

Walking in the way of love

Last week, I talked about the start of the Coronavirus panic in St Ives - the scramble for toilet paper, and later for rice, pasta and tinned food. Many of us were amused by it at the time, particularly given how much other food was still available.

But many people felt desperate. They were worried rather than amused. They saw other people taking what they thought was more than their fair share. They saw other people with what they couldn't get. And they got angry.

Our governments implemented rules to keep us safe, acting on the best information about the virus they had. And those rules caused problems. Some people were better off under those rules than others. And many people who were worse off resented the governments, and resented those who were better off. And they got angry.

Mostly, that anger over coronavirus is history now, but anger is prevalent in our society. People get angry about all sorts of things. It might surprise you to learn this, but I can tell you that people in churches get angry too.

I've known people in churches to be angry about many things, including church seating, paint colours, how the minister is dressed – and social injustices too.

Should we, who know Jesus, get angry? And if we do, what should we do about it?

In the lead up to today's reading from his letter to the Ephesians, Paul contrasts how the Ephesians – and we – should live, against how they lived before they came to know Jesus. In verses 17 and 18 he says "So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts."

So, no matter what people do, if they don't know God in their lives, there is something wrong. This can be difficult for us to come to terms with in our modern, multi-faith society. We know that people of other faiths – and indeed people of no faith at all – do good things. We know that there are Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, humanist and other charities working alongside Christian charities in looking after those in need.

We can thank God for those people and those organisations, and they are, as the saying goes "doing the Lord's work", and we, as followers of Jesus know that "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights," (James 1:17).

But there is more to life and eternity than doing good deeds and being nice people.

Our reading from Ephesians begins with Paul saying, " you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour," and we do that, because, he says, "we are all members of one body". While we have a relationship with God through Jesus, we also have relationships with each other, as the church – as the body of Christ.

We are members of one another. We have a responsibility to each other.

Paul tells us, "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

In the first line in verse 26, Paul is quoting the Greek version of Psalm 4:4. "Be angry, and don't sin."

I think all of us struggle with anger. We see things that are wrong, and get angry. We see people not fixing things that are wrong, and we get angrier. We see people getting angry about things that we don't think they should be angry about, and we get angry at them too.

We see anger, and the effects of anger day to day. From road rage, to domestic violence, to riots, to terrorism and war.

Some people are better at controlling their anger than others, but I do think that all of us can go too far on occasion.

But Paul doesn't say "Don't be angry", instead he says, "In your anger do not sin."

Anger is not necessarily bad.

As we read the Old Testament, we find that God gets angry. Angry at sin, angry at injustice, angry at the way that the least among us are treated

And then in the New Testament, when Jesus saw that the disciples were stopping the children from coming to him, he was indignant "let the little children come to me" he said. (Mark 10:14)

When Jesus arrived at the temple to find people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money, he made a whip out of cords, and drove them from the temple; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. (John 2:14-15)

When Peter told Jesus what he should be doing, Jesus rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan! (Mark 8:33).

Anger is not necessarily bad. Anger at the injustices we see in our society and world, is not bad. Anger at the exploitation of the weak is not bad.

But if our anger – no matter how well meaning it might be, or how bad the thing we are angry at might be – leads us to do the wrong thing ourselves, then it is bad.

The demonstrations that turn violent. The desire for revenge rather than justice that we see around our legal systems. The blaming of one group for the actions of some of its members. And so on.

In our anger, we must not sin. Don't sin. "Be angry, and don't sin."

Paul then explains how we can do that. Firstly, don't stay angry: Paul writes, " Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry." That's not Paul saying that we should stay up all night shouting at each other – or at the television. It's him saying we shouldn't live with it: we either need to resolve our anger, or let go of it - give it to God.

Secondly, when we get angry and stay angry, we are giving the devil a foothold – we're making space for something not of God in our lives. Paul tells us something similar when he writes to the Romans (Romans 12:19,21) "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written (Deuteronomy 32:35): "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Of course, along with not doing the wrong thing because we are angry, we must not do the wrong thing generally. It is pretty obvious stuff: “Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands”, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths”, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.”

It is obvious stuff – but sometimes we all need to be reminded of the obvious stuff. Paul is telling us to be good people: Good friends, good colleagues, good neighbours. Good to each other as members of the body of Christ, and good to others as well.

And the goodness is not just about not doing bad, but it’s about sharing gifts with others: anyone who has been stealing should no longer steal, but work, so they have something to share. Instead of unwholesome talk, say things that will build others up.

Not stealing is mostly easy for us – most of us are reasonably well off and have most of what we need. But it might be something to think about as we prepare our tax returns.

Refraining from unwholesome talk might be trickier for us. Jokes, gossip, criticism, complaining. Conversations that get carried away. Do we think about what we say, or do we just let everything come out? And once things are said, they can’t be unsaid.

So we should work to control what we say. Think, faithfully, before we speak. Choose words carefully.

It will be difficult, and I think it’s harder still to consciously use our words to build each other up. But we can: Praise others when they’re due praise, encourage others when they need encouragement, comfort others when they need comfort. Share God’s love in words as well as in actions.

Paul says, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

If we’ve followed his advice so far, we will be kind and compassionate. We won’t be doing the wrong thing, we’ll be doing the right thing. Our anger won’t be controlling us. We won’t be engaging in theft or slander. We’ll be giving to others, and building them up with our words. We can do all of that.

The trickier part is “forgiving each other” – forgiving others, when they don’t manage to do all those things. Forgiving is hard because forgiving is costly. It costs us to forgive others.

The Lord’s prayer in Matthew’s gospel is explicit that forgiveness has a cost – “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” (Matthew 6:12)

If I forgive someone who has done the wrong thing to me, I give up my right to be resentful them. They owed me for the injustice against me... and now they’re forgiven, they don’t.

If you struggle with forgiveness – and we all do from time to time – I think a good approach is to start consciously forgiving the small things – forgive the person the bumps into your trolley at the supermarket, or the waiter who got your coffee order confused, or whatever it might be. Forgive the small things first and work your way up.

I know many people have been wronged and hurt in ways far worse than I have ever been. People whose lives and livelihoods and families have been torn apart by others. How can they forgive those who hurt them? How can they afford to forgive those who hurt them.

Forgiveness is costly. But Jesus told us to pray, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”, he puts our forgiveness of others, with God’s forgiveness of us. Paul says “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” Kindness, compassion and forgiveness go together.

Reflecting Jesus’ teaching, Paul says “just as in Christ God forgave you.” Yes, forgiveness is costly, but in giving up Jesus on the cross of calvary, God paid the price for our forgiveness. Whatever it is that we might have done, the price of our forgiveness has been paid.

And having received that forgiveness, Paul tells us to “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children” (5:1), and in doing that we are called to share that forgiveness, that grace, to forgive each other, to be kind and compassionate, to help each other, to be patient with each other, to do our best to live in peace with everyone, and help others live in peace.

We are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27) and we should be reflecting that image to the world around us. If we follow God’s example, then we will also be an example of God, of Jesus, to others.

And we follow this example by “[walking] in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Ultimately, of course, Jesus gave himself up as a sacrifice in our place. That’s how much he loves us. To give himself as a fragrant offering, for us. A sacrifice, and offering, that was perfect, and was acceptable to God.

As we walk through life we are called to follow that example, to walk in love, just as Jesus himself walked in love.

Whenever we think about how we should be living our lives, we should be looking to our heavenly Father, and to Jesus, as examples to follow.

When we step back, and try to see the passage as a whole, what’s the essence of what Paul is teaching here? He’s telling us about the change we experience when we come to know Jesus. And it’s not just an instantaneous change, but it’s an ongoing change: We are continually being changed as we grow in the knowledge and love of God – because, as we get to know God better, that must and does have an effect on us. No, we aren’t made perfect, but we are changed for the better.

Sometimes, we will push back against being changed. We’re pretty comfortable: We like things the way they are. We are, I think, quick to criticize, quick to complain, quick to become angry. Venting our anger can feel pretty good. It can feel good to criticize others, because putting others in their place, gives us a feeling of superiority. Pushing others down, lifts us up. But we need to, consciously and conscientiously build each other up.

As we are walking in the way of love, there are some things that we should be angry about, but we mustn’t be driven to do wrong as a result, and we mustn’t let the sun go down on our anger. As we are walking in the way of love, let’s choose our words wisely and faithfully, let’s share with each other and with other people. As we are walking in the way of love, let’s forgive one another, show grace to one another always love one another.

Amen.