

Do Not Be Afraid

The way in which we generally use and understand the word *fear* is, as the dictionary defines it, “a feeling of alarm or disquiet caused by the expectation of danger, pain, disaster, or the like” – in other words *being afraid* of something. But that is not how we should either use or understand the word when we talk about fear of God.

Those of us “of a certain age” may well have been educated in our faith and in our relationship with God on the back of a very “Old Testament” approach to God, a God who was looking for every fault or failing on our part and for which we should expect punishment. Perhaps it also reflected a rather unfortunate understanding, even an experience, of fatherhood – a “just wait till your father gets home” authoritarian figure and dispenser of discipline. “Miss” or “Sister” who taught us in school perhaps didn’t always explain the more positive aspect of “fear” as applied to God and thus he became bound up in that same authoritarian, disciplinarian, image of a God to be feared because he was always ready to punish our every transgression. Sadly many of us still have that misconception.

What we should have been taught was the other meaning of the word *fear*, the one we don’t use nearly as much and which means “extreme reverence or awe”. It probably didn’t help matters that we learned from our catechism that one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit was “fear of the Lord” and, again, the different use of that word wasn’t always explained. In current catechesis the phrase is more usually replaced by “awe and wonder” which is far more helpful.

Looking at the root meaning of the word *fear* doesn’t give us any clue as to why it should have two such very different meanings and, as we have said, the second meaning (reverence and awe) suffers as a result of our over-familiarity with the first (being afraid). We should “fear” God not because of what he can do *to* us, but because of what he has done *for* us.

I think it would help to quote what St Hilary has to say on the subject:

Fear is the trembling of human weakness frightened of suffering what we do not want to happen to us. This fear is caused in us and stirred by our consciousness of our guilt, or by the power of one stronger than ourselves, or the aggression of one too powerful for us; or it may be caused by sickness, or the attack of a wild animal, or the infliction of any evil. This fear then is not taught...rather the things we fear themselves instil their own dread in our minds.

The fear of God is something to be learnt, because it is taught. We must find it by obeying commands, by doing the good deeds of a blameless life, and by coming to know the truth... not in moments of human terror.

All our fear of God is inspired by love; perfect love of God makes fear perfect. We show our love of God especially when we follow his advice, conform to his laws, and trust in his promises.

When we read certain passages from the Old Testament, it's not difficult to see why the people often had a very negative image of God and a somewhat impoverished experience of their relationship with him, one built on fear. I don't think, however, that we can take the situation entirely at face value. The Old Testament is not a history book even though it records events in the history of God's Chosen People. It is therefore not written with historical accuracy in mind; there is a lot of "cause and effect", a lot of interpretation of events. Things are recorded in a literary style that is particular to the time and place in which the books of the Old Testament were written, who they were written by, and what the author's purpose was. Having said that we, of course, hold Scripture to be the inspired word of God, but the way in which that word is expressed is inevitably subject to time and place and culture.

In the book of Exodus we read:

God said to Moses, 'I am coming to you in a dense cloud so that the people may hear when I speak to you and may trust you always. You will mark out the limits of the mountain and say, "Take care not to go up the mountain or to touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain will be put to death'.

Now at daybreak on the third day there were peals of thunder on the mountain and lightning flashes, a dense cloud, and a loud trumpet blast, and inside the camp all the people trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the bottom of the mountain (which) was entirely wrapped in smoke, because God had descended on it in the form of fire. God said to Moses, 'Go down and warn the people not to pass beyond their bounds to come and look on God, or many of them will lose their lives'. [Ex 19 v 9,12,16-18 & 21]

There was a need for caution even for those individuals like Moses who were on familiar terms with God. That aspect of familiarity had to be at God's invitation – a point we'll come back to later - and there was an interpretation of punishment for anyone who overstepped the mark.

David went to bring up the ark of God (and) they placed (it) on a new cart, and brought it from Abinadab's house which is on the hill.

When they came to the threshing-floor of Nacon, Uzzah stretched his hand out to the ark of God and steadied it, as the oxen were making it tilt. Then the anger of God blazed out against Uzzah, and for his crime God struck him down on the spot, and he died there beside the ark of God.

[2Sam 6 v 3 & 6-7]

We might be tempted to put a more positive “spin” on what we read of the actions of God in the Old Testament, and in some respects that may be justified in order that the image we are given of God doesn’t suffer from what might simply be “bad press”. By the same token, if the writer interpreted the punishing hand of God to be at work, maybe he was expecting that to be the case because the people at the time had done something to deserve it. I don’t think we can simply write everything off as “typically Old Testament”; there may well be lessons in there that are still valid for our own day and age and for ourselves in our relationship with God. But we shouldn’t need to fear God (in the usual sense of the word) unless we’ve done something to deserve it.

I often think we should be mindful of those Old Testament events when, for example, we come into church and into the presence of God in the Blessed Sacrament. It’s something we do so routinely (and especially priests) that we can begin to take it for granted, becoming overly familiar and yet we really ought to recollect ourselves every time – not out of fear of punishment, but out of a deep reverence and awe. We are coming into God’s house and God’s presence. We should almost hear his words to Moses when he encountered God in the burning bush: “Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground” [Ex 3 v 5], a reality acknowledged by Muslims as they enter their mosque, for example.

Have we lost this “fear”, this sense of awe and reverence and wonder? People wander into church - no acknowledgement of God’s presence, no genuflection to the tabernacle - and start talking to other people before they have even talked to God. He is right there before them, but they need to first find out about Mrs So-and-So, or pass on some item of gossip that they have just heard or whatever the compelling topic of the minute might be. Does God have to come down in a cloud, or knock us down with a crash of thunder, to get our attention and to remind us of where we are and into whose presence we have come? Saint John says in the Book of Revelation, after seeing a vision of Christ in all his magnificence, that he fell in a dead faint at his feet [Rev 1 v 18]. I would think so. Does God need to do that in order to instil “fear” - awe and wonder and reverence - in us? Have we lost our fear of God in either sense of the word?

The transformation from our Old Testament to New Testament image of God is one of perception in the sense that he is still the same God and hasn’t actually changed at all. God loves us now as much as he ever did; his hopes, his expectations, are just the same now as they ever were; and our response to his fidelity and love are as incumbent upon us now as they were at any stage in our history as his Chosen People. What *has* changed is that he has made himself more easily known to us through the Person of his Son. From the Old Testament image of a somewhat remote God of fear and punishment, we now have a God who came down to earth to be one of us, to live with us, and also to

die for us. What we are in danger of losing is our fear – our awe and wonder – as a result of that familiarity, that intimacy of relationship. And it wasn't a mistake, God doesn't make mistakes. We just have to recall on a regular basis the uniqueness of our New Testament relationship with God and make sure we don't start taking things for granted.

On the one hand there is the danger of assuming that, because Jesus died on the cross to redeem us, then we are saved, whereas that isn't automatically the case. Our salvation is something we have to actively embrace in order to make it effective in our life. A human analogy would be a wayward son (or daughter) who takes advantage of his parents, constantly expecting them to bail him out in every situation, but doing little or nothing himself to change his behaviour or to contribute to his needs. Even Our Lord's parable of the prodigal son implies just the one error of judgment on the son's part, not a lifetime of them. Yes God loves us, yes he has redeemed us, but what difference does it make in our life? What does being a person of faith mean in practice?

On the other hand, is even our apparently good relationship with God motivated more by fear and avoidance of punishment than by love - which would be a very sad and impoverished basis for our relationship with God? Saint John tells us that "fear is driven out by perfect love" [1Jn 4 v 18]. Our relationship with God should show itself in a different type of fear, one resulting from our awe and wonder at the majesty of God, a New Testament God upon whom we can now not only look without dying, but who we can actually hold in our hand in the Eucharist - a familiarity, an intimacy which, again, is at God's instigation (Our Lord's invitation) not ours. In the face of such a miracle of relationship we are surely overawed and yet sufficiently faith-filled and trusting of God to humbly accept and embrace the reality.

It's the old question of whether we see God's hand as a clenched fist ready to punish, or opened to help and embrace us. And, just as importantly, what is our approach to God? Is it one of fear (afraid of him) or of fear (reverence, awe and wonder)? The answers to those questions could be very important.

*Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you.
I have called you by your name; you are mine.*¹

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¹ From the hymn *Do Not Be Afraid* by Gerald Markland.