

Magdalen 15.05.16 1100

Wrath, or *wrath* if you are American,,,,

It's a magnificent word. It sounds ...well...biblical.

I think I've landed the granddaddy of deadly sins. What's a little lust between friends? Pride? There'd be no politicians without pride! But wrath. Wrath is properly scary. Wrath can wipe out cities. Wrath is too hot to handle.

In this country it is possibly even more tricky. We look down on strong emotions. Someone runs their keys along the side of your beautiful new car –crumbs you must have been furious. 'Well' you say; 'a little miffed.'

Which is of course why we do passive aggressive so well.

It's not just that wrath is so monumental and un-tamable, it's that each of us knows that there is an inner fury that is locked away in a very, very deep room and there is menace about its existence.

Have you ever wanted to kill someone?

No, honestly. Have you ever felt so angry, so overwhelmed by fury and physically shaking with passion, that you could have murdered someone?

OK. Whatever we might have felt, I guess most of us haven't actually killed someone. Child psychologists tell us that these feelings can be so powerful, in young children especially, that if someone in the family dies the child is quite likely to feel responsible, just because they wished someone dead. Most of us who are parents have experienced the explosive nature of siblings fighting. You might even have said: 'I thought they were going to kill each other.' And lets face it most of us have not been in situations that are so extreme that murder becomes an option.

So lets take a small step away from actual murder. Have you ever hit someone? This is not a guilt trip thing. I know perfectly well that in a congregation this size there are liable to be several of you who have experienced domestic violence, or a mugging, or sexual violence, or emotional violence -as victim or perpetrator-or witness - - and boy,

Christians are not exempt.

Or a different angle again. What if someone had harmed your child or your parent? How would you feel? Would you feel rising within you a dreadful urge to get that person. The classic way of getting a young man to lose his temper is to insult his mother.

It's within all of us, make no bones about it. We all have the capacity for fury, hatred, violence, which for obvious reasons we'd like to pretend was not there.

I remember an incident when I was a teenager.

My parents were out, and I answered the phone. A man, a member of the Church, began the most dreadful tirade against me, my Dad, the whole church, God. I coped very well, kept calm, and eventually the phone call ended. But after I put down the receiver I broke down in tears. I had been really frightened by the man's aggression.

At that moment my Father came back and found me weeping. As I told him the story I watched this change come over him. This normally calm man, who was very much governed by reason, became molten fury. It took every daughterly skill I possessed to stop him going straight round to this man, and I'm convinced there would have been violence.

Now my Dad was a good and godly man, and to my knowledge he never hit anyone in his life. I just tell you the story to remind you that we are all like that. That when we see and read stories of unspeakable, and unreasonable violence we cannot imagine that these people are in some way fundamentally different from ourselves. They are not. When Jesus was arrested and crucified the majority of people, even those who had shouted 'hosanna' a couple of days before bayed for his blood, and the disciples who said they'd never leave him, ran away and hid.

If we'd been there, well, we'd have done the same. It is the human condition.

But this 'wrath' word is not that simple. When I hear it my mind goes straight to the Wrath of God.

The small child whose trembling little hand pinches some sweets from the corner store, and the heavens crack open and the full weight of God's wrath is directed towards him. A wrath that has to be appeased....so a certain type of theology will tell you. But it's ok because God loves you really, so he'll take it out on his son instead.

I remember being on a panel a while back with Matthew Paris and we were discussing exactly this and he said: "I just want to make it completely plain I do not hold myself personally responsible for the fact that 2000 years ago they murdered Jesus. My own failures and wrongdoings did not cause his death.'

He has a point I think. If we are going to understand wrath, then we need to get our heads round the wrath of God in such a way that God is not cast as pathologically angry.

So here's my theological hypothesis:

The seven deadly sins identify drivers that form human character. In so far as we are made in the image of God they are reflections of the character of God. Then, because of the fault line that corrupts perfection, these drivers morph into 'sins'

Thus for example, love and desire which are beautiful beyond words when seen in perfection in God, easily morph into lust. Appetite which sustains life, morphs into gluttony, and -I would propose -energy, passion which brings about creativity and development, can all too easily morph into anger.

It is a given, I hope you agree, that that which we describe as God is of essence good. Therefore whatever it is that the bible describes as the wrath of God must also be good. Nothing that is bad can emanate from God -the wrath of God must be good.

What I am suggesting -on this Pentecost Sunday -is that what the New Testament writers described as wind and fire -that energy and power of God that comes to us as the Holy Spirit -is the manifestation of what the Old Testament writers described as the wrath of God.and yes, sometimes it is a form of anger -the sort of anger we ourselves experience when we see injustice. The sort of anger that gets you off your backside and do something, bring about change, fight and work on the side of the

poor and marginalized. The sort of anger I feel within the church for example when I am forbidden to treat all God's children equally and am obliged to marry any straight couple who ask me, but expressly forbidden to marry a gay couple.

It's what produced a generation of playwrights such as John Osborne (look back in anger) in the 50's known as the angry young men, who highlighted social injustice and were instrumental in pushing reform. It's what got Jesus flinging over tables at the temple.

Now what really, really lands us in trouble, and it's very big trouble, is when we confuse the first wrath we discussed, the one that threatens our very existence like a depth charge, the one that lurks within each one of us, the uncontrolled and violent wrath of which we are rightly afraid.....with the second one –full of energy and passion.

It is actually pure idolatry to imagine that the wrath of God is in any way like our own destructive anger. –But alas that is what we have historically done. We internalize a God who needs to be appeased and we equate his justice with the need for retribution where in fact surely it is about equity.

We then allow that image of God to oppress us, and worse than that, use it to justify the oppression of others.

It's as if we are so afraid of the wrath that is within us that we project it onto God, externalise it.

It is quite remarkable the extent that religious people can be angry and cruel and then justify it and fail to take responsibility because somehow it's God's wrath not theirs.

Now the temptation is to search for a binary solution.

There is this bad thing called wrath that ferments within us. Therefore pray -if you are the praying sort, for God to deliver you from it; to empty your psyche of anger and reform you into a gentle and peaceful person.

No sure it quite works like that. That would be rather like thinking bad thoughts and therefore asking God to stop you thinking. The good -the energy and the passion, the drive and the creativity are woven into the wrath, and both are woven into our personalities and our characters.

So instead of trying to deal with any of these 7 deadly sins in isolation the route surely needs to be one of personal and spiritual formation. It is as we

grow into the likeness of Christ that these shadow sides of us loose their power to control us. The message of Pentecost is that we indeed have the gift of the very life of Christ inhabiting us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

If we are wise parents we try to help children not to suppress their feelings but to recognize them and name them, and then have enough understanding to be capable of making good choices. When you can do that you might be deemed mature.

Spiritual maturity is part of the same process. The Spirit can teach us to recognize and name what's going on within us, and then be free to make good and godly choices.

Pentecost. The Church and the Christian had to work out how to be without the physical Jesus with them. It was their Bar Mitzvah -their moving into grown up mode. Pentecost is no different today. It is a call to internalize the love and Christ and allow that love to form us in his image.

Amen.