

The Fear of the Lord – Sermon for Epiphany 4 / Septuagesima 2018

Deuteronomy 18 vv 15-20, Psalm 111, Revelation 12 vv 1-5, Mark 1 vv 21-28.

I often quote the last verse of Psalm 111, *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*. It strikes me as the obverse of the first verse of Psalms 14 and 53, *The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God*. That is a striking expression. *The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God*. I sometimes wonder if this was Jesus had in mind when He warned His disciples, *Whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire*. It is a serious matter to be a fool if *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*. If atheism (or the belief that God is irrelevant) is folly, then being a fool is not something to accuse someone of lightly.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. It seems obvious, doesn't it? But it is also problematic. Maybe, in days gone by, people did try to frighten us into being Christians. If we didn't behave ourselves, we should go to hell. God is someone to be very frightened of because He can and might well inflict upon us the most terrible torments. We should be scared of God, they might say, and ensure that our behaviour doesn't in any way offend Him. If it does, we're for it.

There is just so much wrong with this picture, however. First and foremost, God is love. We know that God doesn't desire the death of a sinner. His Will is that all should be saved. God is fully known in Jesus Christ and Jesus prayed for the forgiveness even of those who nailed Him to the Cross. It isn't consistent with our knowledge of God to suppose that He desires to rule us by fear.

One might well suspect that powerful people use this image of a punitive and terrifying God not so much to enforce God's Will on the masses as to enforce their own will on us. Of course, it is true that some powerful people don't even recognise that there is a difference between their own will and the Will of God. They are convinced that the social order, which sets them on top of the pile, is just the way God wants it to be. Moreover some sophisticated atheists have maintained that atheism isn't for the servant class. It's only the fear of God, they think, which prevents the maid from stealing the silver when the butler isn't watching.

It's an insult to God if we try to do His Will only because we are afraid of Him. It's also an insult to ourselves. It's not a good thing only to behave well because we are afraid of the consequences of behaving badly. If you are a parent, you don't want your children to be good because they are afraid of you. You just want your children to be good. If we are in fact good, we do good things and we don't do bad things, just because we are good people. In fact, if we only do good things and refrain from doing bad things just because we are afraid of being punished, we're not good people at all. We're bad people. That's why S Paul says, *The law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers*.

That *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom* is very true, but it is also problematic. Wouldn't it be better to say that the love of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom? Well, it would and I'll eventually get to that. The difficulty is that I strongly suspect that many people who have rejected the notion of the fear of the LORD (in the bad sense described above) have not embraced the love of the LORD as the motivating principle of their lives,

but have fallen into an indifference to the LORD. God doesn't really care, they think. So why should they? The threat of punishment (and, if necessary, carrying it out) does have a place in the upbringing of children even though it is a sign that we have failed in our task of educating them to understand how and why they should live as good people. Society does need the law and the police and the courts to judge cases and to impose punishments on criminals. Scaring people into being good might be a last resort, but sometimes we need it. It won't do to treat God as irrelevant. Being scared of God is better than being indifferent to Him, but it's not what the Bible generally means by the fear of the LORD.

Perhaps *awe* or *respect* are better words than *fear*. *O LORD our Governor, how excellent is thy Name in all the world: thou that hast set thy glory above the heavens! Out of the mouth of very babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength, because of thine enemies: that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger. For I will consider thy heavens, even the works of thy fingers: the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained. What is man, that thou art mindful of him: and the son of man, that thou visitest him? Thou madest him lower than the angels: to crown him with glory and worship. Thou makest him to have dominion of the works of thy hands: and thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet; All sheep and oxen: yea, and the beasts of the field; The fowls of the air, and the fishes of the sea: and whatsoever walketh through the paths of the seas. O Lord our Governor: how excellent is thy Name in all the world!*

Awe and *respect*. They don't quite hit the spot. Maybe, we need the words *awe*, *respect* and *fear*. All human words are inadequate to talk about God, but those three words point us in the right direction - *awe*, *respect* and *fear*. It's not just God's unlimited power. It's not only our sheer wonder in contemplating all that He has done. It's not just that His justice soars like mountains. It is also our sense of unworthiness in the presence of His infinite holiness which makes so apt these words *awe*, *respect* and *fear*. *We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy:*

Not indifference, then, but humble reverence – awe, respect, fear. Yet S John says: *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.* These are the words which God gave to Moses for His people: *That thou mightest fear the Lord thy God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, which I command thee, thou, and thy son, and thy son's son, all the days of thy life; and that thy days may be prolonged. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it; that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily, as the Lord God of thy fathers hath promised thee, in the land that floweth with milk and honey. Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* As we realise that fear is just the beginning, very far from our final understanding of our relationship with God, it is not a matter of lapsing into complacency and indifference; it is a matter of our whole nature – heart, soul, mind and strength - being absorbed into the all consuming fire of the love of God, His love for us and ours for Him.