

Fr James' homily for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading: Ecclesiasticus 27:30 - 28:7
Second Reading: Romans 14:7-9
Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35



What is anger? How do you define what it is and what it does? That's a really good question, and what we are dealing with in Scripture this week. Not just anger though, but forgiveness. Yes, it is nitty gritty Gospel stuff today that is always core to the teaching of Jesus!

The Book of Ecclesiasticus (otherwise called Sirach for its author) that we read from today is a book of sayings to dip into, and it is good today:

“Resentment and anger, these are foul things, and both are found with the sinner”. There's another translation that puts it better ***“the sinner holds them tight”.*** Brothers and sisters, let us not kid ourselves - we are the sinner and this teaching today is holding up a mirror to ourselves. How we love to hold onto grudges, even when we know this to be self-destructive behaviour. How it is in families, at a one-to-one level, and then reflected in world affairs.

What is anger? The great Catholic philosopher St Thomas Aquinas defines anger as a passion for revenge that goes beyond the control of reason. In other words, it is not natural and is not balanced. Dante, describing the rungs of hell, pictures the angry as eternally breathing in smoke - they can't breathe properly, or see or speak. They are eternally uncomfortable. (Now, remember, there is a good sort of anger, as when Scripture talks of the anger of God, or the anger of the “Master” in today's Gospel, which is a passion to put things right, to right what is out of balance. Our anger is more like trying to keep things out of balance).

What is the antidote to anger? It is forgiveness. What is forgiveness? Ultimately, of course, forgiveness gets its meaning from God. The one most ever justified to be angry is the Lord Jesus, but he says “Father, forgive them”... When he is risen he comes to them and says “Peace be with you”. So forgiveness is not a trivial or easy or weak thing. Rather it is massively costly. Both Sirach and Jesus tie our forgiveness of others to God's forgiveness of us. We say so each day in the Lord's Prayer. In reconciliation, each party moves bit by bit to the centre. In forgiveness, the one party takes on themselves what the other should do and bears that burden for them - the opposite of hugging our resentment to ourselves. You cannot do that truly until you know the power of God's forgiveness...the call to be perfect is not a call to some

impossible standard but a call to spiritual heroism. What an adventure our faith is!! If you want to feel alive - try to live the life of forgiveness.

These are very nitty gritty practical Scriptures, are they not? They build a lot on the theme last week of fraternal correction. We are all responsible for one another, says St Paul again today, so we cannot retreat into our seemingly comforting - but in reality harmful - anger.

Reading some preachers' suggestions about how to react practically to these Scriptures, I have been struck by a few: hold in your mind, right now, some resentment, and think how energy draining it is. This week do something to go the extra mile and approach somehow the subject of your anger. Don't do gossip!! How it seems to fulfil a psychological need in us, but say a prayer instead. Criticise someone to the extent you are willing to help that person deal with a problem. And, of course, use the Sacrament of Reconciliation, so you can touch the forgiveness of God.

The image of the Cross in our churches, in our homes, is the eloquent explanation of the difficult meaning of forgiveness, and behind it the dangerous, destructive meaning of anger. The other image - and reality - in our churches, is the Tabernacle, the still centre of our parish life. Come to church! Be with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament! Come to that still centre that is the best antidote to all the agitation and anxiety and aggravation that surround us all in these continuing strange and scary days. The Lord says "Peace be with you".

Amen.

Fr James and Fr Tom wish you a blessed Sunday. Keep safe and well, and never hesitate to pick up the telephone and be in touch. See you in church I hope! Keep in close contact with the website for news of how practical plans are developing.