

## **Is this really the time and the place?**

A sermon preached by The Revd Dr Jo Bailey Wells  
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Readings: Exodus 34: 1-9; 1 Cor 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

### Our gospel lesson brings up the uncomfortable subject of anger.

When you get angry – I'm not going to say 'if you get angry' – how do you deal with it? Do you try and suppress it, hoping it'll go away by itself, because Christians are nice; withdraw from the situation that arouses it, to avoid conflict; take it out on inappropriate people

The problem, of course, is that none of these *solve* anything. Anger turned inwards can lead to depression; whilst anger that's expressed – therapeutic as it can be to get your feelings out - can be damaging and destructive. Meanwhile – if its something big that fuels your anger: world poverty or international terrorism or global warming or any and all of the G8 governments - it's hard to turn away. There may be no place to hide. Perhaps that's why anger is so scary.

And if we're scared of our own anger: what then of Jesus being angry? What do we make of love-your-neighbor-as-yourself-Jesus turning over the tables of those making bit of money out of sacrifice; the one who said 'Blessed are the peacemakers' making a whip of cords? I want to examine the cleansing of the temple through the lens of anger: to see what we may learn from it about anger, both God's and ours. The gospel would suggest there is a time, a place and an action that is appropriate, at least for Jesus, to express anger.

Let's get a sense of the *time*. On the one hand, it seems that Jesus is making his mark right at the beginning of his ministry according to John – you know, the kind of CEO who hires and fires the minute they're appointed, almost before reaching the desk. Barely has Jesus been summoned by John the Baptist and baptized, when, after a family wedding he heads to Jerusalem where the whole nation is gathered for Passover. The marketing department might call it seizing the moment for maximum impact. But, of course, we know that Jesus is not acting on his own agenda: this is no mere opportunistic stunt, a public venting of private grief. He is acting for God, expressing an anger that surely borders on despair. God has been wishing and warning and waiting for so long. This is the anger of One who is 'slow to anger', for sure. How slow is slow? Well, the Passover festival recalls the God 'merciful and gracious' who showed that mercy and grace to the Hebrews in slavery well over a thousand years earlier. God brought them out of Egypt and to Sinai, the place of life-changing encounter and commitment. It's only after this that we discover God's anger, when the precious people God has rescued flaunt the covenant as if ignorant of his mercy and grace. God's anger is the flip side to God's love, his abounding commitment of steadfast love and faithfulness to the thousandth generation. We've seen that commitment hold on through thick and thin – despite the failures that led to exile and the hopelessness with which they returned, despite the first temple falling to ruin and a second not yet finished, despite the countless prophets God has called to plead for repentance or

communicate hope. Now, finally God has sent his Son into the vineyard: ‘perhaps they will listen to him?’ Surely, at the Passover festival, the time of celebrating the God whose grace and mercy overflowed into the milk and honey of the Promised Land. Whose steadfast love and faithfulness continues, despite the anger.

Now let’s turn to the *place* where God’s patient anger finds its timely expression through Christ: in the temple at Jerusalem. This is the venue that safeguards the ark of the covenant, the gift and guide for living life to God. This is the house that focuses God’s promise of presence with his people. This is the altar that provides for atonement and reconciliation through the offering of sacrifice. It is a magnificent building, constructed to bring the people to God and bring God to the people – a permanent tent of meeting. Yet history had demonstrated it was far from permanent: Solomon’s building was destroyed at the hands of the Assyrians, and the ark had been carried off by enemy hands several times. And the prophets had warned incessantly about abusing God’s house. Hosea, Micah, Amos and Isaiah rail against the showiness of worship, the meaningless of sacrifice, and the false piety of those in charge. Ezekiel even communicates the inconceivable, a vision of God’s presence leaving the temple, because the place is so defiled. Jeremiah speaks to the ease with which people come and go in the temple, presuming on God’s presence yet without presuming his call to amend their ways. It’s not that Jesus doesn’t notice and appreciate the 46 years of pain-staking re-building there: it’s that he sees the tragedy with which it’s being wasted. The building is not achieving its ‘aims and objectives’. Jesus is consumed with zeal – with passion – for the house to bring about *true* encounter with God and *real* forgiveness from guilt. Instead it’s become a place of presuming God’s grace, and making money.

So from the time, and the place, we’ve move to the *action* of Jesus cleansing the temple. Jesus stands in the line of Old Testament prophets, a line of those who were specifically called by God to speak for him. In a sense Jesus picks up the baton from John the Baptist in John ch.1, who acknowledges his calling and establishes his authority. Of course Jesus is more than a prophet, but by the presentation of his action in the temple we are led to view him this way. He repeats the themes that so many of them voiced before him. Like many of his predecessors, he ‘takes on’ his message, and communicates it through both word and action. Consider Ezekiel, for example, climbing a watch-tower to demonstrate his role as a watchman over Israel. Here Jesus pours out the coins and overturns the tables. God’s word through such prophets was usually counter-cultural and unwelcome. It challenged the status quo, whether as a message of hope preached in bad times, or a message of gloom preached in (apparently) good times. So here: Jesus meets with resistance.

The discerning of God’s word is always a tricky issue with prophecy, because it is delivered through human vessels who can be fallible, who can falsify a true word or voice a false word. How do you know to believe Jesus? Through experience the Israelites had developed principles for discernment: one of which was to ask for a sign to help them recognize what is truly from God. Jesus takes this question seriously, ‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will build it up’. By those who took it literally it would be misunderstood: but for those ‘with eyes to see and ears to hear’ (a big theme in John’s gospel) - ultimately it made sense.

This brings us to another aspect marking the action as prophecy. Christians sometimes overlook the two directions of classical prophecy, the way in which it points to both the present *and* the future. It challenges the here-and-now as well as predicting future outcomes. So here: Jesus demands change in the present – an end to merchandising and money-changing – and he anticipates the future, with that deft move by which he refers to himself as God’s temple. The present and the future are, of course, interrelated: God is responsive to his people. Here we see again God’s patient forbearance at work, his anger moving very slowly: he communicates the problem, asks for change, warns of consequences and anticipates the outcome. He draws us into his purposes again and again. Finally, here in Christ, he even provides the ultimate solution: he provides the sacrificial lamb. All these animals crowding out the temple courtyard will no longer be needed for sacrifice: Jesus is offering himself not only as the new temple, the place for meeting God, but also the means by which they are fully and finally reconciled. It is at a future Passover according to John’s gospel, at just the hour to slaughter the Passover lamb, that the holy lamb of God is crucified. God’s anger is not just *disturbing*; it is far from destructive and damaging: ultimately it turns out to be redemptive.

Now let’s return to the subject of our anger. What might Jesus’ expression of God’s righteous anger teach us about our appropriate expression of anger? So often anger involves an outburst, at the wrong time in the wrong place and in the wrong way. Whereas, I want to suggest, there may be a time and a place for acting out of anger which is fitting and fruitful, even God-given.

What of timing? God is slow to anger and the letter of James demands that we too be slow to anger. We can’t match God for slowness and steadfastness – a thousand years, a thousand generations – but at the least this precludes the anger that erupts spontaneously, the reaction of frustration boiling over or impatient despair. The imagery in the letter of James is that of bridling a horse: that is, exercising restraint and learning discipline. God’s anger comes not from a place of urgent need or sudden pain, but of consistent constructive longing. God’s anger is the fire of his love.

So our own emotions of anger will need some sifting and sorting: to recognize the misplaced anger, to filter the personal anger, to deal with the guilty anger; and then to sit patiently with any righteous anger that remains. ‘To sit with’ is not to simmer like a pan with a lid that rattles as the steam seeps out making the whole house muggy; or to turn gently incandescent till you emit rage like some radio-active substance. Rather, perhaps, it’s to acknowledge it, first and foremost, to God – in raw honesty, in the style of the psalms of lament – and see what comes back. Is this anger ‘godly’ - that is, does it in some way reflect God’s character and concerns? If God’s anger is the flip side of God’s love, we might ask ourselves if our anger is springing from a place of steadfast love, from a consistent longing for constructive change, for the fullness of God’s kingdom. It is not that God is full of anger: no, he is full of grace and mercy, steadfast love and faithfulness. And so he’s disappointed in his people. It’s only *because* of this great love, that there is any disappointment. Righteous anger is just a tiny part of a much bigger and more rosy picture.

After biding such *time*, what then may be the *place* for anger, this (ever more refined) patient constructive loving kind of anger? Jesus chooses the strategic place for expressing and communicating it. The temple is the religious HQ, where the powers-that-be in Jerusalem hold their grip. It is also the point of pilgrimage where all Israel is gathered for the Passover with – we may presume – an expectation of re-discovering God’s grace and an openness for re-visioning their lives. I’m suggesting, then, that this place is strategic not so much because it offers maximum publicity but maximum openness and thus maximum potential for being understood: for bringing about real and constructive change.

But aside from noting the strategic place, I do just want to underline that it *has* a place. Righteous anger is not necessarily something to be swallowed ‘before the sun goes down’ whether in fear or self-protection, though such a response would be entirely understandable: because it’s usually costly. Rather, it may be a gift, a gift from God, and therefore a gift to be used, exercised, voiced, acted on. Anything, but not sat on. We all have different gifts; if this is yours, then it seems likely to be a feature of your calling to serve God, one way in which you are called to reflect God’s nature in God’s world. The gift of God’s righteous anger therefore may claim a place as a part of your particular equipping for ministry.

That brings us to the action of anger, the action that through the Old Testament as well as in Jesus we describe as ‘prophetic’. This is one way, and the biblical way, in which the energy of anger is not only expressed but channeled for change in God’s kingdom. Do we welcome this in the Church? I was struck by an article I read recently to do with the field of Social Work: describing the way in which social workers may be educated to treat and give comfort to individuals, but *not* to respond to the larger social and economic inequalities that contribute to the illness and despair in the lives of the people they serve. I fear it’s the same in the Church. Perhaps the gift of anger is the starting point for addressing this problem: and if so, it’s a gift we need to nurture in one another that it might bear fruit and be borne out in the ministry of prophecy among us. We won’t *all* be called to this: we certainly won’t all find it *comfortable*, since the Church might well be the target of the very prophecy it is nurturing.

But we are called to be the body of Christ: the very temple which is the meeting place for God and the world. And we have been given the Passover lamb of reconciliation. Our task is to bear out this gospel in word and deed – faithfully, if foolishly, with all the gifts God has given us. If – or should I say when? – you find yourself with the gift of righteous anger, it may be that you need to seek the time and find the place where it might turn to action for change.. the fire of God’s love, ushering God’s kingdom of peace and justice.