie of silence. One scholar reminds us of “the menace of things unsaid”. We can condemn by remaining silent.

Paul goes on to say that there must be anger in the Christian life, but it must be the right kind of anger. Would many of the advances in the world have taken place without some kind of anger to turn around selfishness and wrong attitudes? Take slavery as one example—angry people had to express the desire and need to remove what was wrong.

Anger needs to be expressed assertively

This is a complex and difficult point. When we express anger assertively, we state clearly what it is that is upsetting us, without attacking the other person. Assertive anger sets limits and expresses needs. Learning to be appropriately assertive takes a lifetime of learning, rather than a unit in a management course or a section of personal counselling. Some express their assertiveness in a way that attempts to damage another.

Properly used, ‘assertive anger’ is one way of communicating our needs and feelings, without violating the integrity of others.

In many family contexts, anger can emerge which is really about power struggles, but dressed up around much smaller issues. How true it is that when you give someone a piece of your mind, you often lose your own peace of mind.

Perhaps we understand the ministry of Jesus better in relation to assertive anger. We feel hurts in our society when we stand with the broken and the fallen and those who feel damaged as a result of selfish greed.

In an earlier ministry, I was walking down a street and someone asked me if I could just stop for a moment because someone in the house was very ill. I didn't know them, but I was happy to call. After talking for a while, it became clear that the illness of this person was related to a specific situation. It caused me to feel angry, but I had to be clear in my own mind as to how I was going to express it and bring help to this person.

So, there needs to be clarification of the real issues of anger, if we are going to be able to help others, as well as being able to handle anger ourselves in an appropriate way.

We must learn to identify destructive forms of anger

Having established that there is such a thing as righteous indignation, some forms of anger are clearly destructive.

Anyone can rant and rave without attempting to correct the wrong—it is easy to condemn the wrong in others, but do nothing about the wrong in yourself. We can curse the darkness, as the saying goes, without ever thinking to light a candle.

I recall spending a few days with a family who had a lovely little dog—it was a miniature long-haired dachshund; a most affectionate pet. We were just about to set out to go into the city and the dog ran out of the house and this 9-inch 'giant' was at the gate barking at a bemused Alsatian—eight times his size! The barking and snarling made not a bit of difference.

There are many expressions of irrational anger which are destructive. One anarchistic group in Britain in the very early 1970s called themselves 'The Angry Brigade'.

Small bombs maximised their media exposure as they targeted banks and embassies. In total 25 bombings were attributed to them. This was anger in a most unhelpful and damaging form. Much larger groups have adopted terrorist activity from such roots.

Only by identifying the destructive forms of anger can we understand the distinctive way of Jesus, so that we can be angry about the causes that really matter.

We live in a dangerous world and we need to get this right. Hardly a week goes by without our hearing of the latest terrorist activity and outburst of destructive anger.

We see so many expressions of anger ... and identification of causes that are not worthy of anger is important if we are to find the way of peace.

Anger is, of course, most destructive of ourselves; it can be very quiet and devious and not just volatile and expressive. We must identify the destructive forms of anger within us. It is true that we should never put off until tomorrow what can be done today. But some things are best postponed, especially an angry retort.

In this series, when we explored coping with crises in our lives, we reminded ourselves of the need to let go of things which hurt. If we don't do this, we find that it can lead to the kind of anger that is ultimately self-destructive.

Clarifying real causes is important

The example of Jesus in the temple is an important one. I would not want to have been one of those merchants or money changers in the temple area, when Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Passover. They were profaning the temple with their selling of animals and making a cool profit out of religion, in the only area Gentiles could use. Jesus called it 'a den of robbers' and so there on the spot he made a whip and snapped it at the behinds of the animals and merchants until they were driven out.

Picture him taking one end of a table and then another and flipping them over and all the coins stacked neatly on the tables flying through the air. One can only imagine what it was like to see grown men falling over each other to escape the blazing eyes of Jesus Christ.

Christian anger is in the service of the high and the holy. An expression of it is important. In John Powell and Loretta Brady's book *Will The Real Me Please Stand Up*, they write, "Whatever is not openly expressed in a relationship becomes a subtle form of destruction."

Some causes worth being angry about:

- When people are fleeced by con merchants
- When over-zealous religious people mislead others
- When people needlessly die of hunger
- When folks abuse the rights of others
- When selfishness seems to succeed
- When the name of Jesus Christ is dishonoured.

In his commentary on Ephesians, John Muddiman (alongside many others) points to our text being an allusion to Psalm 4:4. He makes much of the clause that follows, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold." (5:27)

Anger is included by Paul in a list of the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:20. Sunset on the same day is a specified parameter for righteous anger. Interestingly a similar time limit is placed on the restoration of communal harmony and is referred to in Deuteronomy 24:15.

Muddiman sums it up by saying, "A fit of (righteous) anger is not necessarily sinful; it is the nursing of angry resentment that is condemned."

Finding appropriate degrees of anger

One of the ways in which people deal with anger is by shutting down. Some people will withdraw—pretend nothing is wrong—walk out of the room. Unfortunately, leaving the scene only escalates the anger ... to deal with things seems to be the only meaningful solution. Perhaps the Christian, above all others, ought to be able to use degrees of anger appropriate to the situation.

At the cinema, if the person in front is making a lot of noise, it would not be appropriate to tap them on the shoulder and say, "Please be quiet. I can't hear, and if you don't shut up, I'll throw you out!" By degrees, our anger may escalate, but rarely would we have to display extreme anger in this way.

When I began the series and dealt with the question of tears, I concluded it was a sensitive pastoral issue—and I am absolutely certain that the question of anger is, too. Anger can result in positive actions to assist in bringing healing.

Unexpressed anger causes levels of frustration which are not only stressful, but deeply damaging. Charles Allen, who held the senior Methodist pulpit in Houston for years, said, “You can always tell the size of a man by the size of the thing that makes him angry.”

I want to suggest that anger is a life experience. If a person tells you, “I never get angry”—test their pulse to see if he or she is really alive! If they are—are they living in the real world?

We cannot just express it, but seek to apply it to our lives in appropriate and ultimately helpful ways. The anger that is appropriate may not feel creative at the time but, as we learn to live with such tension, so we find a creative strength with which to live our lives in Christ.

For a past generation, Dick Sheppard was an evangelist and scholar. He wrote: “Christianity badly needs men who will not flinch from the crispness of religion nor fear the wrestle of stirring up a wasps’ nest. Where the trumpet is expected, the flute will not suffice, and the flute, I fear, is the predominant instrument in the orchestra of institutional religion. I want a disturbance—the fire which Jesus came to cast on the earth.”

Perhaps a little humour in the midst of this serious subject doesn’t go amiss. For a number of years, I worked in a town with strong Quaker roots. The Society of Friends has been wonderful advocates for peace. I remember the humorous story of a Quaker farmer who owned a very difficult cow. One particular morning she was unusually irritable.

The farmer began to milk her and ‘Old Bossy’ as he called her stepped on his foot with all her weight. He groaned under his breath, pulled his foot free and sat back on his stool. She then swished her tail in his face like a long string whip. He leaned away so she couldn’t reach him. Next she kicked over the bucket, by then half-full of warm milk. He started again, mumbling a few words to himself, but never losing his cool.

Once finished he breathed a sigh of relief and, just as he got up, the cow kicked him against the barn wall. That did it! He stood to his feet, marched in front of his cow, stared into her big eyes, as he shook a long, bony finger in her face, and shouted, “You know that I’m a Quaker and I cannot strike you back ... but I can sell you to a Presbyterian!”

As I draw this difficult theme to a close, I commend the words of Herbert Butterfield. His writings on science, history and religion were well-known. He concluded that “a civilisation may be wrecked without any spectacular crimes or criminals, but by constant petty breaches of faith and minor complicities on the part of men generally considered very nice people.”

Our desire must not be to simply have ourselves considered nice and popular. The prophets stepped over the line of respectability to drive home some powerful messages about God’s truth and justice.

So anger is a real human experience which may be present in any one of us. As with many other pastoral issues, by bringing ourselves to God and seeking his guidance and help, we can handle this powerful emotion ... and use it appropriately.