

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time 130-A 122SMF Ps 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12
Sirach 27:30-28:7 Romans 14:7-9 Matt 18:21-35

Response: the Lord is king and merciful slow to anger and rich in compassion

The emotions are hard to figure out. Take anger. John Cassian who died in 432 around the time of Augustine and Patrick, brought to the West a lot of the wisdom from the East about the spiritual life. Then once established in France, he was asked to write up what he had learned. While he emphasized the call of God to holiness of life, he also saw the rooting out of vices as crucially important. Anger was associated with avarice coming only after gluttony and fornication. While he delved into the muddy waters of depression and spiritual laziness (acedia), he focused finally on pride and vainglory. I find the alignment of anger with depression and acedia to be insightful. He sounds like he read a lot of Sirach. He anticipated a lot of modern thinking about the baneful effects of unaddressed anger. Today we see anger written large across the world although there is also much mismanagement of anger in violence and even terrorism. Why even the resort to rape and sexual abuse as a war strategy to subjugate a people is also a form of repressed anger bursting out to the detriment of others. In any cinema complex there is at least one movie showing at any one time which glorifies uncontrollable anger. Some say that that is vicarious therapy. I doubt it. If our modern world does not know how to deal with anger, its nescience reflects a struggle that humankind has had for a long time.

The same gospel of Matthew that asks in the Sermon on the Mount for interiorly addressing the sources of our anger allows the master of the house in the story of forgiveness in chapter 18 to get angry. The servant himself once forgiven of a huge debt came down unmercifully on his fellow servant who owed him a pittance in contrast. Thus he showed that he had no appreciation of the break which he had gotten from his master. Yes, it is enough to make you mad. And I assume that the penalty dealt him was not unjust and met standards with which the other servants who reported the disconnect would have agreed. But did the master have to get angry? Immediately I hear you say oh he was justified in his anger. Since I see anger as a gift that shows us the boundaries of value and disvalue, I agree. I am happy that my parents were angry with me when I did stupid things. But what about the Sermon on the Mount?

Jesus addresses anger, not in a beatitude but in a hyperthesis 5:21-26 which means that Jesus is stretching beyond what you have heard was said to the ancients. "But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister...." is how v.22 reads. Some ancients added what is one word in Greek and two in English "without cause" and compromised the trenchant character of the Sermon. Either they wanted to remove obvious contradictions with other parts of the Bible and even of the same gospel or they wanted to make the message more palatable. But as John Cassian implies these words are weasel, that is, the cause can grow and grow. St. Jerome who was remembered for his cantankerous ways agreed. The purity of intention which is solicited by this hyperthesis is extraordinary and cannot be backed off. Any resorting to anger, no matter how just the cause is always a falling short and leaving oneself open to temptation. In modern processes for peace building there is talk of no escalation. Police officers are trained not to escalate the anger when they are called to an incident, mostly domestic squabbles. If John Cassian was worried about increasing the causes, Jesus wants to engage the inner person and know from where this anger comes. For some it came with their mother's milk. There are millions born today into an inherently angry situation of privation, refugee camps, irreversible poverty, abusive relationships. The sheer multiplicity of causes to be angry makes the uncompromising words of Jesus all the more reassuring and their echo in the monastic setting of reparative love all the more challenging. What is this life all about? Our Gospel dealing with anger seems such a pitiful thimbleful over against all the avalanche of sin and disgrace. But in the eyes of God who alone knows how to handle anger it is a down payment on an inheritance of God's righteousness. God will not be mocked. Yes, says the psalmist God is at times slow to anger but is in fact rich in mercy. God knows how to handle anger. Ask God to absorb our angers in a prayer of Lamentation. Talk with someone who has faced down their anger, their cosmic anger because it takes a long time to interiorize the saying of Paul: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." (Romans 14:8) Was the master (Matthew 18) angry or did he absorb the anger of the servant and begin the process of conversion? If there were no accounting for the elder's mishandling of his junior, would he have learned anything? Would we?

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