

Dearly Beloved,

Today we mark the fourth Sunday after Easter. The Church, both at Mass and at Matins, begins to read the letter of St. James. James was a cousin of our Lord, chosen to be an Apostle, and the first bishop of Jerusalem, martyred at the age of 96 in the city.

The letter of James is short yet filled with much practical wisdom, and a letter worth reading with some frequency. The selection for today is taken from the first chapter and has the memorable verses, "*Let everyone be quick to listen but slow to speak and slow to anger...for the anger of man does not work the justice of God.*" St. James paired speech and anger together because when we are angry, we often say too much, and vice versa, when we speak too much, we often get into arguments and are offended by other people's interjections into our wise expostulations. Thus: too much speech and too much anger often go hand in hand.

Both speech and anger are ambivalent parts of human life, since they are good in themselves but so often used to excess. Speech communicates truth, and anger addresses injustice; both are good and necessary human actions. And it is also the case that if neglect speech or anger, we can be guilty of sin, for there are times when it is sinful to remain silent or to not get angry. Thus: to be virtuous and grow in holiness, we must know how to rightly use both speech and anger. Since a Sunday homily does not give sufficient time to cover both, and lest I say too much and anger you by my wordiness, I will focus on anger.

Anger is first of all an emotion, a bodily response to a real or perceived evil which we cannot avoid. Unlike other emotions, however, anger is closely tied to reason because anger arises when we judge someone's words or actions as offensive toward our person. Thus: there are times when reason dictates that we be angry—for example, when a child insults a parent, the proper response is anger. The child's action disrupts the natural order and anger seeks to address the injustice. Anger also applies to offenses not only against ourselves, but also against those with whom we are associated so closely as to consider them part of ourselves. An example is that when someone insults Christ or His Church, we should be angry, and, more angry than we would be if we ourselves were insulted, since His honor is more important than ours.

However, we know all too well that anger tends toward excess. Proof of this is that we do not praise people by calling them angry—whereas we say 'he is a courageous person' or 'she is a prudent person' we do not testify to someone's holiness by saying 'he is an angry person.' Moreover, anger is hard to regulate because it is attractive to us: its object, the administering of justice for offenses, which is called vengeance by medieval authors, is good and so we wish to act upon it, but because it is so attractive, it encourages impetuosity and we act hastily and disproportionately.

As St. James points out, anger also leads to sins of the tongue, for when we are angry, we often engage in false accusation and detraction. With a person who hurts us or someone we love, we read into their actions and assign motivations that are often not present and sometimes we go so far as to vocalize these accusations, though that only adds to the gravity of the sin we have already committed through accusatory speech in our minds. Other times we may confront the person, but we are not satisfied with addressing the grievance with them alone, and so needlessly tell others of the offensive action, which sin is called detraction. Thus anger, despite its inherent goodness, is also a capital vice, for it leads to so many other sins.

In Christian tradition, there are two virtues that moderate anger: meekness, which harnesses interior desire for vengeance, and clemency, which mitigates the rendering of vengeance, meaning it tempers our use of punishment. To return to the example of the parent and child, meekness helps the parent from disproportionate interior anger by properly evaluating the injury suffered and placing it in context, while clemency ensures the right exterior punishment when punishment is due. Since our interior dispositions lead to exterior actions, meekness is the most important for us to cultivate, as then clemency will more likely fall in line.

Growth in meekness is fostered by two things in particular: first, silence; and second, the continual remembrance of God's mercy. Silence helps us to temper our anger because it creates an inner sanctuary where we can evaluate the quality of an injury and respond to it properly. Silence also allows us to consider the other person's reasons for offending us, which is so often due to weakness rather than malice. If silence is given as a punishment, that is, if we are obstinately silent on purpose with our offender, it is sinful; but to take space and time to better consider an offense is virtuous.

The second help to meekness is remembrance of God's mercy towards us. If the anger of God was given free rein to act, each of us would be destroyed or plunged into hell—not only those whom we name as heretics or infidels or sinners, but each one of us who has use of reason, without exception. We have each offended God to such an extent that we deserve justice more than mercy, and yet He extends His mercy far more than He acts on His wrath. If we are called to be like God, which is what it is to be holy and virtuous, meekness helps us put our anger into perspective. As James says, the wrath of man does not work the justice of God, and this is worth telling ourselves when we get hot under the collar about anything. The angry man thinks his anger is justified in each situation and as he perceives it, without exception, so we should check ourselves in every case of anger. God will have His day and so will His anger and His justice, but at the final judgment. In this life, He prefers mercy to justice and thus so should we, for insofar as we extend mercy to others now, we will rejoice in His anger at the end of time, rather than being destroyed by it.

As regards the current situation in the Church, we have reason to be angry. Christ is insulted by the ambiguity of doctrine, especially the insinuation that the religion He founded is not unique, and He is insulted by the duplicity of life in the person of His bishops and priests. But because anger is so attractive to us, we must constantly reevaluate our wrath as to whether it is aiding us in virtue or eating us from within. Some vices never tend toward the good, while others, like anger, tend to both good and evil alike. If our anger leads us to more prayer and sacrifice, to measured speech, and to greater hope in God, it is good; if it leads us to excessive speech and accusation, to spending more time reading of controversy than reading Scripture, to becoming men of anger rather than men of mercy, our anger is deceiving us.

In this struggle to rightly employ anger, let us ask the Blessed Virgin for help. Though immaculate, she was angry—angry against the devil, against sin, against lies. But at the same time, she is meek beyond compare and the mother of mercy and repentance. She prays for all her children, even the duplicitous, that they may know the fullness of redemption her Son won for us, and may not waste His precious blood by their indifference, sloth, or malice. May she, by her intercession, teach us to use our anger well, for the salvation of souls and for the building up the body of Christ, the Church. And may we, by her aid, thus reach the halls of heaven, where there shall be no need for anger, for sinners shall be punished, the just rewarded, and the Holy Trinity glorified, and we shall praise His justice and mercy forever and ever.