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Sunday 29B [Off RCL]

Sermon notes on Ephesians 4.25-5.2

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A passage like this tempts us to focus upon the theme which apparently dominates it – “anger”, wrath, malice, bitterness, and so on. These are themes which interest us, because we know them well. We have all been on the receiving end of angry outbursts, and we’ve all delivered not a few of them ourselves.

Perhaps what interests us most about anger as it relates to the reading is that Paul links anger and sin: “be angry, but do not sin...” In so doing he draws our attention to another thing with which most of us, again, are already quite familiar – that our anger or the anger of others can be inappropriate, misdirected, self-indulgent, out of control, or something similar. And so our interest in what Paul says here about anger has to do with whether we ourselves have been angry in this “sinful” way – is Paul talking to *me* here?

Most of us will probably admit that we have got anger wrong in the way Paul implies, but the much more interesting occasions are those when we are sure that our anger has been what we might call “righteous”. “Righteous anger” is a notion we’ve developed to speak of anger which *is* appropriate, which is just, or justifiable. The shining example of this for Christians is the apparent anger of Jesus as he cleared the temple, and, perhaps a little more vaguely, the righteous “anger” or “wrath” of God. In either case we struggle to say precisely what it is which Jesus is angry about, or God is rightly wrathful about, but the notion of righteous anger itself is fed by such religious precedents and ideas.

But talk about such righteous anger should alert us to the point of any discussion we’re likely to have when dealing with the theme of anger as Paul raises it. Our concern in such a discussion is likely to be to establish just what righteous anger looks like, what sort of situations might be considered to require such anger, who might be the ones justified in being angry in this way, and so on. Such conversations are, perhaps, important for us to have, but they are not the kind of thing which Paul is concerned with here. Paul is not interested in how our behaviour lines up according to standards of good and bad anger, whether worked out by consensus, or by divine decree, or simply by my own determination that I’m right in my actions. This way of thinking about our actions is always a temptation to self-righteousness, whether in anger or not. To know when it is *right* to be angry – or not – is to have no need of God.

Rather, what interests Paul is how our being human – which very much includes how we relate to one another – is linked to the way in which God is God. And so, when it comes to considering what he says about “anger” in this passage, the crucial point is not the different types of anger or nuances of the different words he uses for associated emotions and motivations, but his closing remarks on imitating God: “...Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love...”

I want to focus my reflections this morning particularly on this notion of “imitating God”. First, what this doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean trying to work out whether God would be angry in this or that situation, and being angry (or not) alongside God. Quite apart from the fact that it’s most likely impossible to know the force of God’s mind on any particular matter, there are two other problems here. The first is whether it really makes any sense to speak of God as “angry”. Certainly we read in the Scriptures of God’s “wrath”, but if we understand this to mean that God gets angry like we do, then we’ve missed the point of this whole passage and simply cast our experiences and motivations onto God. The second problem with doing what God would do is that by asking what God would do or thinks in a particular situation we are still focussed on the question of “doing”. Determining what God would do and then doing it ourselves is still stuck in the idea that there is an absolute which we (and God) might know or work out and act upon. But this is really only to do the moral calculations and then to bless them by declaring that our conclusions are God’s will.

To imitate God is not to know what God would do, and then to do it. What *is* then the imitation of God then? The answer is hinted at by Paul himself, in the very next line: “...be imitators of God, *as beloved children...*” The notion of children imitating a parent is one which is less prevalent for us today than once it was. Certainly we see in children mannerisms which their parents have, or catch glimpses of similar facial expressions or tone of voice found in mum or dad, but we’ve a much stronger sense these days of the child’s independence and freedom from having to become “a chip off the old block”. In Paul’s time “like father like son, like mother like daughter” had a stronger ring to it than it does for us.

But in order to “imitate God” we need to look a bit closer at what God does, lest our understanding still be obscured by our ever-

pressing concern to know that we're doing the "right" thing. We can say that God does the right thing because simply *God* does it. That is, as a matter of definition, whatever God does is right, because God is God. Now, this might or might not be correct, but it is not very *interesting*. If it does work for God it doesn't work for us, because honesty requires that we don't know that what we've done has been right simply because it was you or me who did it.

But given what Paul says here about what God *has done*, we can get a better handle on the *way* in which God's actions might be said to be "right". Paul exhorts us: "...be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (4.32). Now, the crucial point here is whether forgiveness is the "right" thing to do, or *in what sense* it is the right thing. There is a hard legal principle which maintains that forgiveness is *not* a right thing. "Law" has here a sense a little like in our expression "the laws of nature"; such law is inexorable – break it, and the consequences have to be paid. A moral version of this kind of law is never very far from our hearts, and on such a moral understanding what God does in forgiving is not "right" at all.

But let us allow Paul to be correct in his affirmation of God's work, and press further to understand in what sense the things that God does *are* then "right". I suggested earlier that God's actions can be defined as right simply because God does them, but that this was also an uninteresting definition; it has nothing to do with us, and is something like saying that a bachelor is an unmarried man. What would be "interesting" about a bachelor is not that he is unmarried (a matter of definition) but that he might be "available" (a matter of relation). It is the same with the rightness of God's actions. What would be interesting about God's rightness is whether and how it impacted upon us. It is with just such impact that Paul is himself interested. The rightness or *righteousness* of God's work is not that God is God and always does the right thing, but that what God does *makes* things right.

This is a subtle distinction but a very important one, for it lies at the heart of the gospel. "...[B]e kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, *as God in Christ has forgiven you*" (4.32). The "rightness" of what God does springs not from his status as God and therefore as the one who knows the fine detail of the moral code. Rather, the rightness of God's actions springs from the *effects* of what he does – a setting aright of what is not right. Or, to use other New Testament language, the rightness of God is a *power* to overcome other powers – such as strict legalisms and their consequences. To imitate God, then, is not to know what the right thing is as

God might know it, but to-do-and-to-be (noting that this is one word!) as God is-and-does. God is "right" because he does "righting" things.

Now, it might seem I've wandered a long way from the opening theme of "anger" and "wrath" and so on, but the point has been to situate us differently in order to make *Christian* sense of talk of brokenness in human relations. The point has been to head off a premature concern with the theme of anger, and to allow the more important matter of *God's* work – the gospel – to shine through. For a Christian sense of anger and division does not begin with a legal weighing up of who did or said what to whom and under what circumstances and with motivations. This is the work you do if you want to *know* that you are right to be angry (or not). And although these *are* discernments we have to make in some instances, we may not make them in order to *justify* ourselves absolutely.

What then becomes of our actions or decisions to be angry or not? As "imitators of God", as "beloved children", we are not to *be* right as God might be, but to *make* right, as God does. This *making* right, however, is an unnatural thing to us, for we are used to wanting to *be* right. Being right is safe and secure. If I know I have done the right, then I can defend myself – against you and against God, and anger is one form of such a defence.

But to *make* right requires of us a different intention for our actions. To make right is to be kind, to be tender-hearted, to be forgiving, precisely where this would seem to be something which is quite undeserved, in that I know that I am right and have just claims to make. In contrast, Paul says, let your words give grace to those who hear you.

This is a hard calling. In truth we are only able to live and relate in such a way if we have ourselves been the recipients of kindness and forgiveness, *and* recognised this as being the case. That is to say, we are not yet God's children until God *makes* us his children in the work of forgiveness; we are not able to imitate God "as beloved children" until such time that we have been (re-)made by God through such tenderness and kindness.

Our works of kindness begin with God's work. Our prayer, then, before we pray for hearts to forgive and be kind, is that we might know forgiveness and kindness from God through those around us, that we might then begin on the path of sharing that grace and mercy with others. By the grace of God may we know that prayer answered in and among us. Amen.