

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – September 13, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Vigil; 7:15, 8:30, & 11am Sunday Masses – 800 words

“Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight”, we heard in the first reading. I often counsel people who struggle with anger about how in the different challenges that come up, giving rise to a response of anger, the anger is always the easy way out. It is an easily-indulged passion or emotion. If someone offends us, it’s easier to bite back than to pause, calm down, and think of a wiser response. If someone doesn’t do things the way we want, it’s easier to criticize, belittle, or even rage, than to pause, pray for patience, and then consider carefully how to correct them charitably. And so forth. For those with this struggle, in so many situations, anger is the easy go-to. “The sinner hugs [anger] tight.”

But the Book of Sirach continues, “Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the Lord?” That word “nourish” is key to understanding the way out of sinful anger. Our Catechism teaches us that anger itself is a passion or emotion that is neither good nor bad: it is what it is. It wells up in us, often involuntarily, and sometimes in spite of what our heart desires. One may have already resolved not to be angry about this or that thing, but a trigger occurs and the anger boils up nonetheless. It is a very difficult emotion, to be sure. But again, it’s neutral – until it engages our reason and will. It’s what we do with the emotion that marks the difference between virtue and vice, good and evil.

So we must avoid “nourishing” the emotion of anger, if we would find healing from the Lord – that is, a way out of it always or often ending badly, in sin. There are many ways that one might nourish anger, thus continuing to “hug it tight”. One of these is by not making sufficient time for contemplative prayer. “But I pray every day!”, you say. Yes, but what kind of prayer? Is it mostly vocal – for example, saying the rosary; and petitionary – for example, talking to God about your needs and wants? Or do you also spend silent time in his presence, exposing your heart to his light and considering your life before him? It is in that privileged forum that we recognize patterns, seek grace, and make concrete resolutions to improve.

We might also nourish anger through unforgiveness – the other great theme of today’s readings. It is impossible to let go of anger and truly forgive, if we keep “replaying the tape” of whatever it was that gave rise to it. But that is where our fallen and wounded memories often go. We so want to hold onto the past – to “hug it tight”! It’s as if we thought, “Perhaps if I just salt the wounds again and recall this all just once more, something about it will change!” But that is impossible. The past is, as it were, set in amber. It’s not going to change. Only the way we see it can change; that is, the Lord can redeem it, healing our hearts, so that we see it in his light, rather than squinting at it through the darkness.

And so this brings us back to contemplative prayer. Rather than indulging mental reruns, being triggered, getting angry again, and not wanting to forgive, we need to channel all of that to that quiet offering of ourselves to God in prayer. Forgiveness involves giving whatever it is to him: “‘Vengeance is mine’, says the Lord”.¹ Now perhaps you’re starting to notice a pattern here in the solutions that I propose; anger and wrath can be blustery and noisy – if not in our words and gestures, then certainly in our hearts and minds. A major part of learning to re-direct it aright involves seeking silence with the Lord. It is there that we may gain his grace and seek his strength so that when our passions do flare up, our reason may prevail.

Yes, the emotion of anger is inevitable, but sinfully giving vent to it need not be. We can learn to curb the replaying of memories; we can learn to go for a walk, scrub the bathroom grout, or otherwise channel our energy into a healthy distraction, rather than throwing a fit. Though we

¹ See Romans 12:19.

must not forget that there are some things that do merit a response of anger; there is anger that is righteous. But it can never trump charity, justice, prudence, or any other virtue. Righteous anger may lead us to action and even vigorous action; may it never lead us to sin. Reason must prevail. “Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the Lord?” May the Lord help us not to “hug it tight”; to let it go.