

On Wednesday 2nd May, 2012 I got into an ugly, rotten temper.

There were a few extenuating factors. We had moved out of our house for six weeks for earthquake repairs. We were living in a motel - yep, 2 little kids in a motel unit for an extended period of time. I was stressed and under pressure. The kids were stressed and under pressure. Fiona had gone to work and we were trying to get out of the house and to school and preschool, and it had been a fairly typical struggle to herd my little turtles into the right place in the correct clothes, fed and tidied up after.

We were all wound up like springs.

At that stage I had severe sleep apnoea and lived in a foggy cloud most days. So I was already in a pretty bad mood. Then little 4yo Tristan displayed his own special response to the stress of our situation. Like many Chch kids, he had started soiling himself at the drop of a hat. And he chose that moment, when we were just on the cusp of being late, with everyone fed, clean and strapped into the car. The smell wafted forward and the red mist descended. I'm afraid I completely lost it. I dragged him back into the motel unit and bellowed at him in a way that still makes me feel ashamed when I think of it. I broke a plastic bin in my rage and was a bit too rough with my grasp on Tristan's arm. Everyone in a 12km radius must have heard me, and I saw genuine fear in Tristan's eyes. At that point I was very, very far away from being the loving, caring father I generally try to be.

Anger had got the better of me.

During Lent, we have been working through a series on the 7 deadly sins. Today we are taking a look at the sin of anger. Hmmmm. When I saw the topic I was preaching on, I thought it must have been a nasty joke. Karl and getting angry have had an uneasy power game running for several decades now. Deep breath, and it's time to dive headlong into this one.

So what is anger? How do we define it? Any ideas?? .....

These definitions were the result of a quick glance at wikipedia:

- Emotional response to being offended, wronged, or denied
- An indicator that one's boundaries have been violated in some way
- A physiological response:
  - increased heart rate
  - blood pressure rises
  - adrenaline released

And this one came from the American Psychological Association:

- Anger is an emotion characterised by antagonism toward someone or something you feel has deliberately done you wrong.

Why is it a problem? . . . . . {genuinely asking}

As Yoda says in the Empire Strikes back, "Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate and hate leads to the dark side..."

There IS a dark side to anger and I'm sure we have all experienced it, either in ourselves or as victims of it. Or even as collateral damage when a big explosion happens in our vicinity.



Anger can be pretty funny as long as we're passive observers and not actively dealing with it.

And we do become incredibly stupid once we're angry. When my knickers are about as twisted as they can get, I wouldn't see the correct solution to a problem if it was dressed in a chicken suit and paraded back and forth in front of me.

Anger can lead to violence in its worst forms. New Zealand has a bad culture of macho blokes mixed with alcohol. It leads to some truly horrific attacks against people who just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. We see it on the news, but some of us have even had experience of it in our own lives.

That's at its explosive worst. But anger can be a chronic condition too. I struggle to keep my own temper under control - I always have. This makes it unpleasant for everyone around me when I am under pressure, or lacking sleep, or feeling down. I'm sorry to say that my wife and my kids have developed strategies to deal with me when I'm in that space.

Anger can result in weird irrational behaviour when we won't back down. And it's so often a selfish emotion. We don't get our own way, so we get angry. We think that someone is doing it all wrong, so we get angry. We don't get the respect we feel we deserve, so we get angry. We can even make things worse for ourselves just in a lame attempt at revenge on those around us. Cutting off our nose to spite our face as the saying goes. I've lost count of the objects I have broken because they won't. DO. WHAT. I. WANT!!!!

Anger is not so good eh? We're all on the same page here aren't we??

The trouble is, it's certainly part of our humanity. Everyone on the planet has experienced it in one form or another. So it's safe to assume it serves a purpose, and that God put it there for a reason.

If anger is one of the so-called seven deadly sins, can it ever be a good thing?

It's recorded in the old testament that Prophets got angry at kings who were going off the rails. Sometimes we need someone to get good and exasperated before we realise we're doing the wrong thing. Anger can function as a warning.

God himself gets angry. He got angry at Moses because he wouldn't go and confront Pharaoh. He got very angry in Exodus at mistreatment of foreigners, widows and orphans - people in weak and vulnerable situations. He was angry when his people rejected him for other trendier Gods. The old testament stories contain scary phrases like "his anger burned" and "the Lord was furious with Israel". God's anger is often referred to as being kindled like a fire.

Jesus too got angry on occasion. In some parts of the gospels we have to realistically infer Jesus was angry. Turning over the tables in the temple is one example that springs to mind, and telling Peter to "get behind me Satan" is another. He seemed upset that the disciples were trying to keep the children out of his way and he did curse that poor old fig tree.

But there is one gospel story where it is specifically recorded that Jesus was angry.

In Mark chapter 3 Jesus confronts the Pharisees over the issue of healing of a man with a withered hand. It was the Sabbath and healing is technically "work", so it's against the law on the Sabbath. He asked them "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" He wanted them to see that people come first rather than laws. This man was in need of healing, and Jesus planned to heal him, Sabbath or not. When the Pharisees refused to back down, Mark records that "He looked around at them with anger; he

was grieved at their hardness of heart.” So Jesus reached out and healed the man right in front of them. People come first!



As I was preparing this I was struck, as I have been on occasion, that we aren't worshipping a particularly "safe" God, are we? He loves us beyond our ability to comprehend and he forgives us and includes everyone we ever meet in that love and forgiveness, but he's not a safe, cuddly, teddy bear God. He gets angry. His anger is of the slow building variety, but when faced with a people who didn't do what he asked them to, or took advantage of those who couldn't stand up for themselves, God got angry. God gets angry. And this is the God that we are here to worship and encounter today. I often wonder why we don't arrive dressed more appropriately for the occasion!

So anger in and of itself isn't necessarily an issue. As I mentioned before, it seems that anger is part of being human and that God put it there for a purpose. But as with many things, we humans take the things that God put there and mis-use them to the detriment of others.

The bible is stuffed full of warnings against anger. In James 1 we are told "Know this, my beloved people: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of humans does not produce the righteousness of God."

And this little gem comes from Ephesians "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil."

The fact is, the sorts of things that tend to make us angry are not the sorts of things that make God angry. We tend to get bogged down in the personal, the here and now, the close proximity. Hence the warnings.

That's not the view that God has. God sees the big picture.

So what sorts of things does God get angry at?

In the old testament the wrath of God was mainly directed at the children of Israel for breaking their covenant with him.

When the Israelites turned from God and pursued other beliefs, when they deliberately ignored his instructions and rejected his messengers, God got angry. When Kings and leaders were too proud, or arrogant, or lived in a way that harmed people rather than shepherding them then God got angry. Where there was injustice, particularly against people who were weak or vulnerable, God got angry.

Now, to be fair, sometimes I get angry at this sort of stuff when I see it. Injustice makes me burn too. I get very angry at casual racism and people who assume that I'll find it funny. I get cross at some of the psychotic behaviour of corporations and how they treat people in the developing world. And I get angry at any group that excludes others because they are perceived as not good enough. But..... as a percentage of the total amount of time I'm angry, I wonder how much of it matches God's priorities.

In the gospel reading this morning Jesus healed a man born blind from birth. Just like that, he gave the man a whole new sense and literally opened his eyes. It was a similar situation to the story I mentioned earlier. Jesus noticed the blind man and decided to heal him on his way past, even though it was the Sabbath.

People first, you see.

What was skipped over in our lectionary reading is the huge forensic investigation carried out by the Pharisees after this healing. Jesus had healed the man, so clearly he was operating with some considerable spiritual power. And yet, he healed on the sabbath, so how could such an obvious sinner perform such signs? Maybe the man wasn't healed.

So off they go to his parents to see if he really, honestly was born blind. The parents are sure he was born blind, just as they are now sure he can see. They refuse to speculate on how this might have happened though, because anyone going on record as professing Jesus to be the Messiah faced ex-communication. So the Pharisees go back to the blind man who, it seems, is not scared of them. He even gets a few good digs in at them. It's quite funny and worth reading when you get home. Just start where our reading started in John 9 verse 1 and keep going until the end of the chapter. The Pharisees have all the information they need to get to the right conclusion, but they keep missing it.

John has placed this story in very carefully in his gospel. We have the blind man who believed Jesus, did what Jesus asked and his eyes were opened - literally and metaphorically. The blind man receives his sight, but also realises who Jesus really is.

And counter-balancing that we have the Pharisees who are stumbling around in the dark as to who Jesus is. Their indignation about someone breaking the rules and their fixed ideas on what the Messiah will be like has blinded them. And as Jesus points out, the fact they claim to be completely and utterly sighted, while still missing the point makes it even worse.

And I can see myself being blind like this too. As I mentioned before, anger and indignation are so often selfish emotions. We are mostly cross at things that affect us personally, and as a consequence we can be blind to the real needs that are around us and miss opportunities to do God's work.

Paul warns the Ephesians not to "let the sun go down on your anger". He recognizes that anger can quickly become obsessive. Instead of being upset over a thoughtless word or deed, we have a tendency to make it "personal" in a hurry. We nurse a grudge and cook up schemes for revenge. Once we have slipped into this realm we have opened the door for sin. The well-being of the community then becomes secondary and our main purpose is simply to get even. Thus Paul reminds us of the need to let forgiveness have the last word.

Jesus too taught that we should make things right as soon as possible. While I was researching this sermon I came across this quote a lot. It's from Matthew, and Jesus is preaching to a crowd of people "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder,' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."

Jesus is basically saying that there is no difference between the consequences for murder and the consequences for anger!! For a quick-tempered person such as myself, this is a worry!

But the next bit is the kicker and it's so often missing from articles where Jesus is quoted on anger:

"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."

Sort it out quickly. Get your priorities straight. People are more important than things. Not letting the sun go down on one's anger is about dealing with that anger: truthfully with ourselves and truthfully with others. With open eyes.

Jesus would prefer us to be sighted. We don't want to be like those poor old Pharisees who missed connecting with the very person they were longing to meet.

So where does that leave people like me? People with quick tempers who don't so much slowly kindle their anger as throw a match into the petrol tank of temper?

It's hard, I think.

This is not the state that God has in mind for us. He wants us to see him for who he is, like the blind man in the story, and not to be getting wound up and twisted over the things that happen to us in our lives. As James said “the anger of people does not produce the righteousness of God”. For me, and people like me, we need regular doses of Jesus’s healing to open our eyes to the stuff that matters. To bust through the red mist and show us the what’s right in front of our eyes. As we feel ourselves winding up for a good rage, we need to fire off a quick prayer asking God for the strength and clarity to calm ourselves down. It’s not something I’m very good at doing by myself, and I’m sure that I’m not alone in that. But with God’s help, even impossible seeming things become possible.

And for you lucky people who are calmer and slower to anger? You can pray for us. Anger is a real problem and it requires a big powerful solution. From our bible reading we can see it has been an issue for people for thousands of years and it will continue to be an issue for us. When we see angry outbursts we can pray for God’s calm and for cool, clear heads to prevail. When we see the results of violence and fighting on the news we can pray for the victims of the violence, but also for the people who are unable to control themselves once the rage kicks in. And we can pray for brave intervention to head situations off before they start.

We can’t do any of this without God and without the sort of liberation and healing that Jesus demonstrated in our reading this morning.

The Danish Theologian Kierkegaard wrote this little prayer that fit so well with this reading that had to include it. We’ll pray it together now, and we should continue to pray similar things as we head out into our big, beautiful, infuriating, exasperating, and irritating world:

Let us pray:

Lord! Give us weak eyes

for things that do not matter

and eyes full of clarity

in all your truth.

Amen