

John 2:13 – 22; Psalm 19

Anger

Apparently we are fast becoming a very angry society. People differ markedly in their views on WHY that should be, but it would seem as though the truth of that claim is almost indisputable. The evidence is all around – violence and vandalism, road rage, assaults (and worse) in schools, in the streets and in people's homes. Aggression very much to the fore – manifesting itself in all manner of ways – but sadly very much a feature of modern life, not just in some far off country but in Scotland too. It is difficult to hold back from judging and condemning when we read or hear of the unbridled anger and violence perpetrated against defenceless babies and children. (The awful horrors of Dunblane came back to the fore with the 25th anniversary of that devastating tragedy). What makes human beings ire get to such proportions that they lash out in unrestrained destructive violence even against the weak and vulnerable? Drink? Drugs? Frustration? Evil? I'm sure there are many factors but what becomes apparent is that at its worst anger can result in a total disregard of others as people, as human beings – people are relegated to objects, things or no value, no significance. Rage takes a hold and in no time at all untold damage is done. Tragic results from senseless violence.

We may not resort to such extremes but all of us are prone to losing our tempers – some more readily than others. Even the calmest human being can be riled – it takes a lot to hold our cool when we are being severely provoked. Perhaps we are more restrained by upbringing or fear of consequences or just plain common sense – but let's be wary about jumping to the conclusions that anger isn't our problem. We may not be all ready to sign up to an anger management course but let's face it – we've all been angry and, on occasion, angrier than we should have been.

Anger is all around – and we are not immune.

Righteous anger

There is no doubt that Jesus was angry as he walked through the temple courtyards, as he saw the pandemonium of animals and moneychangers in what was supposed to be a house of prayer. It was big business – controlled by Annas and his high priestly family, including Caiaphas, his son in law. One source has estimated that the annual turnover of the temple market was of the order of £200 million! (I can't vouch for that, but we are certainly not talking sweetie money). The priests had to approve the animals for sacrifice (and only the best would do), everything had to be purchased with kosher coin – Roman coin being unacceptable, having the head of Caesar on it. At every step there was room for making a profit and the religious aristocracy controlled it all and took their not inconsiderable cut from every transaction.

Did Jesus lose the plot? I very much think not. The whip of cords would have been a short little whip used to direct cattle, not a whip of leather or metal. His actions were prophetic rather than violent. It was a symbolic cleansing of the temple rather than an attempt to force the moneychangers and merchants out. Nevertheless, it was dramatic and unprecedented. The people were shocked rather than intimidated. Their reaction was not to run for cover but rather to ask Jesus who gave him the right to act as he had.

Had there been newspapers in Jerusalem then his actions would have been headlines on front page. There had been times when Jesus was prepared to bide his time, to work away quietly, teaching the disciples, preparing them for what lay ahead (both his own death and their continuation of his mission) but he had reached a turning point. As with his dramatic entry into Jerusalem on the donkey, his cleansing of the temple was a public demonstration of his claim to be God's Messiah – a prophetic act announcing the need to reform – to reclaim the temple for its true purpose – prayer and the worship of God – and put an end to the glorification of greed and money-making.

Jesus was angry – there is no doubt about that. At first sight it seems at odds with his teaching to forgive our neighbour, to turn the other cheek but his actions remind us that God is a God of meekness, not weakness – and that there is a place for taking a stand as long as it is done for the right reasons and in the right way. The big difference is that Jesus' anger was controlled and restrained. He became angry not because someone had hurt his feelings or offended him or hurt his pride or pocket. He was angry because the whole temple debacle was an offence to the gospel, an affront to God. The whole enterprise, far from glorifying God, was bringing his honour into disrepute and making a mockery of their religion. The temple, supposedly the key locus for their faith, the home of their spirituality, their meeting place with God had been relegated to a temple of greed and profit – it was even known to some as Annas' bazaar! Jesus was angry – but he did not lose the rag. Instead, he put his life on the line and in a restrained but dramatic and prophetic way demonstrated the need for cleansing the temple and restoring it to its intended function as a house of prayer, the temple of the Lord God Almighty.

Oh! that's just a cop out, some would say. Just an excuse to let Jesus off the hook. Is **righteous anger** any different from any other kind? Sometimes we use the phrase "righteous indignation". Even in ordinary life we are ready to acknowledge that there are times when people have good cause to indignant, even to be angry. Jesus did not lose the plot, he was in full control of his temper, his anger was not prompted by selfish considerations it was genuinely anger at God's honour being usurped. It was righteous anger – righteous that its **cause** was just (he was championing God's glory) – righteous too because his **methods** were in keeping with his cause. This was not violent, bloodthirsty Christian knights of medieval times striking down unbelievers and beheading them, this was not modern day radical Islamic terrorists blowing unbelievers to kingdom come under the mistaken view that in so doing they were doing God's will – Jesus' anger was righteous because both his cause and methods were in keeping with the nature of his Heavenly Father. I suspect too that he was adopting a higher standard in his dealings with the religious leadership than he expected from the common people. The high priests ought to know better, more was expected of them. Prophetic action pointing to the need for change and judgment to come if the warnings were not heeded. His anger did not give him carte blanche to impose his will upon the offenders by force.

Managing anger

I have no doubt that unrestrained anger (whatever its various causes) is a major problem in our society. Too many people are far too prone to lift their hand (and indeed their feet and other weapons) as well as their voices, to vent their anger, frustration and fury and to impress their will

on others. Of course, there is a place for anger management courses and strategies to defuse violent behaviour and replace it with alternatives. Attitudes won't be altered overnight and mistakes will be made but one thing for sure is that to allow the current level of anger and aggression to remain unchecked will only lead to more trouble further down the road.

But Jesus does offer an additional and very profound solution. One that reminds us that anger is something that affects our relationships – to others and to God. It mars and spoils the possibility of us getting on with one another as God intends. Anger eats away at the angry person and is destructive of their nature as much as any damage inflicted on those on the receiving end of their anger. In place of anger God delights to give us love, grace and forgiveness – to heal hurt, deal with injustice and restore relationships. God does not ignore the causes of our anger but he does set them in the context – and reminds us that while he had every reason to be angry with us, he dealt with us very graciously, and send his Son to suffer in our place, forgiving us and restoring us to fellowship with himself – a much more positive outcome.

There is a place for righteous anger – and possibly we need to face up more robustly to the more flagrant offence to the gospel and to God that are to be found in our society, to the injustices, to gods of this age that usurp the honour and glory of God. Not with violence or force, but in prophetic ways that remind people of the truth and point them to the fact that we are all answerable to God. We need to get far less worked up over things that offend us, and far more concerned about efforts to undermine the glory and grace of God.

Anger – it is certainly all too prevalent in our society and we should be concerned about it and seek to support efforts to deal with it – we should also be alert to the dangers of succumbing to our own temper,

We should learn that there is such a thing as **righteous anger** – demonstrated by Jesus in the temple – but that we must not automatically adorn anger in our own causes with that label. Righteous anger is only such if it is prompted by a clear righteous cause (God or the weak and vulnerable) AND is worked out in a righteous way – the methods we use will be fair and just – there is no such thing as “at any price”.

There are many ways of **managing anger** – but among them we must not forget Jesus' readiness to diffuse anger by a readiness to forgive and love and if need be suffer. Rather than losing the rag such an approach will have a far more lasting effect – all the more because it runs totally counter to our society's readiness to rush to anger and violence.

We are not to be doormats – there will be times when as Jesus in the temple – we have to stand up against wrongdoing and injustice – but more significant than our anger will be our readiness to love, forgive and suffer.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.

May the Lord bless you! Amen.