

Homily for Thursday of the 10th Week in Ordinary Time
 1 Kings 18:41–46
 Psalm 65:10–13
 Matthew 5:20–26

Of the 7 deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus speaks to us about the power and destructiveness of uncontrolled anger.

In the first example, Jesus does not want us merely to avoid killing one another; he calls us to remove the attitudes and actions that lead to killing and, indeed, every obstacle to unconditional love

Jesus quotes the fifth commandment You shall not kill (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17 LXX), which prohibited murder. But Jesus goes beyond the letter of the law, calling people to avoid even the kind of anger and critical speech that seeks to wound another person and thus destroys relationships. Whoever is angry with his brother or publicly dishonors him by calling him Raqa (meaning imbecile or idiot) or You fool will face severe punishment. The next two illustrations underscore the importance of not letting anger persist. Jesus addresses the person who is about to offer sacrifice but remembers an unresolved problem in a personal relationship. Jesus says, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother.

Now here is the thing you need to appreciate about this example. There was only one Altar. It was in Jerusalem. Jesus is giving the sermon at the Sea of Galilee, 123 kilometres northwest from Jerusalem. What Jesus is saying therefore is that if when you are in Jerusalem and remember an unresolved problem, leave your animal at the Temple and walk all the way home to Galilee to be reconciled with your brother before returning to complete the sacrifice. This hyperbole would accentuate the urgency to resolve any tensions in a relationship rather than letting them fester.

With his next illustration, Jesus challenges his disciples to settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. If you succeed in reaching an out-of-court settlement, Jesus suggests, you avoid the risk that the divine judge will render judgment against you. The RSV translates the word for "settle" as "make friends." Responding to your accuser with anger only increases hostility, but good will and a desire to be reconciled helps restore friendship. The dramatic image of being thrown into prison points to the consequence of not seeking reconciliation with one's opponents

Saint Paul in Ephesians picks up on Jesus' teaching on anger when he writes in Ephesians 4:

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.¹²

The apostle insists on the complete removal of a cluster of negative attitudes and the behaviors to which they lead: bitterness, is an inner attitude of resentment; wrath is passionate rage; anger, is a settled attitude of hostility. So for instance just before this verse Paul warns "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." When we do so anger is able to take root which in turn can lead to wrangling or loud quarreling; that leads to abusive or slanderous speech. The word for slander is the same word we have in English for blasphemy. When we slander a person we are misrepresenting them and defaming their character. This culminates in malice which is a hateful feeling towards the person who is the object of the uncontrolled anger. Instead, Paul says, be kind to one another and compassionate (RSV "tenderhearted"; NJB "sympathetic"). There may be a play on words here: the Greek word for "kind" is *chrestos*, which some scholars think was pronounced at that time exactly like *christos*, "Christ." Thus "be Christ to one another." Rather than be angry or hostile at wrongs suffered, we are to forgive one another as God has forgiven us in Christ³

All this comes into focus with the following story.

When Leonardo da Vinci was working on his painting, "the Last Supper," he became angry with a certain man. Losing his temper he lashed the man with bitter words and threats. Returning to his canvas, he attempted to work on the face of Jesus, but was unable to do so. Finally, he put down his brush, sought out the man, and asked his forgiveness. The man accepted his apology and Leonardo was able to return to his work shop and finish painting the face of Jesus.

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.* (1993). (Eph 4:32). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.* (1993). (Eph 4:31). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

³ Williamson, P. S. (2009). *Ephesians* (pp. 134–136). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.