

6th June 2020

Anger

***"Ira furor brevis est."* "Anger is a short madness".**

Horace, Epistles Book 1

If you search for "Balaam and the Ass" on the internet, you'll find a *Wikipedia* entry relating to a 1626 painting by Rembrandt in the *Musée Cognacq-Jay* in Paris. *Wikipedia* tells us it describes the biblical account of Balaam's talking ass, "debating with the diviner, Balaam." *Debating?* Oh, I don't think so! For this is not a *debate*, conducted with decorum, good sense and respect. This is a raging, full-blown, violent argument which offers us an insight into the destructiveness of anger.

According to the Book of Numbers, Balaam is going to king Balak of Moab to curse the Israelites who were at war with Moab, and thus guarantee a Moabite victory. But Balaam's ass stops because the path is barred by an angel brandishing a sword – an angel only the ass can see. So Balaam beats the beast in anger. The ass then crushes Balaam's foot against a wall, and a raging Balaam beats it again. Finally, when the ass drops to the ground, Balaam's loses it completely and beats the ass a third time. The frightened and abused animal turns to Balaam and asks: "What have I done to you that you would beat me three times?" And Balaam sees the angel and is challenged to look at the error of his ways.

We all get angry sometimes. Righteous anger can be justified. But anger that leads to violence and retribution can never be. Lashing out when we don't get our own way; taking our anger out on other people; resorting to force when we're out of control; losing it, with damage done to others ... This was Balaam. And this, sadly, if often you and me.

Spare a thought in this lockdown for those who are victims of domestic violence; pray for a return to peaceful streets in trouble-torn US cities; condemn those whose rhetoric is filled with angry words, and metaphors of judgement, hatred and punishment. Listen to Balaam's ass, and be challenged to look at the roots and destructiveness of our anger.

A prayer for today

Living God, you control your anger with patience, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Please teach me to do likewise. Amen.

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