

March 03, 2024

A TIME TO BE ANGRY

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

John 2: 13-17

The writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us that: “For everything, there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.” And he goes on to say: “God has made everything suitable for its time.” Or, as my grandparents used to drill into us: “There’s a time and place for everything”. And that everything includes being angry. By that I do not mean the uncontrolled impulse to hurt or destroy arising out of pride, or the exercise of power, or the desire for revenge, but the strong emotion that you feel when you encounter a situation where someone has behaved in an unfair, cruel, or unacceptable way.

There are some folks, many good folks, who discourage anger of any sort and for any reason. They see it as unbecoming and unacceptable behaviour.

It is understandable why people may be turned off by anger. It is understandable why people may be scared or uneasy in the face of anger. We have seen how hurtful, destructive, and alienating anger can be when it is excessive, misplaced and vengeful, and when it is allowed to control and define someone.

But anger is as human as weeping. It is an emotion and a reaction that we all feel and experience. All of us experience some level of anger at various times and for various reasons. Sometimes our anger is appropriate to the circumstances and sometimes it’s not. There is a balance to anger that we have to learn to negotiate, so that we don’t get angry about things we shouldn’t; and we don’t become complacent over things about which we should be angry.

In today’s gospel reading, we see an angry Jesus. Jesus had gone to the temple, and he had seen in the very house of God, that greed had displaced goodness. People were being exploited, and, for some, profit had become more important than worship and prayer. And Jesus was angry.

The temple was the place where, in accordance with the law of God, people offered sacrifices. For the Jews, the Law of Moses stated what kinds of sacrifices should be offered in the temple, and some of those sacrifices involved animals - a young sheep, a young goat, or a pair of pigeons.

For persons who lived in Jerusalem, that was easy, but for those who had to travel long distances, sometimes over many days - as was the case with many who were in Jerusalem at the time for the feast of the Passover, it was often difficult to carry the appropriate sacrifice. So when people went to the temple to make their sacrifices, the temple authorities made it easy for them by having sacrificial animals for sale right there on the premises. That is why persons were selling the animals and birds in the temple.

In addition, worshippers were required to pay a temple tax, but there was one important requirement: they had to use temple coins to pay the temple tax, because the Roman coins bore the image of Caesar, and that was considered idolatrous. (Render unto Caesar the things are Caesar's.)

That is where the money changers came in. If persons did not have temple currency available, they could change their Roman currency into temple money right there in the temple's outer courtyard.

But, as is so often the case, wherever there is a need, there often is greed. There are those who are always ready to exploit the needs of others for their personal gain, and that is what was happening in the temple, and that is what angered Jesus. What started out as a service to make worship easy, degenerated into a selfish pursuit of gain.

Jesus walks into the temple, and he sees the merchants selling sheep and goats and pigeons. He sees the money changers at their counters. He hears the noise, the shouting, the haggling, and he becomes very angry.

He makes a whip of chords and drives them all out, scatters the coins of the money changers, and rebukes them, saying: "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" Or as Matthew more pointedly puts it: "He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers.'" (Matthew 21: 13)

Jesus did not hide his anger, and in becoming angry, he has shown us that there are times when it is appropriate and necessary for us to be angry too.

As strange as it may sound, anger can be and often is, an act of love. Appropriate anger often flows out of love.

You cannot love somebody and be indifferent to the ill-treatment that they face.

You cannot fulfil the great commandment to love your neighbour as yourself and not become angry when your neighbour is mistreated, abused, exploited, neglected, marginalized, or discriminated against. You cannot claim to love your neighbour and remain indifferent to their suffering.

Jesus went to the temple, and he saw how people were being exploited, and he was angry. His anger was not motivated by hatred for those who were exploiting others; rather, his anger was motivated by his love for those who were being exploited.

For all who are followers of Jesus, I ask you: when last have you been angry - really angry? Not just about the little personal slights and hurts and insults you have faced, but angry about the wrongs and indifference and injustice, and discrimination, and neglect, and ill-treatment that others face, especially the vulnerable and the marginalized.

Do we get angry with those who oppress others? Do we get angry with those who can help but choose to turn their backs or look on with indifference?

What about those who go hungry and those who die from preventable and curable diseases? Those who suffer abuse and neglect at the hands of those who are supposed to love, protect and care for them?

Do we get angry at those things? Angry enough to take a stand, to speak out, to give of ourselves and our resources so that change can come about?

Being angry is not about flying off the handle and wanting to harm or hurt anyone; it is about being sufficiently moved to do whatever you can to change things.

Jesus was angry, and he let his anger be known – he was moved to change things – knowing that he would have to pay the price.

We are observing the period of Lent. It is unfortunate, that for many, lent has been reduced to set of ritualistic observances. Giving up things that do not cost us anything to give up and with the added comfort of knowing that we will return to those things when the period of lent is over.

I urge us; let us make lent different this year. Rather than only committing to giving up something for a few weeks, let us commit to doing somethings that will bring about real change, not only for ourselves, but for others as well, especially those who can't bring about those changes themselves. And if it means that we have to let our anger show, then so be it. There's a time to be angry!

Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers. There are lots that need to be overturned in our societies as well, lots to overturn in the systems and structures that oppress and exploit, marginalise and discriminate, and ignore those who are desperately in need. And there is a lot that needs to be overturned in our churches, too.

Let's pray for the courage and love to be angry when we should be and to let our anger lead to meaningful action and change.

Thanks be to God.

Rev. Sydney Elias