

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

12/7/15

"Jesus, anger and the world around us ..."

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Somalia says 12 Shebaab attackers killed in hotel raids.

Female suicide bomber kills 10 in Chad capital.

Man arrested for allegedly kidnapping, rape.

Mayor to cover funeral costs of teen killed in tavern stampede.

Girlfriend in dock after man murdered.

"Where is my child?" accident pupil's mom's anguish.

John the Baptist beheaded.

All of the above news headlines sans the news about John the Baptist came from News 24 over the last 48 hours.

It does not take much to realise that we are indeed living in some grim times that includes copious amounts of pain, violence, death and loss in the world around us.

This is not new to people or the world.

Ask Jesus.

Mark relates the story we read this morning how John the Baptist lost his life all those years ago ... also in a violent manner. John the Baptist is one of the most colourful and dynamic characters of scripture. Jesus treated him with the highest respect. Jesus insisted on being baptised by John in the Jordan River.

I am fairly sure that when Jesus finally heard the news that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been murdered, He must have been devastated.

Perhaps even angry?

All of us have suffered loss of some kind in our lives, whether it is the loss of a valued physical item, a dearly beloved pet or even a parent or friend. We are all aware of the pain of loss, the grief, heartache and inner turmoil that goes hand in hand with losing someone we love.

May I be so bold as to suggest that perhaps sometimes we even become angry if a life we value has been taken in a trivial or meaningless circumstance?

May I be so bold as to suggest that sometimes we even become angry with God when we experience loss in our lives?

I recently came across a book entitled *The Gospel of Anger* written by Alastair V. Campbell.

Many of us as Christians have grown up in the theological tradition that showing outbursts of anger, pain and raw emotion are to be avoided at all costs. After all, is the Gospel not a message of love and peace and all things opposite to anger?

Campbell challenges us to think a little differently about the Gospel and I knew that when the Gospel reading of the beheading of John the Baptist was set for today, this would be a perfect opportunity to discuss some of his ideas put forward in his book.

Traditionally we have always seen love and anger on opposite sides of the spectrum. Unfortunately, when people think of anger they tend to think of aspects like punishment and revenge, as opposed to trying to find the positive side of anger.

Whether we like it or not, at the end of the day we are all human and we all experience intense emotions at some or other point in our lives. I am sure that Jesus must have felt very angry towards King Herod after the sadness of the initial news of John the Baptist's death had sunk in.

Professional psychologists, like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross who has written extensively on the subject, teach us about the five stages of grieving when it comes to working through the loss of a loved one, whether through a divorce or death.

The stages can be defined as:

Denial

Anger

Depression

Bargaining

Acceptance

My focus this morning is on the emotion of anger.

I feel that as Christians we seldom explore this emotion as it is seen as almost “un-Christian” like and thus best left alone.

Campbell challenges us to renew our thinking on the subject of anger. He suggests that if our Christian commitment to compassion and justice is to be honoured in the way that we act towards others, then we need to sever the link between anger and destructiveness and to find ways in which people’s powerful reactions to life’s dangers around them may be put to the service of human wholeness.

This is a very noble sentiment.

Unfortunately, and many of us can relate to this, as broken human beings we tend to lean towards enduring hostility and even revenge when we are angry.

So how do we do this?

Well, firstly, we need to really understand our journey.

As mentioned earlier, all of us will at some stage experience the pain of loss because part of our natural development is to create attachments to others which sooner or later must be broken. Thus, in essence, our lives are a series of breaks and changes. This cycle begins in infancy and is repeated in beginning school, increased independency of adolescence, in moving home or changing jobs, in friendships made or broken, in divorce and bereavement, in retirement and finally in the impending loss of all that is loved and familiar as death approaches. The irony of the human situation is that the deeper and more rewarding the attachment, the more painful the eventual and inevitable loss.

Many theologians would argue that loss and recovery, and the entire gamut of emotions in between (including anger), is actually the theme of the Christian Gospel. The story of the life of Jesus is one of deep attachment and grievous loss. The temptation over the ages is to look forward to the light and hope of Jesus and thus ignore the reality of loss. This is Christianity without pain, without doubt, without despair, which becomes vacuous when people have their greatest trials in faith, hope and love.

Jesus struggled with hope and despair. I would also suggest that Jesus struggled with anger too.

Secondly, we need to become proactive to our anger as opposed to reactive. This means learning to channel our energy in such a way that our efforts become constructive as opposed to destructive. For example, your anger may mean becoming involved in a cause for righteousness and justice. This is positive. Whilst Jesus never resorted to violence, except in the symbolic act of cleansing the temple, He did speak out fearlessly against the authorities. He did not yield to the authority of Caesar in the things which are God's. Jesus was outspoken for the truth, even though it cost Him his life.

Thus we can safely say that our Gospel does allow us to speak out in anger in the face of political injustice, falsehood and hypocrisy. We are entitled to demand the truth.

Lastly, we need to hand over our emotions to God and the Holy Spirit. We alone cannot contain or control the intense feelings of anger as they sweep through our hearts, whether it is anger towards a loved one, a fellow human being or even perhaps God. It is only through grace and faith that we are able to experience our emotions in a manner that is not self-destructive or negative. Note: This does not mean that the Holy Spirit will take away the pain, anger or hurt, but the Holy Spirit will help us to work through these emotions through the support of our Christian brothers and sisters.

Life is not simple. It is complex.

Life is full of joy. It is also full of anger and pain.

Learning to live our lives as fully as possible as Christians in and through Jesus will help us to live through the ebb and flow of our emotions.

I am reminded of a beautiful but apt quote I once read:

Life is not perfect.

It is what it is.

How we cope with it is what makes the difference.

The challenge for you and me going forward in our daily lives is to ensure that not only do we allow ourselves to experience all of our emotions, thus affirming our humanity, but also channelling them in a positive and constructive manner that ensures that the light of Christ does shine through in our lives and in all that we say and do.

Are you ready for the loss that you will face one day?

May God bless you in the week ahead as you focus on allowing yourself to experience all of your emotions in such a way that the Kingdom of God continues to be built.

Amen.