Seven Deadly Sins: Wrath

Anger is an emotion: it is something you feel. Does God have feelings and emotions? We talk happily enough about God loving us, but how do you feel about the idea of God getting angry? A glance at a concordance will show you that the majority of references to anger in the Bible refer to God’s wrath. Does that mean that God has anger issues? What do you think makes God angry? Why do such things make him angry? If God is good, righteous and holy, it follows that his anger can’t be sinful or wrong. There must therefore be such a thing as righteous anger. Anger itself cannot be inherently sinful, or God would not be capable of feeling anger.

Colossians 3:5-8 talks about divine anger and human anger. Why do you think it is OK for God to get angry, but not for us to do so? If God’s anger is necessarily good, does it follow that our own, human anger is naturally going to be bad because we are flawed human beings? ‘Be angry and do not sin,’ Paul says in Ephesians 4:26, suggesting that sinless anger is, least, a theoretical possibility. What then is the distinction between good and bad anger?

What makes you angry? How does your anger affect you? James knows how anger affects us. In 1:19-20 he advocates a code of conduct that is diametrically opposed to the effect that anger has on people when it sweeps over us. Have you discovered ways to control your anger, so that it does not end up controlling you? Aristotle said, ‘To be angry…is what any man can do and easy; but to do these to the right person, in due proportion, at the right time, with the right object, and in the right manner, this is not…what any man can do nor is it easy’ (*Nicomachean* Ethics 2.9). James also reminds us (in a verse I often quote to myself) that anger *per se* tends not to produce a positive change, either in us, or in those with whom we are angry. In what ways can anger be destructive? If anger does not produce the righteousness of God, what does?

If we internalise our anger and hang onto it in our hearts, what are the long-term effects of doing this? Why do you feel as angry as you do? Unresolved anger from the past can urge up unexpectedly when something happens to us in the present, causing us to react with disproportionate force, sometimes causing us to vent all our bottled-up anger at someone who has unwittingly stepped on an emotional landmine in our lives. Have you ever experienced this, either being angry with someone else in this kind of way, or having them be unreasonably angry with you? Anger’s long-term capacity to poison our lives and our relationships is one of the reasons why it is characterised as one of the seven deadly sins. Are there issues in your past that God wants you to face and acknowledge, perhaps by talking the through with someone who loves you and whom you can trust?

Why do we sometimes struggle to let go of our anger? What are some good ways of dealing with your anger and getting it out of your system? What are the barriers to forgiving someone, and the benefits of doing so? How do you respond to Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:21-26? You may feel like taking issue with God about his attitude to anger: how come he gets to be angry, but we have to forgive? But let’s not forget that God sent his Son to die on the cross, condemning our sin in the person of his Son so that we might be reconciled to him. God did not sweep our sins under the carpet. Yes, our sins make God angry, but God’s response in Christ was to deal with our sin at immeasurable cost to himself. The depths of his anger against human sinfulness are matched by the limitless nature of his grace towards us.

In 1 Timothy 2:8, Paul says that we should lift up holy hands in prayer without anger or quarrelling. Why would falling out with other people interfere with our prayers? Is it OK to express our anger to God in prayer? Fr. Bede Jarrett said, ‘Anger is sometimes good. The world needs anger. The world often continues to allow evil because it isn’t angry enough.’ So *should* we get angry when we pray sometimes? How do you respond to the outpouring of rage and grief we find in Psalm 137:7-9? How do you think God responds to this? Could these verses give us some insight into the trauma experienced by the victims of the violence in and around Gaza in recent months? Does the cross of Christ speak into that situation at all? If so, how?

‘O God, we hold in your presence the anger that this day will bring forth. Teach us to really care, so that our anger is not occasioned by trifles to do with our comfort and status, but by what outrages your heart of love.’

Richard Harries, from *The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer*.