

Volcanic Eruptions

Luke 15:11-32

4th Sunday of Easter

25th April 2010

Here's a question I have for you this morning: Amidst all the talk about eruption of the volcano in Iceland and the disruption caused to air travel in the past ten days, can you remember hearing the likes of Peter Mansbridge or Lloyd Robertson actually pronouncing the name of this volcano? All the news reporters seem to steer well clear of this seemingly unpronounceable name which is a composite of three Icelandic words for "Island Mountain Glacier".

However, today, we here in St. Paul's are not going to be scared into silence by this verbal tongue-twister. We are going to learn how to say this Icelandic name "Eyjafjallajökull" so that, any time it is in the news, we can impress our friends with our linguistic expertise. So, say after me: "Aya – fiallta – yokulta". Excellent! I think you've got it!

It's amazing to think just how greatly the world has been affected by the eruption of this one volcano in a rather remote part of the planet. And to think that it is not the only volcano in Iceland. There are, in fact, another 130! Not only that, 14 have been active in the past 100 years. Of these, one called Katla situated besides Eyjafjallajökull, is much larger and more powerful. One hesitates to think what might happen if that sleeping volcano decides to wake up. If nothing else, we'll be able to pronounce its name more easily!

I wonder what effects other great eruptions of history had on the travel of that day. What about Vesuvius in 79 AD? I wonder if the Romans lamented the fact that all chariots had to be taken off the roads because the horses were breathing in the ash. Or, how about the time in 1893 when Mount Krakatoa let loose in Indonesia? I wonder if all steamship travel was suspended in case the dust gummed up the cylinders and pistons of these ocean-going vessels. ☺

All joking apart, volcanoes have a greater potential to impact life on this planet than any other natural terrestrial occurrence. Not even hurricanes or earthquakes or tornadoes have such a far-reaching global impact. Take, for instance, possibly the worst eruption in history, Mount Tambora in 1815. The ash that was spewed forth affected the world's climate in a very drastic way. The following year was known as the Year Without Summer because ash in the upper atmosphere blocked out the sunlight so significantly. In June of that year, 1816, there was a foot of snow in Quebec City and, as well, the lakes and rivers of Canada, and the northern States remained frozen over as far south as Pennsylvania into July and August.¹

Far-reaching, though the impact of such natural

phenomena are, I can think of certain volcanic activity that has the potential for even greater global impact. I am talking here not about physical, geological volcanoes, but those that exist in the human heart and mind – the volcanoes of human anger and hostility that so often erupt in radical, world-changing ways.

Think of the anger that drove terrorists to bring down the Twin Towers on 9-11. Think of the anger that drives the militant Islamic terrorist to plant that bomb in a busy Iraqi market-place or the Taleban soldier to hide the IED on the road outside Kandahar, killing and maiming our soldiers. Or, the fury of the Palestinians when the Israelis build new settlements on the West Bank or the wrath of the Israelis when Hamas fire rockets into southern Israel. Or, think of the anger of the Thai people as they fight on the streets of Bangkok for greater democracy. Or, the anger in the West at the excessive bonuses being paid to the very investment bankers who helped create the recession. Or the anger against the likes of Bernie Madoff who stole the life-savings of investors with his fraudulent Ponzi scheme.

Of course, we don't need to go into the wider world to sense how much anger lies just waiting to erupt beneath the surface. The anger of the woman whose husband walks out on her, leaving her with young children. Or, the anger of the driver cut-off in heavy traffic who reacts with road-rage. Or, the anger of the man who takes out work-related frustrations on his family at home. Or the anger of the teenager hurt by false rumours spread about her on Facebook. Anger is so much a part of the fabric of the world in which we live today. Simmering beneath the surface then suddenly erupting with all the destructive force of a volcano.

Obviously, where anger in the wider world and in our society are concerned, we work to defuse it through our political leaders. But it's our own individual responsibility to handle the anger we so often experience in our personal lives. Which brings up the question we so often ask ourselves: How can we manage our anger in the competitive, contentious, combative world we live in today?

A 75-year-old man went to his doctor for a physical examination. The doctor went through all the procedures and found everything to be perfect. "It's amazing," the doctor said to the patient. "You have the body of a 25 year old man. What's your secret?" The patient replied: "Well, when my wife and I were married fifty years ago, we made an agreement. We decided never to fuss or argue with one another. So whenever we would have a difference of opinion or saw a fight coming on, she

would just stay in the house and I would go out for a long walk. I guess my good health is due to the fact that for fifty years I've pretty much lived an outdoor life."² Like this man, we each have to have our own individual strategies for dealing with anger.

One strategy is to consider those things that make us angry. Those things that predispose us to losing our temper.

In an article, "Eleven Ways To Blow Up", Curtis Fussell looks at our anger triggers but looks at them from a reverse perspective. In other words, if you want to be angry in life, there are certain things you have to do. If you want to be angry, he says, take pride in being a perfectionist and expect perfection from everyone else. If you want to be angry, don't listen to anyone else's opinion but keep pushing your own. If you want to be angry, overload your schedule and expect others to pick up your commitments. If you want to be angry, expect other people to cater to your needs. If you want to be angry, blame everything on other people. If you want to be angry, put down people who are different from you. If you want to be angry, practice shouting. If you want to be angry, learn to nag, nit-pick and master the art of the snide remark.³

So we can learn to control our anger by thinking about the very attitudes and behaviours that cause us to be angry – and then doing the very reverse.

Another strategy is to find different means of channelling our anger in positive ways. Ways in which we can express our anger, not to destroy the person who has harmed us, but to better our own life.

World famous boxer, Muhammad Ali, credits his ability to channel his anger as the reason why he became the best heavyweight fighter of all times. He says that, when he was a child in Louisville, his parents gave him a brand-new bicycle. Proud and happy, he parked it outside the gym one day. Then somebody stole it, and it just about broke his heart. Someone told Ali there was a policeman in the basement gymnasium so Ali told the policeman that he was going to find the guy who'd stolen his bike and beat him up. When the policeman discovered that the young Ali didn't know how to fight, he offered to teach him so when he did catch up with the guy he could teach him a lesson. Ali never found the thief nor managed to retrieve his prized bicycle. But from that day forward, he says, every time he got into the ring, he looked across at the other fighter and told himself, "Hey, that's the guy who stole my bike!"⁴ And that's how, Ali says, he got into boxing and became so successful.

Perhaps, though, apart from channelling our anger, we can only ever properly manage it by emulating the example of the father in the story of the Prodigal Son. Think how upset that man must have been with his younger son who squandered his inheritance on riotous

living in a far-off land. Yet, when the wayward youth comes home, he welcomes him with open arms. Think how upset the father must have been with his elder son who "loses it" when he sees the festive welcome afforded his stupid little brother who had brought such shame on the family. He is so irked by the fact that he himself has been at home all the time. He has been the good little, obedient boy. Yet he gets no recognition and no reward.⁵

Though the father was undoubtedly furious with his two sons for different reasons, yet he controlled his anger by practising forgiveness towards them. Not forgiveness in the sense of forgetting the wrongs they had done to him. But, rather, forgiveness in the sense of foregoing any need to keep stirring the embers of the fire of his wrath. Foregoing the need to exact retribution as a means of settling outstanding issues between himself and his sons.

So let's manage the volcano of our anger by identifying those things that make us angry. By adopting a strategy to manage our anger. By thinking about the attitudes and behaviours that cause us to be angry – and then doing the very reverse. By channelling our anger. By practising the forgiveness that forgoes retribution. But, above all, let's also never forget the need to turn over our anger to a higher power.

Writing in *Decision* magazine, Colleen Jennings Fraioli tells how she deals with her anger. She simply pictures herself handing over her angry feelings to Christ. Remembering how 1 Peter says you should cast all your care on Christ because he cares for you,⁶ she then asks Christ for the ability to see her situation from the divine perspective. This may not change her circumstances, she says, but it greatly affects her response.⁷

Well, that's the last thing we have spoken about in our sermon this morning. But maybe it should be one of the first things we should do in trying to tame the volcano of our anger. Right at the outset, when we're upset, let's picture ourselves handing over our angry feelings to Christ and leaving the outcome in his hands.

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¹ "Year Without Summer" www.wikipedia.com

² Wallace Kirby, "Responding in Anger", *Affirming The Ash Heap*, CSS Publishing, 2000

³ Curtis Fussell, "Anger – Eleven Ways To Blow Up, Seven Ways To Cool Off", *Deadly Sins and Living Virtues*, CSS Publishing, 1997

⁴ King Duncan, "Managing Your Anger", www.eSermons.com

⁵ Luke 15:11-32

⁶ 1 Peter 5:7

⁷ King Duncan, op. cit.