

## Jesus, the Radical

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday in Lent, March 2, 1997. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Anger! It may not be the toughest thing we have to deal with, but it's right up there. Everybody gets angry. Some seem to deal with it effectively. It seems to destroy others. All the books these days suggest we have to find constructive ways to manage our anger. Thirty years ago, they told us just to let it all hang out. If you're angry, say so, express it, don't bottle it up. Now, psychologists and physicians say that anger is a spiraling sort of thing. Anger feeds on itself and we'd better get to the bottom of it or it will eat us alive. That's what the experts say about our anger, but what about God's anger?

Does God get angry? Does the God who comes to us in Jesus get angry? Many people find it hard to imagine Jesus getting angry. We may find it hard to imagine Jesus getting so angry that he made a whip of cords to drive the money changers, sheep and cattle and their sellers from the temple precincts. So angry that he "poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables."

But anybody who really reads the Bible knows that this isn't the only time Jesus got angry. Listen to his anger, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Blind guides! Blind fools! You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?" That's a pretty blistering, angry attack.

The book of Revelation, that mysterious, last book in the Bible, speaks of the "wrath of the Lamb" which is a poetic way of speaking about the anger of Jesus. Just as Jesus got angry when he saw what was happening in the temple precincts, the book of

Revelation shows us Jesus warning that he'll come in anger to cleanse and reform his church. For example, to the church at Pergamum, the risen Christ says, "Repent! If not, I will come to you soon and make war." The Bible often speaks of an angry Jesus.

People used to say that the big difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament is that the God of the Old Testament is an angry God. In the Old Testament God is always getting angry, sending fire and brimstone to punish the ungodly, causing the earth to open up and swallow God's enemies at other times, sending bears out of the woods to kill and eat children who mock God's prophets. The God of the Old Testament is an angry God, but the God of the New Testament, they say, is a loving God.

It's not that simple. The God of the Old Testament is both a loving and an angry God. And the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ is both a loving and an angry God. Now I'm just as uncomfortable with God's anger as any of you. <sup>Part of that may be because we're uncomfortable with any anger.</sup> But the apostles and the church in every age have plainly taught that the God of the Old Testament has come to us in Jesus Christ. Therefore it shouldn't surprise us to see Jesus getting angry. In fact, it should alert us to the truth that love and anger need not be antithetical. Even though, in our experience, anger is rarely an expression of love and is most often harmfully expressed - for God, anger is always an expression of love. ... *Anger is directed to those God loves.*

The purpose of anger -- God's or ours -- is not just to liven things up, to provide a wider more colorful range of emotions on the old existential palette of our feelings. The purpose of anger is to reveal the fact that someone is in pain, that someone is

hurting. It may be the one who expresses the anger, or it may be one for whom that person cares deeply, or it may be both. But, as real as the pain is, it needs to be addressed and assuaged.

Where does all this anger come from? Or, if you buy that it arises from our pain, where does all the pain come from? Sometimes it's just because we don't get our own way. Which is, often, not God's way anyway. We always need to distinguish which it is, and are often not too good at that. Especially when we think our way is the right way, maybe even God's way. Then our anger can be justified, too.

But often our anger comes from being used. One reason we get angry is because we don't like being used by others. We get angry when we discover someone has sought out our friendship, not for ourselves, but because we can do something for them or because we can introduce them to someone. We hate being used. We get angry, very angry, and we feel hurt, terribly hurt, when we discover that people have been using us. We want people to like us for ourselves, nor for what we can do for them-so we get angry when we feel we're being used as a means to some other end.

I suppose God feels that way also. God wants us to relate to him as our chief end. God doesn't want us to use him for some other ends. God want's us to love him for himself, not for what he can do for us. Sometimes we try to use God for our own purposes. Sometimes we use God's church for our purposes, not God's purpose. I believe that makes God angry. I believe that's why Jesus got so angry. The money changers and the buyers and sellers of cattle in

the temple precincts were, apparently, using God for their purposes, using God's house for their purposes." <sup>Religion had become a business,</sup>  
Ministers... Elders/Deacons... members... visitors.

Anger is a big part of the life we share. But that doesn't necessarily give us many handles on how to deal with anger. God's or ours. Presumably, God knows why God is angry. And the Biblical evidence supports that. God is invariably angry when we behave in ungodly ways. When we fail to worship, when we refuse to serve, when we are intentionally brutal and cold to each other, but, I believe, God is especially angry when we use God as the means to some other end. That makes God angry. And God sometimes expresses his love in anger and he did when Jesus cleansed the temple.

"God's love never changes", the Confession of 1967 proclaims. "Against all who oppose him, God expresses his love in wrath. In the same love God took on himself judgment and shameful death in Jesus Christ, to bring humankind to repentance and new life."

Lent has been the time when men and women prepare to profess their faith and join the church. Traditionally, the story of Jesus cleansing the temple has been read on the third Sunday in Lent to remind all of us who have been baptized, or who are preparing for baptism, to cleanse the temple of our hearts; to use our bodies and our lives in ways that glorify God who has come to us in Jesus Christ; to make the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ not the means to some other end, but our chief end and joy.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, we pray for your holy Catholic Church. fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your son our Savior. Amen.