

## **Message for August 29, 2021**

### **Ephesians 4:25-32**

King Henry the Second was one of the greatest kings of medieval England. Almost single-handedly he created an English empire in France and turned England from a small island nation into one of the greatest powers in Europe. Henry's quest for power and glory however brought him into conflict with Thomas Becket who was the Archbishop of Canterbury. Henry insisted that since he was the king, he had to be obeyed in all things; his word was law! Thomas however strongly disagreed, saying that while he was the king's loyal subject, God ultimately came first. The tension between the two men lasted for years until it finally resulted in a fateful explosion.

King Henry was known for many things, one of which being his temper. He often threw temper tantrums and was even known to roll around on the floor screaming while literally chewing the rugs. After one particular run-in with Thomas, Henry completely lost control. He screamed, raged and stomped his feet but he also uttered the fateful words: "What cowards I have, that no one will rid me of this low-born priest".

Now even though the king was famed for his rages, four of his knights took his words at face value and set out for Canterbury to kill Becket. When he heard what they planned to do, Henry promptly calmed down and sent messengers to stop them, but it was too late. The four knights broke into the cathedral and murdered the archbishop. Everyone was horrified by what had happened and blamed Henry. Indeed, from then on things slowly but surely went downhill and in the words of one historian, "In a fit of temper he had thrown away everything for which he had striven for so long". In one moment of blind unthinking anger, Henry destroyed the work of a lifetime.

Anger is one of the strongest emotions that we ever experience, and with good reason, a person once said that anger is like dynamite. If it is not handled wisely and with extreme caution, then the result can be a horrible devastating explosion. Perhaps not surprisingly then, since anger can be so destructive, the Christian message for years was a simple one; control yourself and don't get mad, but does this really mean that there is no place for anger in our lives?

Hardly. After all, there were times when even Jesus himself got angry. We can remember the time for example when the mothers wanted to bring their children to Jesus and the disciples tried to stop them. Jesus' response was to get indignant or, as we can better translate it, angry. And then of course there is the most famous episode of all when Jesus made a whip and drove the moneychangers out of the temple. If Jesus was not angry on that occasion, then what was he? If we use Jesus as our example, then there are times when anger does have a place in our lives. This was certainly Paul's view. As he wrote in today's scripture passage, using the Revised Standard Version of the Bible: "Be angry, but do not sin".

Be angry but do not sin. There are times in life when we are allowed to and even should get angry. What we must realize though is that there are in fact two different types of anger, one being bad and the other good. The first type of anger, which is also the most common, is essentially self-centred in nature and erupts when we do not get our own way. We are driving along for example and someone cuts in front of us. There is no real danger but we are forced to slow down. Does this ever leave us feeling irritated or even angry perhaps? In extreme instances this can even result in road rage. Or to use another example, suppose we are waiting for a clerk to serve us in a store but then that clerk serves someone else first who arrived after us. So often we get angry because we do not get our own way or, as one person puts it: "When you boil it all down, your anger is a demand that you get your way". This is the most common kind of anger, but Paul didn't have this type of anger in mind when he told the Ephesians that it was alright to get angry. Rather Paul was writing about a righteous anger that is not aroused by what happens to ourselves but rather by what happens to others. We can return to the examples of Jesus' anger that I mentioned earlier.

On the few occasions when Jesus got angry, he didn't do so because he couldn't have his own way. Even when he was on trial for his very life and experiencing a travesty of justice, he didn't get angry. Nor was he angry when he was unjustly crucified. Rather the only times he got angry was when he saw others hurt. He got angry for example when he saw his disciples, as well-meaning as they were, stopping the children from coming to see him. That time in the temple when he got angry, he did so because he saw the money changers fleecing the poor. In both of these instances the anger of Jesus was

not born out of pride, greed, or wounded vanity, rather it was fanned into flames when he saw wrong being done to others. And as it was with Jesus so it should also be with us.

It has been said with some justification, that anger is the dominant emotion in our society and even in the world itself today. There is for example the tremendous anger inspired by the pandemic with its resulting loss of life, livelihoods, and all of the restrictions. Then came the anger aroused by the horrific killing of George Floyd last year. Earlier this summer many people were outraged by the discovery of the remains of hundreds of indigenous children in unmarked graves at the sites of various residential schools. In the past few weeks there has been a great deal of anger about what is happening in Afghanistan and the plight of thousands of people desperately trying to escape the Taliban takeover.

Truly there is so much anger in the world today and there is a place for much of it. As Bede Jarett wrote in "The House of Gold", "The world needs anger. The world often continues to let evil flourish because it is not angry enough". Yes, there is a place for a righteous anger but just *feeling* angry is not enough. To use an example, anger about the wrongs of the past may be expressed by the removal of statues of people whose beliefs and actions we find abhorrent today. Likewise, we can rename streets, schools and other public buildings named for these people and feel a sense of righteous accomplishment by doing this, but then what? What does the removal of a statue or the renaming of a school for example, do to lessen the plight of an indigenous child living on a reserve in an overcrowded house without safe drinking water? Such anger is what I sometimes call "cheap righteousness"; it may make the person expressing it feel better, feeling a sense of accomplishment, but in reality it achieves little. A true righteous anger is more than a feeling; it will also lead to constructive action. Even as we experience this righteous anger though, we must also remember what else Paul said. "Do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry".

Now sometimes people, and especially married couples, take this literally; they will not go to bed mad at one another and if that means staying up all night trying to resolve their differences, then so be it. Rather than taking this literally though, the importance of what Paul wrote lies in the point he was making. While it would be nice if we could always resolve all of our disagreements and

never go to bed angry, this isn't always possible. Resolving feelings of anger sometimes takes time and the process cannot be rushed. Nevertheless, Paul is still making a valid point and that quite simply, is that sooner or later we must let go of our anger; we must simply because we do no one including ourselves any favour if we nurse it and turn it into a grudge. I have long liked the way one of my favourite authors, Frederick Buechener, puts it:

“Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of confrontations still to come, to savour to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

This is so very true. No matter how justified or how righteous our anger may be, there comes a time when we must let it go. If we don't then it will surely consume us.

Anger, along with love, hate and fear is one of the strongest emotions that most of us ever experience. Indeed it is so strong and fearsome that the usual Christian message has been that all anger is always bad. Anger however does have a place in the lives of Christ's disciples. There are times when we should get angry when we see the harm done to other people, but it is not enough just to feel mad; what good can we do with our anger before we put it to rest?

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Gracious God, hear us as we now come to you in prayer. As we so often do, we begin this prayer by offering you our thanks for the many blessings that we have and experience.

We give you thanks for the gift of this day and this summer season itself with all of its varied beauty, such as our gardens and the sight of the moon in

the night sky. We thank you too for the goodness of your creation, such as the fields and orchards with all of their bounty.

We thank you for this time of year which has been a time of rest and relaxation for so many people, a welcome break from the routine. As even now we look to next weekend and what follows, such as the return of our children and young people to school, we pray for the well-being and safety of all. To this end, we pray for those in authority, that they may be guided to make the best decisions for all of us as the pandemic continues. We pray for our society as well as the debate grows increasingly more bitter and strident over mandatory vaccinations and vaccine passports.

Gracious God, when we look at the world around us and see such as the situation in Afghanistan, climate change, the pandemic, the wrongs of the past and the injustices of the present, we often feel a sense of justifiable anger. Help us we pray, individually and collectively, to channel these feelings to bring good out of all the bad. Save us from a false sense of self-righteousness, and grant that we may see others with the same love, understanding and compassion that you do.

We pray this day for your many children who are hurting; those who are hurting because of illness and those who are hurting because of the death of a loved one. We pray for all of your children who live in fear, and especially those in Afghanistan and those who fear what will become of loved ones and friends in that troubled land. Truly may your love and compassion be over all that you have made, and may the day come when your will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen