

THE ANGER THE WORLD NEEDS

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Matthew 10.34 Says Jesus "I have come not to bring peace but a sword". It's a saying that seems at variance with many of the pictures of Jesus that we have – Jesus the peacemaker, Jesus the reconciler – but here is Jesus the conflict bringer. "I have come not to bring peace but a sword".

But if you look at Jesus' life you'll see this is no more than the truth. On one occasion he enters a synagogue and the elders are more concerned with the proper keeping of the Sabbath law than they are with the needs of a sick man, and we are told he looked around at them with anger and sorrow.

Or listen to his preaching: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. For you tithe mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law; justice, and mercy and faith. You blind guides." Can't you feel the fury?

Everywhere Jesus goes controversy seems to follow. When he preached in his home synagogue he told them that God cared for other nations as much as he cared for Israel. They were so furious they drove him out of town.

In the end came the great explosion. The temple was the centre of the religious and political power in Israel. The only way to get forgiveness was to go to the temple and offer a sacrifice. When you did Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us the Temple was charging 15 times the cost of a lamb bought in the marketplace. Jesus was infuriated and decided "I'm going to speak out against this if they kill me for it". And that is exactly what they did. He strode into the temple and drives out the trailers with a whip. "My house should be a house of prayer for all nations but you have made it a den of robbers". It was then the authorities decided to get rid of this Galilean rabble-rouser. "I have come not to bring peace but a sword" - that's a simple factual statement.

Why is Jesus sometimes so challenging? The answer is quite simple – because of the value he puts upon people. When he thinks of how a selfish rich man can enjoy great wealth while utterly blind to the poor beggars sitting at his gate his love moves him to protest. When he sees widows robbed of their property by religious leaders who then make a public exhibition of themselves saying long hypocritical prayers it sets his indignation blazing. When he sees the poor cheated in the very temple of God he cannot keep silent. For Jesus his anger comes out of his love. Because of that he has challenge hypocrisy and injustice in a way which inevitably brings controversy. "I have come not to bring peace but a sword".

Isn't one of the lessons we learn from the ministry of Jesus that if you have a deep concern for people sometimes it's going to make you angry? Islamic fundamentalists bombers destroy a disco in Bali butchering innocent young people so you can hardly tell which body is which. How does anyone value human life so cheaply? Doesn't it maker you angry?

Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe stokes racial antagonism setting black and against white, Shona against Matabele. His generals use their intervention in the Congo as an opportunity to loot mineral resources – doesn't it make you angry?

Monsieur Chirac frustrates the reform of the Common Agricultural policy. With the result that farmers in the poor nations continue to be denied markets for their products so perpetuating an economic system that puts obstacles in the way of third nations breaking out of their poverty. Doesn't it make you angry?

Sometimes if you care about people you have to be angry. Someone goes out driving a car under the influence of drink and they kill someone. Drug dealers deal in poison. Someone gets a brick through their window because of the colour of their skin. If you love people how can you not be angry? Sometimes I think our prayer ought to be God make me more angry than I am. "I have come not to bring peace but a sword".

Yes, but anger alone will never save the world. Listen to this from Paul. "Be angry but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger". Anger is a necessary part of the Christian life but it is a dangerous emotion. Have you ever met people as I have where anger never seems more than a step away?

Bishop Jack Spong tells how he pioneered Christian Jewish contacts when he a vicar in Richmond Virginia. He invited the local Reformed rabbi to speak at his Church and he went to speak at the synagogue. The result was violent controversy from Christians who saw as a betrayal of the argument. On TV one day Bishop Spong said that the rabbi had become one of his closest friends "indeed he is so close a friend that if I were to die tomorrow, he would surely be one of my pallbearers". A letter arrived the next week from a disturbed Christian; "I hope it will not be long before your wish can be carried out".

Sometimes with people you know their anger isn't a part of their love, it's a projection of the frustrations or conflicts they feel in themselves. Anger can be creative but it can be destructive, bitter and pointless. So lets look at Jesus once more and let me show you the only kind of anger the world needs.

Firstly Jesus knew how to control his anger. A group of men bring him a woman taken in adultery. Think about it. They bring a woman taken in adultery. How many people does it normally take to commit adultery? Isn't it two? But the men bring the woman. As for the man well the woman probably led him astray in the first place. A man - a few wild oats. Who hasn't? But for a woman to betray her husband like this. She deserves everything she's going to get. Jesus is clearly furious at their hypocrisy. But he doesn't just blaze away at them. He sits silently with his head down and writes in the sand. I think he's controlling his anger. When his reply comes it's infinitely more effective because it's calm and measured. "Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone".

Stephen Tyng was once rebuked by a young minister for losing his temper and he replied, "Young man I control more temper every 15 minutes than you will in a lifetime". Sometimes a motivating anger is a pure emotion, a controlling anger is not. If you cannot control your anger you are part of the world's problem not its solution.

Then secondly Jesus' is always angry about what is done to others, never what is done to him. Jesus had an immense capacity for moral indignation and yet when they spat upon him,

mocked him, scourged him, crucified him, he did not lash out with angry words. Said Peter of Jesus "When he was abused he did not return abuse, when he suffered, he did not threaten " (I Peter 2.23). Personal wrong did not make him angry, "Any man who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven," he said. Anger at how others are treated can be a pure anger; anger at how we have been treated can so easily twist us inside into bitterness.

Then thirdly anger needs to be linked to a positive sense of possibility. Notice Paul says do not let the sun go down on our anger. Anger is one response to a deeply unjust world – but it'd better not be the only one. Let me tell you a story.

A man entered a monastery noted for its commitment to silence. Every person took a vow of total silence. There was however one exception. At the end of each year they were allowed to speak two words to the Abbot, the head of the monastery.

A new monk arrived and immediately took the vow of silence. He didn't speak a single word the whole year. At the end of the year, they brought him into the abbot's office to speak his two words. The two words he chose to speak were 'food bad'. He then got up from his chair and left. At the end of the second year he came back to the abbot again. And this time he said "Room small". At the end of the third year of silence, he came back to the abbot again and he said, "Bed uncomfortable". At last after 4 years of silence he said to the Abbot "Want out".

"I'm not surprised," said the abbot. "All you've done since you've been here is complain".

Some people seem unable to do anything but strike a negative note. Jesus anger is real but his is the anger of a man who is always concerned to bring something positive out of the situation. No one had a quicker eye than Jesus for the good in people and no one is quicker to praise it when he sees it. A rich young ruler comes to him. Maybe his wealth has been linked to the exploitation of the poor, but there a quality in him that moves Jesus heart. Zacchaeus is a lackey of the Romans, a thief and a cheat. But Jesus can see the good in him and reaches out for it. The Samaritans are the despised heretics, but Jesus sees through the stereotype to the good within. The point about Jesus is not just that he will not endure the evil that others will tolerate, it's that he sees the good to which others are blind. So that 23rd chapter of Matthew, which is full of such fiery preaching, ends with him crying "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her children under her wings". Like a terrible storm ending in a rainbow Christ's anger comes to its close in love.

"I have come not to bring peace but a sword". Without doubt that gives as a gospel imperative in an unjust world. Love and anger are linked. But if we are going to be angry we'd better be sure what kind of anger it is. Before we are fit to take this charge upon ourselves we had better come ourselves to the foot of the cross and join our lives to the one we see there. Only as our lives are moulded by his can our anger be the kind which helps to save the world.

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