

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A

First Reading: Ecclesiasticus 27:33-28:9

Second Reading: Romans 14:7-9

Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35

Sometimes when I am hearing confessions people tell me that they have committed the sin of anger. They have found themselves in a situation at home, work or in their street that has made them angry and led to them losing their temper. They think that the very fact that they got angry is a sin. So, they can be a bit taken aback when I tell them that anger is not a sin, it is just a feeling, an emotion. We cannot help the way we feel at times, but what we can help is the way we act when we may be feeling a particular emotion.

If someone says to us “Don’t take it out on me.” it is usually a good indication that we are acting as badly as we feel. We cannot allow our emotions to rule our lives because we have a head as well as a heart and our lives must be lived in a way that reflects both. There is no justification for treating people badly because we are feeling angry or depressed. They should not have to suffer because of the way we feel.

Anger in itself is neither right nor wrong, but as today’s first reading tells us when it is partnered with resentment it becomes a foul thing. There will be times when we will be angry and we will be right to be angry. We know from the gospels that Jesus got angry. He was fully human, so of course he got angry, but when he expressed his anger he ensured that he made his final point without undermining the God-given humanity and rights of those around him. He challenged those whom he was angry with and his words may have stung. We know that some, like the Scribes and the Pharisees, were less than happy with what he said, but when Jesus saw something that made him angry he let the person or persons concerned know in no uncertain terms that what they were doing was wrong and they had better get their act together. His anger was born out of a sense of concern and injustice. There was never any taint of resentment in it, and there was always the offer of forgiveness.

Through our lives we are faced with situations where we will know that we have been unjustly treated. We may even believe that we have received treatment that could be described as inhumane and in such situations our understandable anger makes us want to strike back and give our tormentor or tormentors a taste of their own medicine, but two wrongs can never make a right. Our anger may be justified but equally vicious retaliation cannot. We cannot allow resentment to gather in our hearts because it will only fester and turn us into creatures of hate and it is more likely to destroy us than those who are the subjects of our hate.

Of course, this is easier said than done. I can stand here and say “Turn the other cheek” until I’m blue in the face, or you could read the words of Jesus telling us to forgive seventy seven times a hundred times, and the next time we get angry we can still lash out. Our capacity to forgive can be limited and a lot depends on the situation and the severity of the injustice we have endured. A lot can also depend on how much we are in touch with the message of the Gospel, because there are also times when we can be unjustly treated because of our belief in the same gospel. Wearing a clerical collar these days can make you a target for anyone with a grudge or a twisted need to take their resentment out on some one, but we can all be targets as we journey through life and when someone attacks us we can be taken by surprise and shock. We have no time to defend ourselves and we can be left feeling powerless and that is one thing that is very difficult to accept. We can feel that our whole sense of self-worth is being undermined and attacked. This can make us fearful and we may not be aware of it. That fear can sometimes be the thing that makes us lash out when we become angry. It is possible to be angry without being afraid but fear and anger can be a deadly combination. They can be the parents of resentment and hate. We can replay a situation or an experience over and over in our minds and think of what we could have said or should have said or will say if we get a chance. This can be a futile exercise and can only serve to feed the resentment which can turn into hate.

This is what happened to the servant mentioned in today’s gospel. He was the architect of his own misery and this led him to a situation of powerlessness but because of the love, mercy and forgiveness of his master he was saved from a bleak future. However, he forgot it all almost immediately. He wanted to reclaim power and control by attacking someone who couldn’t fight

back. He had been humiliated and was most likely consumed with anger, fear and resentment. Someone had to pay and he didn't care who.

Forgiveness is a virtue and an attribute of God. We hear of it when Christ was suffering the injustice of the cross. In his totally powerless situation he still had the strength to forgive his tormentors. This can be our starting point for dealing with others whom we need to forgive. It is a very challenging ideal to live up to but it is one that Jesus expects of us. We need to ask for his help. We need to take those experiences to him and ask us for the grace of forgiveness and this could be a life-long process. That sounds daunting but doing this will gradually transform us into other Christs.

It could be argued that love and hate have nothing in common. That is true but one thing can be said of both of them and that is that they self-generate. Both of them can consume our lives. Hate can generate more hate and love can generate more love. In many of life's situations we are called to make decisions and making the decision to love even in the most difficult, painful situations is to be a reflection of Jesus Christ. We need to make the Christian choice and if we do we will be enabled to properly challenge injustice whether it is directed against ourselves and others but we must do so with the strength of God's grace and love and with the words of Jesus on the Cross in our hearts and minds "Forgive them, Lord for they know not what they do."