This morning I bring you some thoughts on anger.

Let’s start with God’s. In our first reading, from the prophet Isaiah, God says to his people: For a brief moment I abandoned you …. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment.... To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed. (Isaiah 54.7-10)

Isn’t there something slightly immature in God’s behaviour here? The surge of anger followed by the declaration of unconditional love: isn’t it a bit adolescent—the hurt, resentful anger of the spurned lover, followed by the overwhelming flood of relief when the beloved finally turns around and requites his love?

Or maybe it’s more parental than adolescent: the anger of a parent who has watched with growing dismay and rising frustration as his child, stubbornly deaf to guidance, proceeds to squander his life. Nevertheless, isn’t there still a hint of egocentricity in that “surge of anger” when God turns his face away, smarting from humiliation, pretending not to give a damn?

If that is so, if God’s anger here springs from God’s ego as well as his child’s prodigality, then in Jesus it seems that God has grown up. For what could be more mature, more strong, more resolute in love, more selfless than Jesus’ prayer on the Cross for those who were crucifying him, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing” (Luke 23.34)?

Thus in the Christian God, in the God revealed in Jesus, it seems that other-regarding love completely displaces self-regarding anger. And Christianity is a religion of love, forgiveness, and peace, in which anger has no place.

Well, no, not exactly.

Our second reading, from the Gospel of Luke, hints at a more complicated picture. Responding to warnings that King Herod is out for his blood, Jesus retorts, “Go tell that fox ....” (Luke 13.32). If there isn’t anger there, there’s certainly hostility. And it reminds us that Jesus did sometimes have a very sharp tongue and that sometimes it was fuelled by righteous anger. Thus in the twenty-third chapter of the Gospel of Matthew: But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!... Woe to you, blind guides.... You blind fools!... You blind men!... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!... You blind guides...! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!... You blind Pharisees!... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!... You
serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?  
(Matthew 23)

This is not restrained language. It’s fierce. It’s furious. It’s very angry. But it’s not angry out of personal pique or humiliation. It’s not angry out of hurt ego. Rather, it’s angry out of care for the weak and vulnerable who’re being exploited. Jesus is very angry with the Pharisees for using their religious authority to raise themselves up and weigh others down, for their abuse of status. In the opening verses of the same chapter, Jesus tells his disciples that while the Pharisees “sit on Moses’ seat” (23.2), “[t]hey bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger” (23.4). Jesus is angry with the Pharisees on behalf of the ‘sinners’ they exploit, on behalf of the wayward sheep they love to control.

So it seems that the Christian God can still be angry, but angry out of resolute love for the weak, and angry against those who exploit their weakness. God’s anger is strictly disciplined by his love.

As with God, so with us—at least in principle. Thus in his Epistle to the Ephesians, chapter 4, verse 26 St Paul writes to the Christian community at Ephesus: “Be angry, but do not sin!” The implication: there can be such a thing as sinless or righteous anger.

However, anger in the hands of human sinners is a dangerous thing. So often it is fuelled by the ego—by disappointment, by frustration, by impatience, and, most of all, by an unwarranted self-righteousness.

I speak with authority. I frustrate easily and rise to anger quickly. In that I am my mother’s son. (“It was Eve wot made me do it, Guv”). Fortunately, other people don’t see it very often, because most of it takes place either in my head or behind closed doors, where my ever cheerful wife does me the excellent, puncturing service of not taking me very seriously.

On those few occasions when I have let rip in public, the pleasure was very brief and the eating of reparative humble pie embarrassingly long. And I’ve observed that the expression of anger in public is very often a sign of weakness. In the long run, self-control is far stronger. Recently, as I was reading a biography of Alfred Milner, the late Victorian imperialist, I was struck by this passage:

Against any real challenge to his faith or resolve ‘he would collect his forces inwards like a strong place calling a garrison to arms’. Under a challenge of this kind he did not display heat; his resolution ‘froze rather than flared’, and a visor of steel would fall across his normally quiet face (Terence O’Brien, Milner. Viscount Milner of St James’s and Cape Town, 1854-1925 [London: Constable, 1979], p. 393)

Well, I’m not sure about freezing. And I probably shouldn’t be drawn to the visor of steel as much as I am. But I’m certainly trying to learn to collect my forces inwards.

Still, if we take our cue from Jesus, prophetic anger against injustice and on behalf of the weak and oppressed can sometimes be warranted. It will only be genuine, however, if we don’t enjoy it. Real prophets rail against their own people, not someone else’s—and it pains them.
But if we do start to wax prophetic, let’s choose our words very carefully. Words of criticism—even fierce criticism—are one thing; words of gratuitous needling, contempt, or ridicule are quite another. Sometimes the insulting form of our words makes it virtually impossible for the insulted to hear their content. In which case, our communication has failed—unless insult was all that we intended to communicate.

That’s why the Bible, in both Old and New Testaments, is replete with exhortations to watch our tongues. If, in the twenty-sixth verse of the fourth chapter of his Epistle to the Ephesians, St Paul exhorts us to be angry, but without sin, three verses later he writes: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen”. And that applies to Christian prophets, too.

Before I close, let me gather thoughts on anger together.

First, it is not true that the God whom we find in Jesus has simply grown up and out of anger. But his anger has matured, in the sense that it is strictly fuelled and disciplined by love. When love discovers that the beloved is squandering his life or that his weakness is being exploited, it will assume the form of anger