

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Just How Angry Are You?

Anger is an emotion, and some psychologists tell us that emotions in themselves are morally neutral, neither good nor bad. We shouldn't confuse the *arrival* of our feelings with the tenor of our moral life; often, it is true, we don't choose our feelings at all: they wash over us, sometimes they overwhelm us, seemingly to the point where they overrule our power to choose. It's also true that if we can't *choose*, we can't *sin*: sin is a free choice. But it's hard to deny that when our emotion overwhelms us, we are most at risk of doing and saying things that are damaging, harmful, ungoverned; and this means that we are in the territory of sin. We do not hesitate to condemn those who drive under the influence of drink or drugs, even if they don't kill a pedestrian or crash the car. In the same way we should fear the things which rob us of our balance and our self-control. They may be excusable, but not respectable; they endanger our moral life.

A Climate Of Anger

We may sometimes glimpse a current of the anger that flows beneath the impassive surface of life. We expect people to be civilised, quiet, well-behaved. English life has well-kept gardens, tidy houses, decent values, sound food, trustworthy laws, firm democracy. I still hear people stoutly asserting that there is no finer place to live on earth. At the same time, we have a huge problem with street crime, and our own city has become a place for gun law, the violent robbery and injuring of the old, a place of rape and drunkenness, of prejudice and racism. How far does it have to go before we stop thinking of it as the home of law and order? One of the clearest results of this trend is the sure erosion of patience and tolerance; the popular press is rampantly xenophobic, it is a commonplace to hear of lynch-mobs and shouting crowds, the temptation to "take the law into our own hands", the beating-up of nurses in A & E, the threatening of teachers in schools. I reckon we should also take a long look in the mirror. I've sensed for some time the acceptance of "righteous" anger as a source of truth and authority; even within the Church, a spirit of anger makes claim to give us the right to be heard and to prevail; the romantic notion that anger gives privileged access to truth seems to me to be a dangerous assumption, when everything we know about anger points to its injustice and distortion.

Today's Gospel

The parable of the unforgiving steward eliminates from the picture any sense that our anger with another person might be righteous. To believe that, we'd have to discount God's forgiveness of us, to forget that we have needed the death of Jesus for our reconciliation. If we want to, we can find in the remembrance of this gift the source of our forgiveness of others. It seems to me that the steward, once he had left the presence of his master, forgot what his master had done. He saw his fellow-servant quite separately from himself; having been pardoned a king's ransom, he saw the petty debt he was owed as giving him rights over his brother. He felt free to tyrannise, because his own terror had been swept away. Our own case is not very different. As long as we experience our lives as spared, we shall be impelled to spare others. If we take up the weapon of anger, it is because we have come to think of ourselves as worthy. We are in great need of the truth.

As We Forgive Them

The Lord's Prayer teaches us that those who offend us can become treasure for us, just as the gift we make to the poor becomes treasure. The treasure in heaven that is laid up for us is counted in forgiveness. Only those who have forgotten their need for it can afford to give up this form of insurance!

Fr Philip