

## Lent 3.09

I think we have all been in situations which have tried our patience, and at time the result has been that we have lost our cool and reacted violently, telling people off and saying awful things. Afterwards we are usually sorry and wish we had not acted that way. And we remember that sentence from Scripture which says that human anger does not bring about God's justice. In fact, during this season of Lent we are especially focused upon controlling our anger and mastering our pride, as one of the prefaces for Lent tell us. The scriptures also tell us that people who have control of their speech have control of themselves, and from our own experiences we know that this is true. The person who does not offend in speech will more than likely not offend in action either. The scripture also tells us that the tongue, although a tiny reality, can destroy a life with one word. That too we know from our experience. It is what we say that makes or unmakes our worlds, both our personal and our public worlds. How many families have lost their unity because of what a family member has said. How many wars have been fought because of what a government leader has said. The pen is mightier than the sword, we are told. But the pen is simply the instrument of the tongue,

that little bit of flesh in our mouths which expresses what we think and feel. Watch out when it is the instrument of anger.

That is why today's Gospel always presents itself to us as somehow shocking. Jesus, the lamb of God, Jesus the one who will be silent before his accusers, Jesus the one who urged us to place ourselves at the service of others, Jesus the one who told us to imitate himself by being meek and humble of heart, this same Jesus now appears as someone who is angry, indeed even violent, and both in speech and in action. He strides into the temple area and overturns the tables of those doing business there. In John's account of this scene he even makes a whip out of cords to drive them out. What has upset him so much? In John's Gospel it is because these business people have made the temple a marketplace. In the other three Gospels it is not just the presence of these business people in the temple but the fact that they are robbing the people. Thus the temple, instead of being a place of prayer, has become a marketplace and even a den of robbers, and Jesus is enraged.

Dare we say that the Lord lost his cool and that his anger does not work the justice of God? I suspect most of us are not willing to say that. We would prefer to say that the Lord's anger is justified

here. That would also seem to be the reason why the Gospel writers included this scene in their stories. If they had not thought this, they would undoubtedly have left it out of their writings.

But if that is the case, must we not also say that there may also be situations in our lives when anger is justified? Can you think of any? And if you can, would you want to distinguish in the following way? An injustice has been done to someone. We ought to respond to this fact and not simply remain silent in the face of it. So we take a clear and firm position. We speak out and call for the rectification of the injustice. We are therefore angry in the sense that we are refusing to allow this situation to go unaddressed. But—and here is the distinction---we do all this without resorting to violence. No whips or tables overturned. Only when our firm rejection of the injustice does not work do we then resort to physical force, to violence. And that, it would seem, is the situation in which Jesus finds himself. The robbers are not going to respond to anything less than physical force.

In nine out of ten cases in our personal lives violence or physical force is not justified and is usually not effective. Think of parents. Their clear and firm rejection of a child's anger or misdemeanors is what is most effective, and not physical violence. The same

seems to be true in our relationships with each other. And here the violent word does not usually help, let alone physical force. More often than not, a calm and measured statement of what we believe to be the truth of the situation is the most effective tool for removing differences and alienation. As St. Ignatius said, we speak so that the truth may appear and not that we may seem to have the upper hand.

As far as public life is concerned, there can be cases of justified anger, and there may even be a need for violence. For example, our church defends the right of a nation to wage war for its own self-defense, but only if certain conditions are met. However, the church does not allow for the waging of nuclear wars because they are unlimited wars and therefore do not distinguish between soldiers and civilians and are therefore considered unjust wars.

Our church may well be forced in the future to take very firm positions which will go against the opinions of many, perhaps even the majority, in our country today. Indeed, it may happen that it will be forced to fight against new laws which contradict its own beliefs. Let us hope that in this struggle it will be strong and firm but not in any sense of the word violent. If we become violent, we are going to make more enemies than friends and thereby

undermine the possibility of making our voice really heard. That, it seems to me, is the situation with the abortion issue and with same-sex marriage. Instead of condemning those who disagree with us on these issues, let us try to explain our positions to them. We must presume, at least at the outset, that those who disagree with us are in good faith and believe that they have good reasons for their positions. In short, we may be angry but we must also be reasonable and humble.

The Lord Jesus was angry and even violent in this gospel scene. Let us reflect on it and ask ourselves how it can serve as a model for our lives today.