

**12<sup>th</sup> August 2018**

**Ephesians 4.25-5.1**

One day a little boy ran around his village shouting, ‘I hate you, I hate you!’ No one knew quite how to respond to him.<sup>i</sup>

Eventually the little boy ran to the edge of a steep cliff and shouted into the valley ‘I hate you, I hate you!’

Back from the valley came an echo: ‘I hate you I hate you!’

Startled at this the boy ran home. With tears in his eyes, he told his mother that there was a mean little boy in the valley who shouted at him ‘I hate you, I hate you!’

His mother took the boy back to the cliff and told him to shout, ‘I love you, I love you!’

When he did, back came the reply: ‘I love you, I love you!’

From that day on the boy wasn’t angry anymore.

What we do and say often comes back to us as an echo. If we want to be treated with respect, we often must learn to be respectful. If we want to have friends, we must be friendly. Nobody owes us anything. Conversely - Anger begets anger. Sadly, many people are angry because they have been hurt or told that they are worthless. Then they pass on the anger to someone else.

The Christian gospel is good news because we believe God loves us before we love God. God loves us even when we are angry, sinful, wicked. If we are open to the voice of God speaking through the universe we hear the words ‘I love you, I love you’ and that can profoundly change our disposition, our personality, our lives. It can break the cycle of anger and hatred, especially self hatred.

Paul in the first part of the epistle to the Ephesians has outlined the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ – how God declares us to be loved and wants to remove those barriers between humanity and its creator – to bring all things together through the love that is so high and wide and deep and long in Jesus Christ. But we still struggle with our old lives and our fallen nature that refuses to believe that we are loved.

People don’t change much, do they?

It's been nearly 2,000 years since Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, but the behaviours he warns them against in Ephesians 4.25-5.2 are still pretty prevalent.

This week has seen plenty of anger (v.26), evil talk (v.29), wrangling and slander (v.31).<sup>ii</sup>

The trial of Ben Stokes has been in the headlines with the England cricketer accused of assaulting two men and knocking unconscious one of them in an alleged homophobic attack.

There is constant concern about how social media from Facebook to twitter can stoke anger and lead to trolling, hate speech, fake news and allegations, anonymous rants and other such unpleasant traits such as bullying and intimidation. This week [US conspiracy theorist Alex Jones and his website Info Wars](#). has claimed that some of the children killed in the Sandy Hook shooting were actors. The bereaved parents of two of the children are suing him for defamation in these "false, cruel, and dangerous assertions". Facebook, YouTube, Apple and Spotify have removed some or all of Jones' content or accounts, but Twitter has refused to follow suit, saying that he has not yet broken their rules.

Boris Johnson's ill-advised and impolite remarks about the burka in a column for *The Telegraph* have led to [calls for](#)

[the Tory whip to be removed from him](#) – in other words, to remove him from the party. At the time of writing, he has not backed down. Labour is no less embroiled in rage and wrangling, as the row over the party's handling of antisemitism continued this week.

Are we becoming angrier as a nation? Do we take offence easily?

A traveler between flights at an airport, bought a packet of biscuits and sat down to read a newspaper. She heard a rustling sound and from behind her paper saw a neatly dressed man helping himself to her biscuits. Not wanting to make a scene, she leaned over and took a biscuit herself. As he ate more, she grew angrier. She reached across to the packet more pointedly and munched increasingly nosily.

Before long the biscuits were gone and the woman, now inwardly fuming, stood up to leave when her flight was announced. As she opened her handbag to get her ticket, she found her packet of biscuits, unopened!

Do we take offence easily?

All of this would no doubt have seemed just as familiar to Paul and his readers as it does, sadly, to us. Even if we like to think ourselves free from the taint of bigotry or hatred,

it is still so very easy to allow anger and bitterness to overwhelm us; to give in to a ‘clever’ or snide remark that takes us across the line from reasoned debate to crude offence; to refuse to back down or apologize, for fear of losing face; or to hold a grudge and refuse to accept an apology offered.

But Paul urges us to put all this aside and to ensure that it does not get the better of us (v.26).

As anyone who has tried to break a bad habit will know, it is very hard to do so unless you can replace it with a better one. Paul has suggestions to help us work out what we should take up in place of the wrong ways we are urged to put down. Hands that steal should take up honest work (v.28); mouths that speak evil should instead speak words of encouragement and grace (v.29). And in place of the anger and wrangling and slander should be kindness, forgiveness and love (v.32 and 5.2).

Such a total transformation might seem like a hard ask. Just imagine the shock we would feel if our politicians managed it within the week! But in the verses just before today’s passage Paul tells us where to find the source of

the help we need. We can put away our anger before the sun goes down each day because in Christ we know that each morning, each moment, we can start again and “clothe [our]selves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness”. (v. 24) We can live as “imitators of God ... in love” (5.1-2) because “God in Christ has forgiven you” (v.32)

And at last, if we live in this way, we can become instead a “fragrant offering” that pleases God, its spreading scent witnessing to those around us that in Christ, people can and do change, very much.

Our individual behaviour is important. People know that Christians have a moral code and they notice when we do not live by that standard. People in our communities see God through the lives that we lead; our neighbours see from our behaviour what God is like. Our church community exists not primarily for ourselves but for others, for the common good, and for God. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during part of the Second World War, described the Church as the only organization that does not exist for itself, but for those who live outside of it.

Anger is a difficult and potentially destructive emotion. The church can often be a focus for anger. Both in giving it and receiving it. If you see religion being about morality and that you are saved by your good works, then you will be critical of anyone letting the side down. You will want to retain your moral superiority and self-righteousness by pointing out the moral failings of others – those who are weak or failing – those who are not going to heaven. If you view God as an angry God who judges people according to their deeds and misdeeds, then you may mirror and reflect your image and understanding of God.

The church can also be the recipient of anger from people who feel judged or condemned by the church's standards of morality. The church seen as an institution, an authority, will be the target of those who have an attitude problem to the authorities – who don't want to be told what to do and how to live their lives.

The usual arena for anger is the family. It invariably has to do with frustration and lack of self-control, with the impatience that is the refusal to endure or suffer discomfort. Within each of us is a sensitive core of frustration – press it and we get angry. My anger can be triggered by someone's excessive noise or laziness, by

someone's refusal to see my point of view and that I'm right, by anything that affects my comfort whether its physical, emotional or intellectual. Press against any of them and you'll get the adrenaline flowing.

We know how much anger there is in families. We know the terrible consequences I spouse and child abuse, sexual, mental and physical. And behind it all lies this raw, twisted, unlovely and unloved human ego, screaming in its own pain and self-hatred, striking out at the very thing it loves. <sup>iii</sup>

Sometimes anger is a group thing: a rejection of reality as represented by the other – another nation, race, gender where we perceive an invasion of our territory, a threat to our balance and security. Sometimes anger seems to be bred of intellectual laziness that can't be bothered to respond to a new truth or a need for change. Like a clumsy and impatient child playing with un-cooperative building blocks, frustrated by its own ineptitude, we knock over what we have half built and blame the universe for our anger - so unlike the infinite patience of God that Paul points out in this passage we should imitate.

We have all been influenced and shaped by those around us. We pick up habits from our parents or others who have

strongly influenced us: teachers, role models, mentors or peers.

My father had a fierce temper. He would explode at the smallest thing – erupting like a volcano. But his redeeming feature was that he would get things off his chest and not let things fester into resentment or bitterness. A bit like a gas cooker in contrast to an electric one – you light the gas and whoosh there an instant flame. But turn off the gas and no lingering heat. Whereas for some people anger simmers like an electric hob – it takes time to warm up but takes an equally long time to cool down – the anger can linger for longer.

When Paul talks about don't let the sun go down on your anger he's probably got in mind the gas cooker rather than the electric one – best deal with conflict as it arises – honestly and openly and not defensively or accusationally.

I usually use this verse on my marriage preparation course to teach couples how to have a good argument - the rules for the fight; keep the focus on the issue in hand. Don't bring up past resentments 'you're always doing this... remember when your mother came....

But own your anger: 'I was angry when you did this... rather than make direct accusations of blame – 'you made me angry' – as if your partner deliberately set out to upset you. Explain exactly what it is that the partner has said or done which has caused the problem - observable facts. But don't necessarily give or imply blame. Both agree to change something, do not go running off to complain to a friend or parent etc. Don't let the sun go down on your anger – it's important it doesn't fester or spread and thereby multiply and get out of hand.

Paul tries to make the point in this passage that as adopted children of God, through Jesus Christ, how might we be influenced to change our behaviour? Changing habits is hard. What bad habits are we trapped by, and how might we bring those to God and to one another to seek transformation?

What might be a political truth to one person is socially unacceptable to another. What might be an important standard for one generation might not be for another. Simple things such as opening doors for others, writing 'thank you' letters, and not interrupting when someone is talking, are things that some people regard as more important than others. But what are the universal truths and standards of behaviour that Christians are called to

live out, as imitators of God?

Paul calls us to put away or release our anger, and instead be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God is kind, compassionate and forgiving of us.

If our faith is good news and not good advice – then it rests not in an angry God who wants to damn us to hell for being disobedient rebellious creatures who aren't following his ways – but a patient, kind loving God who in forbearance loves even the unlovely - who loves us before we love Him – who while we were still sinners died on the cross to forgive us – not because of anything we had done to deserve that love. Grace - God's unmerited favour towards us is the foundation on which Paul's advocates change in habits and behavior. Let grace change you. Christ's acceptance of us in our sinfulness is more likely to woo us out of our sins than the hectoring moralizers who will only confirm us in our self-disgust and make us run for cover. That's not to say that appropriate human behavior is obviously fundamental to human happiness and flourishing but the bottom line for Christians is salvation – everlasting access to the love of God. Do sinners have that while they are still sinners, while they are still in their sins – or does God only love us if we behave ourselves?

The tragedy of dysfunctional and angry and disturbed children is that they usually have had no original endowment of love from which to grow. We are all dysfunctional to some degree if we have not learnt in the depths of our being that our salvation, our acceptance to God has already been secured, that we are safe. Paul claims that God is the one who loves us from all eternity, dying for our sins, the one whom we love because He loved us first. We are given an enormous inner security of confidence that enables us to make our lives a loving adventure and a foundation for a changed lifestyle. Through prayer and worship and meditation on the scriptures, and through the work of the Holy Spirit – whom Paul here describes as having sealed us – God's mark on our lives – like an official stamp on a document or package marking us out for a special purpose - we are called to cast off the old dead life and put on this new life, this life where we know deep down we are loved, not because of what we do but because of who are we, even despite who are. Interiorize that love and we will start smelling of Jesus – his fragrance drifts and infiltrates every part of our being. May you have the whiff of grace about you!

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<sup>i</sup> Wayne Rice, Hot Illustrations for Youth talks 4, Zondervan, 2001, p78

<sup>ii</sup> Rebecca Frole: <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2018/96-july-august-2018-b/proper-14/postscript-living-as-a-fragrant-offering>

<sup>iii</sup> Richard Holloway, Anger, Sex, Doubt and Death, SOCK, 1992 ch 1.