

## Thoughts on God's anger

I was recently praying the Holy Rosary (Sorrowful Mysteries) using an excellent online aid forwarded to me by a friend and compiled by the Rosary Center & Confraternity in Portland, USA (<https://www.rosarycenter.org/homepage-2/rosary/how-to-pray-the-rosary/>) that for each *Hail Mary* of each Decade provides a mystery to meditate upon while praying. The theme of the first Decade of the Sorrowful Mysteries is the Agony in the Garden and I was immediately struck by the mystery of the fourth *Hail Mary* of this Decade: "He [Jesus] sees the wrath of the Father which His sufferings must appease". I was initially confused. How could it be, I thought, that God is angry with mankind and presumably seeking retribution, yet at the same time out of love for us sacrifices His only Son to redeem us and take our punishment upon Himself? Is it not a contradiction for the Triune God to punish Himself for the sins we have committed and for which he seeks retribution? And in any case, if He is on the one hand angry with us but at the same time loves us and wishes to forgive us, would it not make more sense simply to pardon us without further ado? There have after all been wonderful examples in human history of people whose innocent loved ones are murdered, for example by terrorists, and who despite their pain and anger choose to forgive rather than to seek revenge, and indeed Jesus Himself on the Cross prays, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing". And yet we may ask, why did Jesus feel the need to implore His Father in this way? Is He afraid of His Father's anger and revenge? But this too seems contradictory, since it is the same Father who has chosen to sacrifice His Son for our sins. It is the Father's will that is being done. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays, "Yet not my will, but yours be done". So when Jesus prays "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing" it seems He is referring to His murderers carrying out the will of the Father, although this also entails loading even more guilt onto the whole of mankind. That this should be the Father's will is completely at odds with our Christian understanding of a merciful and loving God. This concept of a wrathful and revengeful God also does not tie in with what Jesus Himself teaches us about forgiveness: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:38-40).

To understand this apparent contradiction, I feel the first thing is to be clear about what exactly we mean by "anger" and "wrath". I would like to propose defining anger not first and foremost as a feeling of intense hate and hostility, a desire for revenge and retribution, but more as a sense of injustice. Whatever extremes our anger might take, whenever we are angry the reason for our anger is fundamentally a sense of injustice: somebody has wronged me without provocation, I sense this injustice and desire justice and this provokes my anger. The question to answer now, I feel, is whether this sense of injustice and desire to restore justice is in itself a bad thing or whether it might not even be something good and necessary. If a man in the street is beaten and robbed, I can walk past thinking this does not affect me and therefore does not need to concern me or I can feel a passionate sense of injustice and

anger that this person should be treated in such a way which compels me to stop and help said person. In other words, this is something I should be angry about. Anger, therefore, is not per se a bad thing but as with all things can become so if distorted and corrupted by human sin.

We read in the Bible that the Lord is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love” (Psalms 103:8). But hang on, this does not mean that God does not get angry or is incapable of anger but more that He is fundamentally a being of love and not of anger. He can, however, become angry in a positive sense where He sees injustice and wishes to restore justice. He would not walk past the aforementioned robbery victim in the street! To return to the mystery that so confused me, “He sees the wrath of the Father which His sufferings must appease”, we need to understand that the wrath of the Father is not directed here against humanity as such and He is not seeking revenge from us and punishment for our sins. Rather, His anger is directed against the power of sin arising from original sin itself. It is a passionate sense of injustice and will to restore justice arising from His love for us; owing to its passionate nature, I therefore feel that “wrath” is a more apt term to describe it than “anger”. God sees the destructive power of sin that threatens the very existence of mankind, infecting the world with all sorts of viruses not just of a physical nature but also other ailments such as sin, selfishness, war, greed and abuse of power, to name but a few. He loves the world and the people He has created so much that His desire to restore justice and eliminate the power of sin is such that He is even prepared to sacrifice His only begotten Son to achieve this.

Human anger, by contrast, in many instances cannot simply be reduced to a sense of injustice and desire to restore justice out of love. Human beings are often angry without any justification; we can if we choose even be paranoid and go around thinking the whole world is against us. Mankind tends also not simply to wish to restore justice but to go further than this and seek revenge, punishment and compensation. If we are wronged by another, we impulsively desire not simply to have the wrong put right (for example something has been stolen and should be returned) but to make the perpetrator pay for what they have done. It is rather like somebody breaking the law and being ordered to pay a fine or sent to prison as a punishment. That is not God’s kind of anger: Whenever we sin, we cause damage to God’s creation and He wishes this damage to be put right for the good of all and out of love for us. That is why in the Catholic Church we have the Sacrament of Reconciliation which is a wonderful opportunity for us to put right what we have done wrong. But as long as we are willing to do this and truly repent, our Lord forgives unconditionally. He seeks no vengeance.

One of the most moving elements of the Holy Week services I find, is the passage from St. John (3:16) so beautifully set to music by the nineteenth century English composer Sir John Stainer: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”. Does this not wonderfully sum up the Father’s “wrath” which Jesus’ sufferings were to appease? The Apostles’ Creed tells us that Jesus “descended into hell”. We do not know exactly what took place there but we

believe that by the will of the Father He conquered the sin that would otherwise have caused us to perish. Let us therefore take hope this Easter despite the problems besetting our troubled world, the current pandemic, the wars, the abuses of power, the damage to our environment, all the uncertainty the future holds for us, and remember that Jesus has saved us by His Father's will. May we be blessed this Eastertime by the love, peace, healing and consolation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Sin and death have not had the last word.

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