

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Homily: Fr. Shijo George

Pastor – Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Victoria, BC, Canada

There are some things in life that happen so unexpectedly that later we realize, “Maybe God was trying to teach me something.” Last Thursday, while I was on vacation in Port Hardy, I was walking along the beach, reading and looking at the different things around me. As I was walking, I passed a group of people who were sitting together, drinking and smoking. Suddenly, one of the women stood up and came toward me. She came very close to me and just stood there, staring at me. I had no idea what I had done. I wasn't saying anything or responding to her. Without warning, she then said something very offensive to me. I simply asked her, “What did I do? Did I do something wrong?” The two people who were sitting with her immediately said: “No, sir. No, sir. It's not you. Sorry, sir.” In response, I simply said: “It's okay. No problem.” and walked away.

I went to another part of the beach and continued enjoying my time. Later, when I was walking back, the older man from that group stood up again and apologised: “Sorry, sir. Sorry about what happened.” I simply replied: “It's okay. God bless her.” Immediately, something beautiful happened. When the woman heard that, she apologised and said: “I'm really sorry for what happened. God bless you too.” I walked away thinking: “My goodness! I was actually thinking and praying about what I should preach this Sunday, and God just gave me an illustration!” I almost had to laugh. Sometimes God doesn't give us material for a homily from a library; sometimes He gives us our homily on a beach!

I also realized something very important: the real battle was not between me and that woman; the real battle was inside me. I could have become angry. I could have responded with harsh words. I could have insulted her. I could have spent the rest of the day thinking: “How dare she treat me like that?” And even after walking away, I could have carried that anger with me. That is what anger often does. The person who hurt us may go home and forget the whole thing, but we carry the incident home. We carry it into our room, our workplace, our family, and even our prayer. We even carry it into the next conversation. Suddenly, someone who has already disappeared and moved on from that one incident in



our life is still controlling our emotions. The person who made me angry may be kilometres away, but I am still giving that person power over my heart. This is where today's Readings become so practical.

Sirach says: “Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.” What a powerful expression: “The sinner hugs them tight.” Sometimes we don't simply experience anger. We hold it; we feed it; we replay the conversation; we think about what we should have said and what we could have said; and we tell somebody else about it. From there, another person hears about it, and then another person, and another; and the anger grows. What began as a small irritation grows into resentment. Resentment becomes bitterness. Bitterness can become hatred; and hatred can eventually become a desire for revenge. That is how anger can become wrath.

The Catholic Church does not teach that every feeling of anger is automatically sinful. Anger can arise naturally when we experience injustice or something disconcerting. However, the Church warns us against allowing anger to transform into a desire for revenge or in deliberately wishing evil upon another person. The Catechism teaches us that anger becomes sinful when we deliberately desire evil for our neighbour, and harbouring deliberate hatred of another person is contrary to charity. So, the question is not simply ‘Do I ever get angry?’ Of course, we do. The deeper question to ourselves is ‘What do I do with my anger?’ Does my anger lead me toward God, or does my anger take me away from God? Does it help me to correct something, or does it make me want to hurt somebody? Do I bring my anger to God, or do I carry it around all day?

Although anger may knock on the door of our heart, we don't have to invite it in, nor give it room. This is exactly where the Gospel becomes challenging. Peter comes to Jesus and asks: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Peter probably thought he was being very generous, citing ‘seven times!’ But Jesus responds: “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Jesus then follows that with the parable of the unforgiving servant. A man owes his master an

enormous debt and cannot repay it. The master shows him mercy and forgives the whole debt. However, that same man goes out to find someone who owes him a much smaller amount, and instead of showing the mercy that he himself received, he grabs the man and demands payment.

Jesus makes the point very clear: if I have received mercy from God, I must become a person of mercy. That does not mean pretending nothing happened. It does not mean that injustice doesn't matter. It does not mean to allow people to abuse us. It means refusing to allow another person's wrongdoing to destroy the peace in our own heart. Sometimes forgiveness is not about what the other person deserves. Forgiveness is about what I don't want anger to do to me. Anger can become a prison. Often, the person who triggered the anger and locked that door is no longer even there. WE are the ones holding the key.

This is why I love the wisdom of St. Francis de Sales. He had a wonderful understanding of human emotion. He recognized that when anger comes, the answer is not to become even more agitated while trying to control the anger. Instead, he encourages us to turn gently toward God, ask Him for help, and respond with an act of meekness. When anger rages inside us, true virtue is to remain gentle. That is a very different understanding of strength. The world often tells us: “If somebody attacks you, attack back. If somebody insults you, insult them back. If somebody raises their voice, raise yours even higher.” But Christianity says: “You don't have to become like the person who hurt you.” That is strength. Anyone can shout. Anyone can insult. Anyone can lose control. It takes grace to remain peaceful. It takes strength to remain gentle. It takes Godliness to say: “God bless you” when everything inside you wants to say something else. Perhaps that is the little lesson God gave me on that beach. I could have allowed one unpleasant moment to control the rest of my day. Instead, by God's grace, I walked away. And when I said: “God bless her” something changed. Maybe I changed. Maybe she changed. Maybe both of us did. Suddenly, what could have become a confrontation became a moment of reconciliation.

This can happen in our everyday lives. Think about driving. When you are driving peacefully, and suddenly someone cuts you off; immediately something happens inside you and you react with: “What is he doing? What is she doing?” You honk. You shout. Maybe you may use some language that you wouldn't want your children to hear! Then you drive home angry. But here's the funny thing: that driver doesn't even know that you are still angry. That person has probably reached their destination, and you are still carrying that anger. You bring it home. You speak harshly to someone you love. You become irritated with small things. You become impatient, and your whole mood changes. That one person who is not even aware they are the cause of your anger has now affected your relationship with your family. That is what anger can do. It doesn't only hurt the person at whom we are angry; it can spread. Eventually, we discover that we are no longer reacting to what happened five minutes ago; we are reacting to everything that has accumulated in our heart.

Let us ask ourselves three simple questions:

1. Who is controlling me? Am I controlling my anger, or is my anger controlling me?
2. What am I carrying? Is there somebody I have been carrying in my heart for days, weeks, or even years? Perhaps that person doesn't even know how much space they occupy in my mind.
3. And finally, can I place it in God's hands? Instead of replaying the situation again and again in your mind, just say: “Lord, You know what happened. You know how I was hurt. You know my anger. You know my feelings. I give this to You. Help me not to become what has hurt me.” That is where freedom begins.

Perhaps this is the heart of today's message: anger, when surrendered to God, can become an invitation to grow in patience, justice, and self-control. Left unchecked, anger that we deliberately nurture can become wrath: and wrath can destroy our peace, our relationships, and eventually ourselves. So, when anger comes, don't immediately speak or react. Don't immediately send that email or text message. Don't immediately make the phone call. Pause. Pray. Breathe. Give God a moment to enter the situation.

St. Francis de Sales gives us a beautiful spirituality of gentleness. When anger begins to rise, turn toward God, and then respond with meekness rather than allowing the emotion to take control. Remember one simple sentence: “I don't have to win every argument; I have to protect my heart.” Jesus does not want us to live as prisoners of our emotions. He wants us to live in freedom.

The servant in today's Gospel was forgiven a great debt. We too have been forgiven. In turn, we too live must live by mercy. In effect, Jesus says to us: “Go and do likewise.” Forgive. Let go. Pray. Be gentle. And when someone hurts you, don't allow their sin to become your sin. Perhaps sometimes the most powerful response is to not respond; and not to engage in a clever argument. It is not revenge. It is not shouting. Sometimes the most powerful response is simply: “It's okay. God bless you.” Then simply walk away, with God in your heart.