

## **Living wisely and handling anger:**

**Readings** Rom 5:1-11 John 2:13-22

### **Living wisely**

Today we are continuing our Lent series based on the book of Proverbs and exploring what it means to live wisely. It's not a question we ask much today, or at least in that form. We are more likely to ask: "What am I going to do with my life?" Or we might ask how can I live my best life – the focus is on me and my self-fulfilment.

But sometimes events happen which cause us to think more deeply about these sort of questions. Today we have in mind the mosque shootings in Christchurch that happened a year ago. They were a jolt to the moral fabric of the world we live in just as the earthquakes a few years previously jolted people out of their normal routines.

One of the things that was said at the time of the shootings was: - "This is not us. This is not what NZ is like." And thankfully, it is not. But it does raise the question who are we as New Zealanders; what do we value; what sort of society do we want to create? As Christian people, as God's community here at Church on the Hill we also need to be asking ourselves who we are; what do we value; what sort of society do we want to create? In a minute we shall be looking at what Proverbs has to teach us on this, particularly when it comes to handling anger, but first I want to put that into a wider context.

So, let's begin with a question:

What is the first verse in the Bible?

Genesis 1:1 – "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Everything starts with God.

Proverbs 9:10:

<sup>10</sup> The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,  
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

"The fear of the Lord" is the foundational belief that underlies the Wisdom teaching in the OT. God is the creator, the One who established a divine cosmic and social order, brought life into existence, and oversees and maintains this order. *ṣēdāqâ* (righteousness) is the harmonious world order built by God into the very fabric and infrastructure of creation. So, wherever righteousness is practised by human beings, we are in tune with creation. When humans do not

practise righteousness, adverse effects are felt across all created spheres. Yesterday John and I were at a meeting of the Nelson Tasman Climate Forum and one of the things that came out strongly in our group discussion was the way that rampant consumerism has contributed to the damage done to our environment. We have not practised the way of righteousness.

So how do we live? - As human beings we are called to shape our lives in such a way as to be in tune with the world as God has created it. This is the mindset that lies behind the wisdom sayings in Proverbs. This is what it means to live wisely.

But, as NT people we also have a future perspective. In *Virtue Reborn* Tom Wright says:

“Christian life in the present, ... is to be understood and shaped in relation to the final goal for which we have been made and redeemed. The better we understand the goal, the better we shall understand the path towards it.”

That goal is, of course, God’s renewal of creation with renewed human beings to look after it. Jesus’ resurrection to new life is the beginning, and the giving of the Holy Spirit enables us to develop those strengths of character, right now, to embrace our vocation to reflect God’s image into the world.”

God has built this opportunity into our present experience of life.

Romans 5:3-5:

“We also celebrate in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces patience, patience produces a well-formed character, and a character like that produces hope. Hope, in its turn, does not make us ashamed, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

How we respond to the challenges of life shapes our character.

I want to pick up on that word character. What is character?

I remember reading a story told by a well-known American pastor. He was putting up a fence and his young son was watching. Suddenly the hammer slipped and hit his thumb – I’m sure you can guess what happened next. As he tells the story he was not sure who was more surprised at the words that came out of his mouth, his son or himself!

What is likely to come out of us when the unexpected happens?

What spills out is our character; our inner and habitual way of being.

Character is the human equivalent of a stick of rock. I don't know think we have this in NZ but in the UK this seaside favourite is a long, peppermint-flavoured piece of candy that has the name of the town not only on the outside but running all the way through it. In the same way character is a pattern of thinking and acting that runs right through someone, it's always there no matter what the circumstances.

But how do we develop a Christian character; how do we consistently behave in a 'Christian' way? Is it something that happens automatically when we become Christians? – No, it is something we have to work at. As we have been seeing in Proverbs, it is a path we walk one step after another; repeated actions that become habits so that eventually we become people of good character.

Some of you may know the saying:

“Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny.” It's the same sort of idea.

It's an idea that has a lot going for it. Remember the plane that landed safely on the Hudson River? On Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> January 2009 an Airbus A320 took off from LaGuardia Airport, New York. But 2 minutes after take-off the plane flew into a flock of Canada Geese and lost power in both engines. The pilot and co-pilot had to make several major decisions instantly if they were going to save the lives not only of the people on the plane, but also those on the ground for they were heading for one of the most densely populated parts of the city. Quickly discounting all the other options, they decided to attempt to crash-land on the Hudson River, a notoriously difficult operation that could have seen the plane break up and sink in the freezing water. They had only 2-3 minutes to complete all their preparations and calculations, to make a fast left turn so the plane was in line with the flow of the river, and then straighten out again and glide down. Yet they did it, with everyone escaping safely! They did not have time to consult manuals; they had to act instinctively using all their skills and experience.

And this is the point, - the captain had not been born with those abilities, he had to acquire them through training and repeated practice. And, he developed the character qualities of courage, cool judgment and determination to do the right thing for others. Repeated actions become habits, habitual ways of behaving, and gradually our character is transformed.

This doesn't happen automatically just because we have been converted, come to church, say our prayers or whatever (though of course those things are important). Sooner or later, each of us must make the key choices and, having made these key choices, we must acquire the habit of making them over and over again. It is a matter of consciously deciding, again and again, to do certain things in certain ways, creating patterns deep within our brain. Your clothes don't just fall out of the wardrobe and put themselves on you – you have to make a conscious decision what to wear, every day, - and do it all over again the next day!

### **Handling anger**

Having painted the big picture, I now want to focus on one particular aspect of what living wisely looks like; namely handling anger.

Is anger always bad?

Aquinas describes anger as a natural expression of human passions aroused by threats to ourselves and others. Anger is a response to injustice; it requires recognition that someone has been wronged, followed by a desire to set things right. He even says that anger is the instrument of justice - so long as it doesn't get out of hand. In a world full of injustice, it's hard to imagine a right response that doesn't include anger.

Someone once said of Jesus: "I am unable to commit to any messiah who doesn't knock over tables." I wonder what you think of that?

Of course, they were referring to Jesus clearing out the Temple which was our Gospel reading. We can see it as an act of anger – Jesus drove out people and animals; poured coins onto the ground and overturned tables. Why? Because the temple courts were being misused. The house of prayer had become a market place. Jesus was putting things right and restoring it to the purpose God had always intended – a place where all peoples could draw close to him.

"Anger, when it is a holy emotion, has *justice* as its object and *love* as its root." Both justice and love are focussed on the good of others."

When it is good, anger is a passion for justice, motivated by love for others. We get angry when someone we care about is hurt or threatened. Great love is the root of great anger. You don't get angry unless you care.

“Good anger is expressed in passionate efforts to make sure others get the respect they deserve, to bring about the end of oppression and tyranny, to give due punishment to those who cause injury and damage, to honour covenants and promises, to give equal treatment to the marginalised, and to uphold the law.”

This sounds to me much like the words Israel’s prophets used to draw the people back to God.

Good anger does not seek to destroy the other, but to set things right.

Jesus tells us “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” (Matt 5:6)

Anger as a passion is also experienced physically – our faces get red, adrenaline surges, our hearts beat faster our blood pressure rises. Anger is the ‘fighting’ half of our fight or flight response to danger or threat. As such it can be our ally in calling us to action – to speak out in situations where we would normally keep silent. We may need anger to lift us out of apathy and indifference and to mobilize us to action.

But if anger motivates us to fight then we must be sure we are fighting for a good cause and fighting well. It is the difference between Martin Luther King preaching with passion for civil rights and irrational hate speech; between our speaking out for social justice, or our venting emotion just for the purpose of letting off steam – we may feel better but I’m not sure that those around us will do.

So anger is not inherently bad but becomes disordered when it attacks the wrong target or gets out of control. We need to distinguish between anger, the *passion*, a part of our normal human emotional make-up and wrath, the vice which is anger in its sinful, excessive, misdirected form.

Anger turns vicious when it fights for its own selfish cause, when it becomes all about me and my agenda to the exclusion of the claims of others.

Often we fall into anger because of our fragile egos. We take something personally when no insult or slight was intended. Inside we feel vulnerable, and attack in the form of anger is our first means of defence. Our reputation or sense of self-worth may be so fragile that we respond like a frightened animal backed into a corner. We feel threatened and it feels better to be angry than to be helpless.. A slight to my honour,

damage to my reputation, disrespect to my person are frequent anger triggers and can easily cause us to verbally attack the other person even when they can't hear us. How many of us berate other road users from the safety of our own vehicle!

Instead Proverbs: 19:11 suggests

A person's wisdom yields patience;  
it is to one's glory to overlook an offense.

Bad anger is often aimed at the wrong target. The recipient of our anger may not be the one responsible for the offence but simply a handy person for us to pick on. The waitress blamed for poorly cooked food; the airline desk employee blamed for the late departure or cancellation of a flight; or, dare I say it, the child whose parent lashes out after a tiring and frustrating day.

Bad anger can be anger expressed in the wrong way and be disproportionate in its response. Often the blowing up is not just a response to the immediate event but the result of anger or resentment that has been building up over a period of time.

Sometimes if we hold onto anger in this way it becomes resentful and vicious. We refuse to forgive or to attempt reconciliation; we fantasize about vengeance; or employ passive –aggressive tactics. We rehearse in our heads the things we wish we had said at the time. It can be a harmful habit to get into. The danger is that we move from being upset about an injustice and wanting to set things right, to a desire to hurt someone, to make them pay, to inflict punishment on them.

“[Wrath] is the love of justice perverted into the desire for revenge and for the injury of someone else.” Fairlie. *Seven Deadly Sins Today*

Proverbs 24:28-29 warns us:

<sup>28</sup> Do not testify against your neighbor without cause—  
would you use your lips to mislead?

<sup>29</sup> Do not say, “I’ll do to them as they have done to me;  
I’ll pay them back for what they did.”

This is why Jesus links wrath and insults with murder because they are designed to hurt and injure the other; to harm and destroy.

However, if we look up verses in OT that refer to God's anger one theme comes through time and again.

Psalms 103:8 – "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Proverbs too is full of warnings about being too quick to anger.

Proverbs 14:29-30

Whoever is patient has great understanding,  
but one who is quick-tempered displays folly.

Proverbs 15:1, 18

A gentle answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger.

A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict,  
but the one who is patient calms a quarrel

In Aquinas the virtue opposed to wrath is gentleness along with self-control.

Proverbs 16:32

"Better a patient person than a warrior,  
one with self-control than one who takes a city."

Remember we have been thinking of building a pattern of right choices into our lives. After the initial flash of emotion we have a choice as to how we respond to anger, even good anger.

How are we doing? What sort of person are we becoming?

I am going to finish by quoting some words of Paul

"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary:

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;  
if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head,

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Rom 12: 18-21