

February 7, 2010

Sunday of the Last Judgment

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Anger is troublesome. Among Christians striving seriously to live the mandates of the Gospel, I wager, anger is the sin most often mentioned in the Sacrament of Confession. Alas, it also has a remarkably long shelf life.

High among the problems attending anger is this: In the classical inventories of the passions, anger is the only one with no opposite impulse. Each of the other passions is paired with a reciprocal antithesis: love is matched by hatred, desire by aversion, hope by despair, fear by boldness, and joy by sorrow. Only anger stands by itself, with no corresponding emotive pull in the opposite direction (cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia IIae q. 25, art. 3). If you get angry, you're just stuck with it until it goes away!

Another problem with anger is that it is not, in every instance, a thing to be avoided. This is hardly surprising, since the morally proper object (*finis*) of anger is justice. Indeed, life in this world presents occasions when the refusal to become angry is likely a moral defect.

Another problem with anger, I believe, is that some Christians entertain unreasonable expectations with respect to it. For instance, in Confession they repent of "correcting children in anger." I admit, of course, that children can be (and often are) emotionally harmed by parental displays of anger, and none of us would say that it a good thing. On the other hand, it would hardly be preferable for children to grow up with no experienced memory of anger as an expected response to bad behavior.

One of the most common misunderstandings about anger is the assumption that at some point in our experience of irritation it is morally permissible to blow our stacks: some kind of righteous "boiling point," as it were. We differ among ourselves about where that point should be placed, but most of us implicitly conjecture that such a point does exist. That is to say, we presume that nobody---not even God---should require us to tolerate an unlimited amount of provocation. At some notch in our strained endurance, we presume, anger becomes a righteous response.

This presumption is illusory. The righteousness of righteous anger is qualitative, not quantitative: It is determined by its formal and final cause, which is justice, not by the measure of irritation that arouses it. Anger does not become righteous by reason of its accumulated provocations. I know it is painful to hear this---and it is no less painful to say it---but there is no point in our cultivation of patience where "I've had enough" becomes the rallying cry of righteousness.

Offhand I think of two biblical stories that demonstrate this point:

The first concerns Moses, about whom the Psalmist said that the Israelites "became provocative at the waters of Meribah, and it went badly for Moses on their account." What, exactly, did Moses do? "He spoke rashly with his lips" (Psalms 106 [105]: 32).

Having endured the ceaseless murmurings of the Israelites for forty years, Moses finally declared, "I've had enough!" Commanded by the Lord to "speak to the rock before their eyes," Moses "said to them, 'Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod" (Numbers 20: 7-11).

That was it---the single offense that kept Moses from entering the Holy Land. If ever a man might be excused for blowing his stack, I would have imagined, it was certainly Moses at the waters of Meribah. Obviously, however, the Lord took a different view.

The second example is concerns David, when he was sorely provoked by Nabal (1 Samuel 25). Having used up his entire stock of patience with Saul in the previous chapter, David suddenly found himself without inner spiritual resources when confronted with the moral obtuseness of a man whose own wife described him as a worthless fool.

In this particular case, the Lord used that wife, Abigail, to prevent David from following through with his rash and angry threat. Otherwise, surely, David would have sinned like Moses, and like Moses he would have been punished. As the anger of Moses kept him from leading Israel into the Promised Land, David's anger might have kept him from occupying Israel's throne.

This lesson about anger is a hard one to hear: At no point does grievous provocation become a righteous cause.

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