

Third Sunday of Easter, Year C

The thrust of today's readings is introduced in the First Reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The Jewish court expects Peter and John to blame them for crucifying Jesus. Instead the apostles speak of repentance and forgiveness. Forgiveness, because God wants them as he wants us to 'live to the full'. Repentance, because they, like ourselves, cannot welcome God's offer of forgiveness without a change of heart: a change in our way of thinking, in the choices we make and in our way of behaving. God is not blaming the members of the Sanhedrin. God is offering them the grace to change and the grace of forgiveness. The killing of Jesus was an awful crime. The way Jesus kept trusting and kept believing and kept loving and kept offering forgiveness was the break-through which we needed to convince us that God truly is love and that the suffering that we bring on ourselves and on others through our sins is something we do. It is not brought about by the punishment of an angry God.

The amazing love of God is celebrated in the Second Reading from the Apocalypse where we hear millions of the saved, sharing in Jesus' risen life and praising the Lamb of God who has taken away the sins of the world.

The Gospel is a beautiful scene of forgiveness. It is a reflection on the success of the ministry of the apostles, no longer catching fish in the lake of Galilee, but now welcoming people into the community of believers in which we share the Eucharist around a coal fire on the shore of the lake. This remarkable success – which continues in our day as the Church grows in numbers and in holiness – is not due to the expertise of the missionaries. We are told that they fished all night and caught nothing. Rather, the catch comes when the missionaries listen to the Spirit of the risen Jesus and follow his directions. Notice, too, that the net is not broken because it is Simon Peter who hauls it ashore. The author is underlining the importance of unity in the Christian community and reminding his readers that they must consciously belong to the wider Church that is built on the rock of Peter's faith. I am sure that we have all reflected often on the sensitive and extremely delicate way in which Jesus offers forgiveness to Peter for the threefold denial.

Well then, if the thrust of the readings is about forgiveness what do we do with the images of an angry, punishing God that we find so frequently, especially in the Older Testament. We human beings easily fall victim to fear. This is something that some governments know very well and use to their advantage. Though they deserve and receive the strongest condemnation for using such a divisive strategy, it is not my purpose here to focus on this. I am thinking rather of the Church. To our shame, the Church is no stranger to using fear as an instrument of power, though it would probably call it instruction. This is a far worse crime and it must be challenged head on. Yet it seems, at first glance, to receive support from the Bible, which frequently speaks of God's anger, and of God's punishment. What are we to make of this language?

Today's Responsorial Psalms provides some perspective when it says: 'God's anger lasts but a moment. God's favour lasts for a lifetime'(Psalm 30:5). Elsewhere the Bible says that God's punishment endures for three to four generations, whereas God's love endures for thousands of generations. However, even though on balance God's love wins out, we still hear of God as angry and punishing. What are we to make of it?

A part solution is to recognise that we experience two very different kinds of anger. The most common is when we lose our temper because something displeases us and we run out of patience. Such anger is obviously a failing, and there is no such anger in God.

There is, however, another kind of anger: the anger we experience when we love people so much and find them hurting themselves and others. We cannot just sit by and watch. Our love for them causes us to express our concern passionately. Our whole being cries out against the folly and we are determined that things will change. Jesus experienced this kind of anger when he cleared the temple, and when he came up against stubborn people who were destroying themselves and others by their resistance to grace. There is no way that Jesus was going to just stand by and watch this happen, and, thank God, there is no way that he is going to stand by and watch us or those we love waste our lives and hurtle towards hell.

God is love, and he loves each of us passionately. God cannot stand by and see our world, our society, destroy itself. God is stirred to anger by injustice – not the anger of losing patience with us, and not the anger that seeks to destroy those who oppose him, but the anger of passionate love that cares enough to correct us with a view to our changing and choosing life; with a view, as Peter said in today's reading, of our repenting and experiencing forgiveness.

The Bible does not explicitly distinguish these two different kinds of anger. Furthermore, many of the texts that speak of God's anger are simply a projection onto God of our own limited human experience. When we sin, we plunge ourselves into darkness, and we imagine that God is angry with us and is punishing us. In fact it is we who are blocking out the light, not God. The Catholic Catechism sees hell not as God's punishment, but as our 'definitive *self-exclusion* from communion with God'(n.1033).

Sometimes, like the apostles, we find ourself wrapped in darkness. We are getting nowhere. To use the Gospel image, we are fishing all night and catching nothing. We are not to blame God. We are not to think that God is punishing us. Rather, we are to listen to God the way the apostles listened to Jesus. If, with trust, we follow God's inspiration we, like the apostles, will find that whatever good God wants for us will happen, and, like the saints in the scene from the Apocalypse, one day we will join in their song of praise.

We do not have the wisdom to know how long the night needs to be for us to learn to rely on God and to look to God for the love we really need. The apostles fished all night and caught nothing so that they would know that the miracle that happened in their ministry was from God and not from them. In another scene, they fought the storm unsuccessfully all night and it was only as dawn was breaking that Jesus calmed the waters with his word. Lazarus was locked in the tomb. It was only on the fourth day that the huge rock was rolled away and that Jesus told his friends to unbind him and set him free.

When we think that God is angry with us let us never forget that God is in love with us, and passionately so. Whatever the cause of our suffering - and causes of suffering are often very complex - it is not God who is causing the pain. God lovingly takes the opportunity provided by the suffering to wake us up to our need for love and to draw us back to the communion God longs for us to have. Jesus encourages us to believe that God is loving us in the most delicate way God can. Let us, like the psalmist, keep on crying to God whatever our distress, and let us

trust God that the dawn will indeed break, if not here, then in the way it broke for Jesus – in the resurrection. What a tragedy it would be to give up hope just as the dawn was drawing close.

God knows we are weak and that we fail. God loves us passionately and it pains God to see us suffering. But we cannot just wish away the sufferings of life. Jesus wants us to know that God is love and to cry out to God, and to continue to look to God to rescue us and to save us. The resurrection of Jesus is the source of our confidence that, when we are ready, we will be saved and that we are being called, whatever our sufferings now, to an eternity of joy in the embrace of God. The only anger God experiences towards us is a passionate love that will never be content to see us enjoying less than the fullness of life for which God made us. Let us join Peter in declaring our love and believe that Jesus is calling us, as he called Peter, to share this divine love with others. However unworthy, we are capable of amazing love when we are in communion with God.