

# FROM FEAR TO LOVE

By JAMES WALSH

**A**s God's beloved children, be like him. And walk in love . . .<sup>1</sup> Perhaps there is an echo in these words of that relationship of love and perfect friendship between the Father and his first children, the man and woman created according to his image, so graphically described by the author of the third chapter of Genesis, when he says that 'God walked in the garden in the cool of the day'.<sup>2</sup> The immediate result of the sin of Adam and Eve was that they were ashamed to face their father, afraid to walk with him. They ran in panic, 'and hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God'. It is evil which breeds fear; and all evil is the result of sin. Fear is the instinctive reaction to every evil which threatens a man. It can blind him to the extent that he mistakes evil for good; or at the least, drives him to choose what appears to him to be the lesser of two evils. So it was with Peter in the courtyard of Caiphas; he was so blindly afraid of physical harm that 'he began to curse and swear, I do not know the man'.<sup>3</sup> Only the sound of God's voice, his look, his grace, can bring a man back to himself and enable him to bring this fear under control. 'And the Lord turned and looked on Peter'.<sup>4</sup> The power to overcome such blind fears is conferred upon us in our loving union with Christ, who, in overcoming his own fear, triumphed over suffering and death: 'during his earthly life he offered prayer and entreaty to the Father who could save him from death, not without a piercing cry, not without tears'.<sup>5</sup> With the help of the angel of the agony, he prayed still more earnestly;<sup>6</sup> he rejected his blind fear of suffering and death, and accepted his Father's will.<sup>7</sup> 'And he was heard because of his Godly fear'.<sup>8</sup> He had already told his disciples that only this Godly fear was a good fear: 'there is no need to fear those who kill the body but have no means of killing the soul; fear rather him who has the power to ruin body and soul in hell'.<sup>9</sup>

All these irrational fears and terrors are symbolised in the child's fear of the dark; they have been dispersed for us and in us by the

<sup>1</sup> Eph 6, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Gen 3, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 26, 74.

<sup>4</sup> Lk 22, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Heb 5, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Lk 22, 43.

<sup>7</sup> Lk 22, 42.

<sup>8</sup> Heb 5, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Mt 10, 28.

light of the risen Christ which the darkness cannot contain.<sup>1</sup> It is this light which brings us that serenity which is freedom from fear; it destroys the darkness of night, death and hell.<sup>2</sup> The only fear which is to remain in us is that fear which came upon the apostles after the Lord has banished their panic and terror in the face of death: 'And he awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, why are you afraid? Have you no faith? And they were filled with awe and said to one another: 'Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him'?<sup>3</sup>

We are further taught that this fear of God's power and majesty has itself to be controlled with God's love. When the Israelites, at the foot of mount Horeb, were given a glimpse of the power of God in nature, they cried out 'let not God speak to us, lest we die'. But Moses said to the people: 'Do not fear; for God has come to educate you and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin'.<sup>4</sup> This God of might and power is also the Father of his people.

The wise man, who, as the psalmist never tires of saying, is blessed because he fears God, is never afraid of God. He knows that God's justice, power and holiness is his love: the love which casts out fear. The Christ who repeatedly told his apostles, 'do not be afraid', confers on us his Church the power which frees us from every evil, and therefore delivers us from every fear. The last petition which we make in the prayer which he taught us is 'free us from every evil': that is, from everything that tends to fill us with fear. This petition the Church develops in the prayer *Libera nos, Domine*, just before the consummation of the holy sacrifice: 'Free us, Lord, from every evil, past, present and to come'. Once freed from the evil, we are freed from its attendant fears and terrors. 'The Lord is my light and my salvation: whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life: of whom shall I be afraid?'<sup>5</sup> This salvation, this freedom from fear, is assured to us in our union with Christ, because of the Father's protection. 'He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge . . . you will not fear the terror of the night nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness nor the destruction that wastes at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand; but it will not come near

<sup>1</sup> Jn 1, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Mk 4, 39-41.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Exultet. *Ille regressus ab inferis, humano generi serenus illuxit.*

<sup>4</sup> Exod 21, 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> Ps 26, 1.

you . . . because you have made the Lord your refuge, the most High your habitation, no evil shall befall you'.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the *Libera nos, Domine* we pray that he may give us 'peace in our time, so that, strengthened by his steadfast love, we may be always free from sin and at peace in every kind of worry'. The Church, like Christ her head, is well aware of the anxieties which responsibility for others brings: St. Paul himself spoke of his 'anxious care for the churches',<sup>2</sup> and the epistle of James reminds us that one of the elements of religion is care for orphans and widows in their affliction.<sup>3</sup> But a point is easily reached when these loving preoccupations become excessive. These fears, too, are to be cast out by love. Every kind of responsibility is to be seen as a privilege conferred by love. Our Lord reminded his apostles that if they really believed that God is their Father, if they were sincere in their service of him, they would never be over-anxious about material necessities. Those whose duty it is to provide for others, materially or spiritually, have to remember that they are sharing in the Father's providential love which can never fail. The almighty, all-wise Father is providing for his children through them. Our service of others is always a share in the loving fatherhood of God. At the last supper, our Lord was anxious that his apostles should rid themselves of their fear and loving anxiety for him, as well as for themselves. He repeatedly urged them: 'Let not your hearts be troubled'. He had come to reveal the Father to them and to us; and at the last, he told them: 'he who sees me, sees the Father'.<sup>4</sup> In order to make it plain to them that he loved them, and loved them to the end, he washed their feet.<sup>5</sup> This same care, love and service, which he showed to them was the full expression of God's fatherhood. It is also to be a model of our love and service of the Father, in our care for others. The confidence and absolute trust which Christ had in his Father is to be ours also. To serve the Father means to allow love to replace anxiety and fear. That is why Christ told his apostles: 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his holiness';<sup>6</sup> and 'Fear not little flock, for your Father has granted you a kingdom'.<sup>7</sup> When he himself acknowledged that his own heart was troubled, he added: 'and shall I say, 'Father save me from this hour? No, for this was I born and for this came I into the world''.<sup>8</sup> He was in the world to reveal to the world the love that his Father has for all men. He himself was to consum-

<sup>1</sup> Ps 90 (91).

<sup>5</sup> Jn 13, 1-5.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor 11, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Mt 6, 33.

<sup>3</sup> Jas 1, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Lk 12, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 14, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Jn 12, 27.

mate this love: 'Greater love than this no man hath . . .' Such love and such service has no room for fear;<sup>1</sup> its reality is sacrifice. We walk in love according to the pattern of his loving sacrifice,<sup>2</sup> when we face our fears and control them by accepting sacrifice as he accepted it: 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself'.<sup>3</sup> And, there, on the cross, he commended himself to the love and protection of his Father. It is by similar sacrifice and service that we, in our turn, cast our care upon the Lord and receive all our sustenance from him.<sup>4</sup> Our own preoccupations and anxieties cease to be such when we recognise them for what they are meant to be: our own share in Christ's loving sacrifice for others; so that 'nothing is to make you anxious'.<sup>5</sup> They remind us of our need for him and for his salvation, and of our union with him in the love that we give to others. They are part of our life with him and of our love for him. Once we understand that the burden which we carry is the burden of love, he can begin to purify us from the selfishness which makes us afraid.

Much of the fear and trouble in our lives is the direct result of our own selfishness. We are afraid for our own reputation, afraid of unpopularity, afraid that those whom we love do not love us enough, afraid of losing face and favour, afraid of loneliness. These are the fears which separate us from the Lord, the fears which lead us to do the right thing for the wrong motives; we serve simply because we are afraid of doing otherwise. A simple and sincere examination of conscience and analysis of our motives, will show us how far our lives are governed by such worldly fears. It should reveal to us the disordered love of self. Unless we are willing to detach ourselves from all that self holds as worthwhile, whether in terms of material possessions, reputation, power or influence over others, we shall be ruled by these fears.

The movement from fear to love is often simply a movement from creatures to God, the creator and dispenser of them all: the recognition in practice that we shall always be afraid until he alone is the object of our love. There are times and circumstances when this movement must be violent; as it was with the Lord himself in the garden of the agony. But for most of us this ascent from fear to love is more gradual; it is that daily dying to self which is the putting on of Christ. In so far as we submit ourselves to this mortification fear gradually loses its power over us, so that ultimately 'nothing can

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Jn 4, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Eph 5, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 12, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Ps 54, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Phil 4, 5.

separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus'.<sup>1</sup> If we examine the qualities of love and their opposites, in St. Paul's eulogy of charity,<sup>2</sup> we shall recognize there the daily faults into which selfish fear and anxiety so often lead us. To break free from the fears which are the root-cause of so much envy, jealousy and arrogant behaviour, we must 'fix our eyes on him who endured the cross and made light of its shame'.<sup>3</sup> The transformation which his love is to effect in us will sometimes demand that we face unpopularity, disapproval and even the loss of our most precious possession, our self-esteem. Our regular confessions will become more fruitful once we recognise that it is only by rejecting the fear that we can effectively reject our dominant faults. Only by submitting to this radical purification can our lives in the world become like his, and his love have its way with us to the full.<sup>4</sup>

There is one last fear which can assail us even whilst the fears we already mentioned, care, anxiety, self-will and self-interest, are being purified by the love of Christ. It is a fear that often comes to those who have grown old in virtue and in the love of God; to those who have turned from sin and worldliness; to those who have given themselves whole-heartedly to God. Suddenly they find themselves besieged by new fears, anxieties and doubts. There is the fear, for instance, that too much might be asked of us; the fear of having to surrender the little material comforts to which we cling so pathetically. Most painful of all, there is the fear which the sight of our own sinfulness engenders in us. We cannot believe that the Lord has forgiven us fully; we doubt our own purpose of amendment; we worry whether we have made our confessions properly; or whether there is some serious sin in our past that we have not confessed, and of which God will surely demand a strict account.

Sometimes these fears loom so large as to make us forget that our God is a God of love. All we know is that he is the just God who will render to every man according to his works. This is perhaps the most insidious of all fears, for it comes to us under the colour of virtue. It is the result, we think, of a true sight of our own sinfulness and wretchedness; that this is the way we are to work out our salvation, in fear and trembling. We may even think it humility. We reflect on the many opportunities and the many graces with which the Lord has visited us; and we are overwhelmed by the pitiful inadequacy of our response, perhaps over many years. Fear can

<sup>1</sup> Rom 8, 39.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 13.

<sup>3</sup> Heb 12, 2.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Jn 4, 17.

even persuade us to see this despondency and disturbance of our peace as intended by the Lord, as a punishment for our sins. But the Lord's punishments are never intended to depress us, only to discipline us. 'He never withdraws his mercy from us. Though he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people'.<sup>1</sup>

The fear which flows from humility never leads to depression or to despondency, but to an increase of hope and confidence. 'You who fear the Lord trust in him, and your reward will not fail; you who fear the Lord hope for good things, for everlasting joy and mercy'.<sup>2</sup> The fear which is the gift of the Holy Spirit is a fear which enables us to live in his presence. True fear is a profound awareness of one's dependence on God; for we accept the fact, and are constantly mindful, of our sinful state. This fear confers a true knowledge of the relationship between God who is all and ourselves, who are nothing and worse than nothing, and yet the object of God's all-powerful, all-knowing love. 'He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, it is written, let him who boasts, boast of the lord'.<sup>3</sup> There is no true and perfect love of God without this fear. We are to remember that Christ our Lord received this gift of fear at the moment of his incarnation. It is this same fear which attaches us to Christ, and disposes us to revere our Father as he reveres him, and to conform our will to his. This is the fear which confers upon us a constant reverential awareness of God's holiness. It gives us a horror of venial sin, and a humble confusion as we lovingly confess all our daily faults. It keeps a strict watch over our disordered appetites, and prompts us to that fidelity in all things which is the perfect service of God. All fears, except this lovely fear, are the enemies of love.

'What does the Lord God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul'?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Macc 6, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Sir 2, 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor 1, 30-31.

<sup>4</sup> Deut 10, 12.