SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, October 11, 2026** **Festal Eucharist**
The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost 11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia
*on*
Matthew 22:1-14

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## Slow Anger

"*There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. [...] And in the eyes of the people there is the failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage*." [1]

I still vividly remember the surge of indignation I felt when I read this page for the first time. You recognize the origin of this quotation, *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck – and you remember the harrowing ordeal of the Joads, a family of tenant farmers driven from their land during the Great Depression, as banks and landowners took advantage of a series of devastating droughts to evict impoverished families, and force them to migrate West. Lured with the false promise of a better future in California, these families encountered instead the same harsh fate: landowners who exploited desperate workers, drove down wages to maximize profit, deliberately destroyed crops to maintain prices – while these families were dying of starvation.

The forms taken by greed, exploitation, and corruption have changed, but the results on the most vulnerable people in our society remain the same today. Open any news outlet and you will hear of millions of people being denied healthcare, see children who witness parents brutalized by law enforcement officers, people working three jobs and still struggling to make ends meet, obscene accumulation of wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people, the steady and deliberate erosion of human rights, the brazen undermining of the course of justice, the impunity of the most egregious perpetrators of these crimes.

Surely, indignation at such injustice is not only understandable. It is imperative.

Now, this realization should help us to make sense of an aspect of the biblical revelation about God that often makes us uncomfortable, namely that God too gets angry at these same wrongs.

We are told so by Jesus himself in a chilling sentence of the Gospel we have just heard: "The king was enraged" (Mt 22:7).

Think about this.

When it comes to us, we generally agree that not to feel outrage at the perpetration of injustice, exploitation, violence, and corruption is a moral failure.

When it comes to God, we find that the notion of him being angry, passionate, hurt, grieving, and sad, is unworthy of his divine status. An angry God is a bad God.

If we were a bit more consistent, though, we would have to acknowledge that if God was not 'enraged' – as the king of the parable- at the sight of such wrongs, this would mean that he is a God who is indifferent, who does not feel compassion for the victims, who does not care about evil.

Jesus instead, with the prophets, the psalms – with the whole of Scripture, assures us that God does care – if anything much more than we do!

"You shall not wrong a foreign resident or mistreat him, – says God in the book of Exodus- for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn." (Exodus 22:21-24)

We cannot begrudge God for getting angry then.

What we struggle to make sense of though, are some shocking portrayals of the outcome of God's wrath. The sentence from Exodus I have just quoted ends in this way

"and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless." (Exodus 22:24)

There are plenty of passages, especially in the Old Testament, where God seems to behave in exactly the same way as the king of Jesus' parable. When the servants this king had sent with the invitation to his banquet are mistreated and killed, he lashes out, sends his troops, destroys those murderers, and burns their city (22:7).

In reality though this parable is making exactly the opposite point – namely that this is how *not* God, but a king of this earth would behave in the presence of such brazen wrongdoings. Jesus is saying that had we provoked a king's anger in the way we have done with God, revenge and payback would have to be expected, and be considered as amply deserved.

But here Jesus makes a crucial distinction instead: righteous anger is one thing; seeking to act out or relieve this anger by vengeance and payback, indiscriminate punishment and destruction, are quite another.

Steinbeck offers a striking, and moving, illustration of this distinction:

True, the title, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the sentence I quoted at the beginning want the reader to feel anger and indignation. Steinbeck's memorable characters though demonstrate that it is possible to oppose injustice and exploitation not with murderous vengeance, but with a deepening of humanity, altruism, generosity, and solidarity.

In the midst of their appalling deprivation, the families portrayed by Steinbeck share their meagre resources, their shelter, and whatever little they possess. Strangers help one another along the road, workers organize to resist exploitation, and the Joads gradually discover that their responsibility extends beyond their own family.

The mother of the family declares at one point that

"If you're in trouble or hurt or need—go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help—the only ones."

Similarly – just to give another example- you might remember the final scene of the novel: the eldest daughter of the family, having just given birth to a stillborn child, encounters a stranger dying of starvation. She takes the stranger into her arms and breastfeeds him – an intimate, almost sacramental act of solidarity and compassion.

Had we read only the passage from Steinbeck I quoted at the beginning, we would have been left with raw and powerless indignation. Only by pursing the reading of the novel to the end we are shown that there are ways in which this anger can become life-giving.

Just in the same way, we should not take the king's vengeful spree at its face value. Only through a thorough and careful reading of the whole Bible we discover that the true outcome of God's anger is not payback and destruction, but healing, compassion, and the restoring of relationship.

In a passage of the book of Exodus where God reveals to Moses who he really is and how he is determined to behave with us, this is what he declares about himself:

"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, ***slow to anger***, and abounding in love." (Exodus 34:6).

The king's wrath is swift and brutal.

God's anger is *slow* – that is it resists the urge to lash out, and turns the passion and indignation into a renewed commitment to come to our rescue. This is the message of one of Jesus' most misunderstood sayings, "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Mt 5:39) – that is: instead of striking back, be imaginative, look for another way, turn your indignation into caring, supporting, helping others, into advocating for one another.

We have to admit that sometimes we revel in our indignation, are quick to condemn evil only as a way of persuading ourselves that we are not as bad as others. We are "impatient to feel innocent", as Rowan Willams says. [2]

Slow anger resists the urge for moral posturing – it stops moaning and starts acting.

Slow anger overcomes the temptation to think that we have no power to make a difference, to turn evil into good.

Slow anger knows that no act of authentic care for others is ever too small.

Giving a glass of water to someone who is thirsty, going the extra mile with those who want to antagonize us, giving what we can to those in need without sounding the trumpet before us, doing to others what we would have them do to us if we were in need. This is Jesus' recipe for fighting injustice.

So, yes, "the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy for the vintage", and yes "the king is enraged".

Let us not waste the power of this indignation, reclaim our agency, together, as a community, and recover the power of authentic solidarity, of heartfelt care and compassion.

Let us discover the immense joy we can find in giving and in being there for one another.

Let us imitate our king and our Lord,

“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love.

## References

1 John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 460-461.

2 Rowan Williams, *Solidarity. The Work of Recognition*, 220.