

33rd Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

The Responsorial Psalm chosen for today's Mass begins with the words: 'Blessed are those who fear the Lord'. This is repeated at the end. Drawing on a text from Isaiah (11:2-3), fear of the Lord is one of the traditional seven gifts of the Holy Spirit associated with the sacrament of Confirmation. So obviously when we speak of the fear of the Lord we are speaking of something good and important, a special gift from God. We even read in the Book of Proverbs: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'(Proverbs 9:10).

To begin with it is important to realise that whatever 'Fear of the Lord' might mean it does not mean that we are to be afraid of God. This is especially clear from the teaching of Jesus who showed us that God is love. There is an interesting text in the Book of Exodus (20:20): 'Do not be afraid. God has come only to test you and to put the fear of the Lord upon you.'

What are we saying when we are told not to be afraid of God and at the same time to be grateful for the gift of Fear of the Lord? One of the characteristics of Hebrew poetry is the repetition of the same idea in successive lines, using different imagery. For example, in Psalm 33 we read: 'The eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who trust in his steadfast love'(Psalm 33:18). In this text, to fear the Lord is the equivalent of trusting in God's steadfast love. If we are afraid of someone we run away from them or try to hide, we don't rest peacefully in the assurance of their love. So, once again, it is clear that Fear of the Lord is not meant to mean the same as being afraid.

Psalm 118 makes the same connection: 'Let those who fear the Lord say, 'His steadfast love endures forever'(Psalm 118:2-4). Let us take another example from Psalm 112:1 'Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in his commandments.' Fear of the Lord includes the idea of trust in God's love. It also means greatly delighting in God's commandments. This implies a close intimacy and a deep affection. And the Book of Proverbs assures us: 'The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life'(Proverbs 14:27).

We mentioned earlier that Fear of the Lord is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the rite of confirmation an attempt is made to find other words to express the essence of this gift when the bishop prays: 'Fill them with the spirit of wonder and awe in your presence'. Where we would expect the expression 'fear of the Lord' we find 'wonder and awe in God's presence'. This is a good way of beginning to get a correct understanding. Imagine you are on a cliff at the edge of the ocean. You are safe behind a strong railing. But the sea is thundering, the waves are roaring in and crashing against the cliff and water is being hurled into the sky. It is awesome.

Or imagine your wife is expecting her first child, and you are present at the birth. There is always an element of pain, and some level of risk and there is a lot of uncertainty and

expectation. Your feelings are intensely involved. Then a baby daughter is born. You are not afraid, but the whole experience has filled you with wonder and awe.

These images bring us somewhere near what is meant by 'Fear of the Lord'. If we ever just take God for granted, or find God boring, then we can be sure that we have completely failed to understand who God is. God is the source of all existence. God holds each of us in being every moment of our lives. And to think that God is love. This is truly awesome. One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is to fill us with this sense of wonder and awe and reverence. This sense of awe brings home to us the awful possibility that through sin we could separate ourselves from communion of life and love with God. We read in the Book of Proverbs: 'The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance I hate'(Proverbs 8:13).

'Fear of the Lord' then is fear that comes as a grace from the Lord. It is fear that we experience in God's presence. It is fear that arises from an awareness of how fragile we are. More than that, when we experience God's love we also become aware of how poor our living is. We become aware of how easily we can forget God and God's love and get caught up in what are, after all, petty distractions - our own plans and whims and pleasures and ego. Our lives can be pretty boring and second-rate. We can exist on the surface and miss the power and wonder and challenge of life and of love. The experience of wonder and awe in God's presence does also include an element of fear, but it is not fear concerning God - being afraid of God - but rather fear concerning ourselves - how easy it is for us to sin and so lose God. Earlier we quoted from the Book of Exodus. Let us complete the text: 'Do not be afraid. God has come only to test you and to put the fear of Him upon you, so that you do not sin'(Exodus 20:20).

The great Saint Bernard writes: 'The fear of the Lord is indeed the beginning of wisdom, because the soul begins to experience God for the first time when fear of him takes hold of it, not when knowledge enlightens it. You fear God's justice, you fear God's power; and so you experience God as just and powerful. Experience makes a wise person, as knowledge makes one learned and wealth makes one rich ... A proud heart easily follows knowledge unless repressed by fear, which is rightly called the beginning of wisdom because from the beginning it is a barrier to foolishness'(On the Song of Songs, Sermon 23:14).

Confronted with the transcendent and absolute Other on whom we are utterly dependent, and who has absolute power over life and death, we are faced with our own mortality and sinfulness. We cannot ensure our survival. We are powerless and dependent. This realisation makes us humble and may jolt us into coming to our senses. It is, as is said, 'the beginning of wisdom'.

We are not meant to be afraid of God for God is love. But we are meant to be afraid of turning our back on God or wasting our life in dissipating our energy in directions that are at best worthless and unloving, and at worst very destructive of ourselves and of

others. We are not to fear God in the sense of being afraid of him as though he was a threat to us. But we are meant to take seriously our capacity to be lost, and how utterly we need God's grace and forgiveness.

A monk who chooses to remain anonymous writes in his book 'The Hermitage Within': 'The point of departure for great mystical ascents is always the intense activity of the gift of fear. People like insisting on the 'filial' character of this fear, but this presupposes a perfectly clear view of everything, which by definition keeps us in an abyss of nothingness below our heavenly Father. Harmless, artificial insults to your self-esteem are not going to make you humble. Humiliation has its compensations in religion: an 'edifying' acceptance of it raises our prestige and ministers to our vanity. But the Holy Spirit will deprive you of self-esteem from inside, by contrasting God's grandeur and your baseness by its light: to the point perhaps of making you cry for mercy in horror of your abjectness: 'Alas for me, I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips'(Isaiah 6:5).

The Responsorial Psalm with which we began these reflections is itself a celebration of the blessings and joy of family life. It is appropriate in this context to think of God as our Father, our Mother, even as the Bridegroom of the soul. But let us not think that in using these images we can take God for granted. Rather, let the wonder and awe of such a love overwhelm us. It will ground us in humility. It may also lead us to a deeper respect of motherhood and fatherhood and of committed spousal love and of the other forms of love which we use as images for the mystery of God's encounter with us. Fear of the Lord is the appropriate response of a human being in the presence of the sacred, and Jesus taught us to recognise the sacred in every dimension of our ordinary lives.