

CHRISTIAN ANGER by Fr Michael Harper

'In your anger do not sin, do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold' Ephesians chapter 4 verses 26-27.

It is clear from these verses that Paul assumes that anger is permissible for Christians provided they keep it within a time limit. If anger in and of itself were wrong he would have put it quite differently, and in any case, God is said on many occasions to have been angry, and Paul writes about the wrath of God in the epistle to the Romans. Jesus Christ was also said to have been angry on some occasions (for instance Mark 3b, 5, John 2 vs 13-17).

To be without feeling is to be less than human. It was said of William Carey that he literally 'felt the darkness of heathendom'. All great pioneers have been men and women who have been passionate about their mission from God. Anger is a God-given emotion, but like our sexual desires needs to be kept on a tight rein. What then is sinful anger?

1. Anger which exceeds the time limit.

Paul sets a specific time limit to anger – 'do not let the sun go down while you are still angry'. He may have known the famous words of Plutarch 'make it a rule to shake hands by sunset'. It is good advice, for there is nothing that hinders sleep more radically than anger against someone who has wronged us.

It is important for our health to let anger have its course. Anger is good to let out. To contain it can lead to harmful physical and psychological side effects. I am told that in Mexico when cars are involved in an accident, the drivers are locked away in a jail for 24 hours! That is wise when the Latin temperament can easily turn anger into violence. There needs to be a cooling off period, and we are seldom rational while our anger lasts.

One useful way I have found of handling anger is to put it into writing, perhaps in the form of a letter to the person who has upset us; but never post the letter. Tear it up or erase it if it is on your personal computer!

2. Anger that has no reasonable basis.

In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned His listeners, 'anyone who is angry with his brother without cause will be subject to judgement' Matthew 5 v22 Although the words 'without cause' are missing from some of the earliest versions of this passage, the truth remains: Jesus is not giving blanket disapproval of anger – there is a justification for it when it is in a good cause. But He solemnly warns us against groundless bursts of anger. Paul helps us here when he says about anger: 'do not give the devil a foothold'. In this chapter of Ephesians, Paul covers a number of moral or ethical matters, which are part of

the 'putting on' of the new self, 'created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness'(v23). They include lying, stealing, gossiping and immorality. But it is only when he mentions 'anger' that he warns about the devil.

Clearly anger can allow the devil, like some door-to-door salesmen, to get a foot in the door. This may partly be because anger encourages irrationality. Hence the importance of seeing that our anger is justified (based on facts not rumours) and that it never lasts longer than twelve hours. Once the devil is in the house he can cause havoc in our lives.

3. Anger that is easily provoked

It is interesting that it was when Jonah was angry with God for not demolishing the Ninevites that he confesses 'I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love'(4 v 2) it is a pity he did not accept the logic of what he believed!

This truth is applied also in the New Testament when James writes, 'everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires' (1 vs.19-20).

Anger is very easily kindled when we don't listen carefully, and when we speak too often. There is nothing in life more destructive than unbridled anger. We are not surprised to find this mentioned in the great hymn of love in 1 Corinthians 13, 'love is not easily provoked – angered' (v5); it goes on to say, 'it keeps no record of wrongs'.

One of the greatest hindrances to successful Christian living is the fatal ability we all have of keeping records of wrongs, and storing our anger and resentment. We can only be at peace and be instruments of peace and reconciliation when we have discovered the secret of forgiving and forgetting wrongs.

This is particularly important for Christian leaders. In Titus 1 v 7 for example, one of the qualifications of a leader is to be 'not quick tempered'. One of the weaknesses of the famous Anglican Charles Simeon was his hot temper. During his lifetime he struggled with this besetting sin, and largely overcame it.

4. Anger that is unforgiving.

During 1988 we remembered several great historical moments. Two of these are in stark contrast – the Armada and the Glorious Revolution. As far as the Armada is concerned all has been forgiven, and it was appropriate that the Spanish Ambassador should have lit the first bonfire when the event of four hundred years ago was commemorated.

But all has not been forgiven since the Glorious Revolution, as the sad events in Northern Ireland bear testimony. The continuing bearing of grudges and an unforgiving spirit whipped up by commemorative Marches, feed the flames of anger and allow the devil to

control the circumstances. When the devil comes in through the back door, reason flies out of the window.

Forgiveness is not easy. We have to do it over and over again. But it is the only sure way to thwart the attacks of the devil and allow the Holy Spirit to form the character of Jesus Christ in His people.

Prayer;

God of mercy, You are slow to anger and have immense stores of grace, teach us how and when to be angry, and help us to end each day free from it, forgiving and forgetting those who have wronged us. Let the character of Your Son Jesus Christ be implanted more and more in our lives. Amen.

Further reading:

James 4 vs.1-12, 1 Corinthians 13, Colossians 3 vs 1-14