# Be Angry but Do Not Sin

# Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

# A Sermon preached at Pulaski Heights UMC, Little Rock on March 1, 2019 by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Anger is back in fashion. The Trump supporters are angry. The Trump opponents are angry. The Brexiteers are constantly angry: angry with Europe, angry with Remainers, angry with mild Brexiteers, angry with each other. The Remainers are angry that more people don’t seem to be angry enough about it all.

I want to put together two lines from the scriptures and try to discern what they tell us when sat beside one another. The first one is this, from the Letter to the Ephesians: ‘Be angry but do not sin.’ The second is this, from the Gospel of John: ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’ I want to explore why anger is back in fashion and what the words of Jesus in John’s gospel have to offer in the face of anger.

I want to tell a story in five chapters. It’s a story the broad outlines of which we all know, about the past, present and immediate future, in which we all appear towards the end of chapter four. I believe this story goes a long way towards explaining why anger is in fashion.

Here we go. Chapter one takes place from 1760 to 1830. We’ll call it the first industrial revolution. Mechanised cotton-spinning, powered by steam or water, made a single worker 500 times as productive. Steam engines became transportable and used a fraction of the fuel previously required. Iron-production became hugely more efficient. Machine tools became commonplace. Chapter two takes place from 1870 to 1914. We’ll call it the second industrial revolution. It created electricity, telephones, radios, cars and planes, and consolidated and dispersed all the developments of the first industrial revolution, such as gas and water supply, railways and sewage systems, on an imperial canvas of colonial expansion. Huge social changes resulted: wealth moved to the developed world, artisans gave way to factory workers, work left the home. The consequent massive dislocation was partly addressed by the emergence of the welfare state. While the years from 1914-1980 included two world wars, they didn’t involve a revolution in working patterns. Like the middle years of the nineteenth century, they were a time of consolidation, not transformation.

But chapters three, four and five, from 1980 onwards, bring three more revolutions. Chapter three, from 1980-2000, was the first digital revolution. Most obviously it introduced the computer, the internet, and the mobile phone. But in terms of working patterns, digital communication made it possible to shift production to the six emerging countries, China, India, Indonesia, Korea, Poland and Thailand. National boundaries became less significant; instead, what mattered was skilled labour at low cost. This is the point at which populations of the countries that had initiated and traditionally benefitted from globalisation, finding through it a source of raw materials and growing markets for manufactured goods, started to experience the downsides as jobs first leaked and then haemorrhaged away to the developing world.

Chapter four, in which we find ourselves, involves artificial intelligence, robotics, and cloud computing. This is the one that is beginning severely to hit middle-income groups. For a generation college graduates have adopted the strategy of skilling their way to job security and prosperity through knowledge and technical competence. This strategy is ceasing to work. A worker or machine elsewhere in the world can snatch such a job away in a second. But before anyone has adjusted to this second digital revolution, the third looks set to be upon us. Chapter five, the third digital revolution, likely to begin around 2025, will see robots taking over not only manual labour but even sophisticated cognitive work, potentially transforming hitherto expert domains such as medical diagnosis, financial advice, news journalism and legal judgements. While the industrial revolution transported goods and the digital revolutions transported ideas, but inflicted trauma when they rapidly dislocated people, this new phase is set to overcome the challenge of transporting people by simply transporting machines instead.

I believe this story in great part explains why it is fashionable to be angry. The story that kept people going in the decades after the last war, the story that stuck around so long that it came to seem like simple justice – that you worked hard, stayed in the same job for life, took on further training, made it possible for your children to have a better chance than you had – every part of this story seems to many people to be disintegrating. In the 20 years prior to the 2008 crash, while the richest and poorest benefitted greatly, a whole swathe of the population in the developed world made little or no economic gains. This led to a rise in inequality. Meanwhile growing mobility and international competition for jobs has enormously increased people’s interactions with strangers. Many people have sensed a diminishing control over their destiny and a weakening of their social ties. The result has been the erosion of trust in mainstream institutions – government, business, media, education and NGOs. The world’s goods and services continue to expand, but at the expense of its social and environmental capital.

Here we have the cocktail that has generated rising nationalism, populism and cross-cultural intolerance in many countries, along with a decline in appreciation for democracy. The international elites have been taken by surprise, because for generations they’ve measured well-being in terms of economic indicators, and they’ve seen greater average wealth, so they thought everything was ok. But three vital outcomes have stagnated – equality, empowerment, and solidarity. People in general feel diminishing motivation, capacity and opportunity; they experience a decline in care, belonging, meaning, identity and trust. There’s an increasing sense of powerlessness and isolation.

‘Be angry,’ says Ephesians, ‘but do not sin.’ People are certainly angry. But how do we avoid letting that anger turn into an inhospitable sense of sovereignty, a narrow form of nationalism, and an intolerant version of populism?

The clue, I believe, lies in Jesus’ words after the feeding of the five thousand in John’s gospel. ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’ The people have seen him provide a miraculous food supply from a handful of loaves and fishes. The questions that arise in their hearts are the same as were in the Israelites’ hearts after God sent the manna in the wilderness. This miracle is all very well, but how can we institutionalise it so we can rely on it? How can we process it and systematise it and theorise based on it and programme it in? Jesus’ reply is, ‘You can’t. But if you have me, you don’t need to. In me, there will always be enough – usually far too much. In me, you need never be hungry. Learn to love the things I give in plenty. Don’t go chasing after the things that run out. Shape your heart according to my heart, and you’ll never be thirsty again.’

People are angry in America because they’re saying, ‘We thought we had a deal. We were rewarded for hard work, and our children got a better chance than us. But that deal’s gone. So the fault must lie with a swindle, by the foreign countries or the Washington high-ups, or a steal, by the foreigners in our country or Wall Street.’ It’s hard to argue, because most of the country really did believe in that deal for a long time. And it really does feel like that deal’s gone. But the truth is that that deal wasn’t such a good deal for the rest of the world, and the rest of the world has realised that, and it wasn’t that great a deal for a lot of people in America whose face didn’t fit, and that deal was not proved durable in the face of new technology, whose march can’t be stopped.

And it may sound pious, but what need to be heard are Jesus’ transformative words, that constitute a bigger revolution than any of the five chapters I just outlined. ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’ There will be enough for you. But you have to put your confidence in me. Be angry but do not sin. Be confused but do not despair.

And this is vital not just now, but because the chapter five that lies ahead of us is going to be a bigger challenge than any we’ve faced so far. The reason for that is that it starts to beg the question of what it means to be human. Since the Enlightenment we have called ‘human’ such cognitive abilities as other animals lack; but before very long machines are going to share many such abilities. Is this a crisis or an opportunity? It’s a crisis if we insist on things staying as they are. But consider what the four chapters since 1760 have done to us. As one economist puts it, ‘Since the Industrial Revolution, people have been required to become machine-like, in order to interact effectively with the machines that they had invented. When the machines did simple, repetitive tasks, the workers operating them needed to do simple, repetitive tasks as well. When the machines became more versatile and programmable, the workers were required to become more versatile, but only within the bounds of the existing programs.’ We have come to resemble our machines.

But now we have a chance to rediscover our true humanity. Our true humanity lies in our ability to relate, cooperate, combine and create with God, one another, ourselves and the planet. This requires us to understand one another, empathise with one another, seek the well-being of one another, and love one another as we love ourselves. The first four chapters of the story didn’t require these aptitudes as much as we’re going to need them now. The fifth chapter and whatever lies beyond will require them like never before. But this isn’t something to be feared: it’s something to be celebrated. It’s a chance to recognise the centrality of the faith to which Jesus calls us.

God will provide. It’s what the angel says to Abraham and what Abraham says to Isaac. It’s what Jesus says to the five thousand and what we most need to hear today, as we stand on the brink of a third digital revolution that will take away so much we thought would never change. It’s the most radical social conviction and the most transformative economic statement. It’s perhaps the hardest faith conviction to turn into daily practice and the most challenging part of the gospel truly to believe.

Why are we angry? Because we thought we had a deal, and we thought that deal meant there would always be enough for us. Now we’re realising there’s no deal. But maybe, just maybe, we have an opportunity to become more truly who we were always called to be. ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’ Maybe those are indeed the words of eternal life. Maybe we only have to do one simple thing: believe them.