

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

SOMEWHERE, deep within us, is a closed door behind which lurks our own particular fear. There is no lock to that door, and when it swings mysteriously open we find ourselves paralyzed on its dark threshold. The room it leads to may only be peopled by those silly, irrational, nebulous fears whose name is legion and who bedevil the vast majority of mankind. Fear of dogs, of spiders, mice, and snakes, of the dark, of heights, of crowds, of blushing – the litany is unending. Such fears do not necessarily stunt our personalities, but we do waste a good deal of emotional energy on them without ever successfully eradicating them. They remain as reminders that we do not possess ourselves as fully as we would like to think.

But deeper than these fears are others, crouching in those dark corners of our personalities, which we rarely venture to explore. The fear of growing old, fear of pain and sickness, fear of loving or of not being loved, fear that we or God may not really exist, and that great fear of death which makes us afraid to live – here again the litany is endless. We may pretend that such fears play no part in our lives, but in spite of such self-delusion, indeed precisely because of it, they influence our decisions, attitudes and activities at their very deepest level. That influence is all the more pernicious in that we are ignorant of its presence. So, the miser will starve to death amidst his wealth, through fear of poverty. Fear that life is slipping away can make some give themselves to a frantic and aggressive gathering of rosebuds while they may, whereas others will lapse into a strange vegetable existence as if hoping that death may pass them by. Some years ago, as the result of a vividly realistic television programme about an invasion from outer space, some people killed themselves in their fear of imminent death.

The reactions provoked by fear can be opposites, but fear itself is a killer. It stifles love, cuts the heart out of real spontaneity and initiative, and infects man with the deadly paralysis of indecision, which sometimes hides behind the agitation of pseudo-decisions.

read more at www.theway.org.uk

Nevertheless, the book of Ecclesiasticus states quite unequivocally that 'fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'¹ and contains a great eulogy of fear. In its wake, the whole christian tradition has repeated that man's religious experience must, if it is to be authentic, begin with fear of the Lord. Yet God is love, and perfect love casts out fear. How then can the way into the embrace of the God who is love be the trembling road of fear?

The problem becomes more acute when we realize that the fear which is the beginning of man's religious experience and of his true maturity is not some new element injected into an already existing humanity. Fear is so integral a part of the human affective complex that to be human means to experience fear. Fear is with us, as part of us, and the paradise of fools is for those who imagine that they are beyond the chilling reach of fear. Man goes to God as man, which means that he must go to him through his fear. Fear is one of the emotions through which the presence of God is mediated to man, but to do this it must be fear in its reality and not under the form of some monstrous caricature. For, like any emotion, fear in its raw state holds a double possibility: that of becoming its own truth and that of degenerating into a sort of cancer which destroys what it feeds on and what produces it. So, fear can degenerate into a purely animal reflex which dehumanizes man and leads him to do anything in order to save his own skin; at this stage it can even masquerade as courage. Or else it can become a genuinely human and humanizing emotion which enables man to find the right balance and appreciation of himself, of God and of all that God has created. The problem is not to eliminate fear from our lives, for that would be a crude emasculation of human affectivity, which would be disastrous. No, it is rather to refine and direct fear, to harness its dynamism in the service of the christian life of love. A blind animal fear has no part to play in a fully human life and hence has nothing to do with religion. True fear of the Lord is poles apart from that visceral terror before the unknown tremendum which some have seen fit to describe as the essence of religion. The christian God is not, and never can be, a threat to man's existence, and whatever else fear of the Lord may be, it is most emphatically not a cringing mistrust of an unpredictable, ruthless deity who must at all costs be placated.

If man is to begin his journey towards God with fear it is vital that he discern accurately the particular quality of that fear and

¹ Sir 1, 14.

make sure that it comes from the true source. For it is not any sort of indiscriminate fear which leads man to God in a genuine religious experience. The panic fear of him who, with his load of sins, walks as delicately as any Agag, lest he be knocked down by a bus, has no deep religious value. The danger is that because we are creatures who are full of fear, we tend to transpose our own particular fear quite gratuitously upon God and identify that as a religious experience. Unless we realize this we are liable to find ourselves worshipping a God whose face mirrors the horror of our own fearful imaginings. If we are terrified of God then inevitably our God will be a fearsome one, but only because we have fashioned him to the image of ourselves.

The very fact that our fearful impulses escape our control indicates that to some extent we are divorced from our own affectivity. Hence we do not live out the truth of that affectivity, for the measure in which any of our emotions slips the reins of our control is the measure of its falseness. To be true an emotion must be an integrated and integrating force in our lives, which are intended to move dynamically to a greater and greater unity. Not, of course, that emotion is meant to be switched on and off, much less suppressed. But it is a force and every force demands control if it is to realize its full potential. The alternative is what has been called 'the expense of spirit in a waste of shame'. That control can never be something purely external. Restraint from outside serves only to irritate and chafe the emotions if it is not accepted freely. The control must come from an interior source, and that is nothing less than the delicate interplay and harmony of the whole affective complex of man. The attempt to limit ourselves to one type of experience inevitably cripples our affective power and stunts the growth of our personality, for we are depriving ourselves of other experiences which we need in order to find out the truth.

To give a simple example. It is the mark of a certain immaturity to want to prolong a glad and happy experience as if it were the full truth of reality and life. Such an exclusive search for happiness can degenerate into a mere hedonism, a cult of enjoyment which makes us incapable of really enjoying life. The control here is our capacity to experience sorrow and integrate it into our lives. This does not of course mean that we should take our pleasures miserably or crack jokes at the graveside. The control comes from the integration of the two experiences of joy and sorrow in one dialectical movement, so that each becomes interior to the other, and together they produce

an ability to enter into the vitality of each experience, and make of it something constructive. Hence it is possible to accept happiness without being lulled into a sense of false security, and accept sorrow without being panicked by an equally false insecurity. So man learns the truth of his own affectivity and each experience can further refine and invigorate it. He tastes life with the palate of a connoisseur instead of gorging himself on the carrion of dead experiences.

But if this refinement of man's affectivity is not to degenerate into a cultivated selfishness it must be pursued through the dynamism of the Spirit of love. St Paul puts the ideal in a phrase, 'Rejoice with those who rejoice and be sad with those who sorrow'.¹ The control here is the transformation from the particular to the universal. It is the readiness to share in the joy and sorrow of others, the effort to enter into their experiences and make them our own, which prevents us from sinking into a purely private world. For the full truth of man's affectivity is found only in this universality which so takes him out of himself that he learns to love above all his enemies and lose his private self in order to rediscover himself in the universality of Christ.

It is obvious that an unbridled, craven terror of God is a false experience, since it eliminates love and joy, and reveals to man neither the truth about himself nor about God. This is fear become an uncontrolled and devouring monster which consumes the whole of our religious life. However, though we may not react as violently as all that before God, it is possible that some tinge of that animal fear colours our experience of God. We may have the uneasy feeling that the outstretched hand of God will turn into a mailed fist when we get too close to it. Let the bitter acid of mistrust begin to sour our relationship with God and we might as well turn away from religion. The best we can hope for is to treat God like a tame, pet lion – with a certain wary affection. Ultimately we shall only be looking out for our own skins. This is the insurance policy type of religion which grudgingly pays certain premiums against the day when God may turn nasty. As far as the Bible is concerned it is the one attitude calculated to exasperate the Lord.

In an authentic experience of God the role of fear must be that of an integrating force which binds man closer to God and to his own self. This means fear must break down the barriers of selfishness which keep love at arms' length. The presence of God inspires fear

¹ Rom 12, 15.

but we must be very careful where we locate this fear. As we have said, there can be no question, for the christian, of a God who is a menace to human existence. Fear of the Lord is not to be sought in any threatening attitude on his part towards man whom he has created, redeemed and destined for glory. The true fear inspired by the presence of God has but one source – before God man realizes his own situation. Before the truth of God man perceives the truth of himself – and who can honestly say that he is not afraid of looking into the depths of his own heart? For the truth seen in God's presence is not a theoretical truth, it is not an ideal picture of an ideal man. I see myself, as I am in my present situation, and here there is reason for a fear which binds me closer to God who gives me to see that truth. At this moment when fear is directed from God through myself back to God it becomes religious.

Such was the reaction of Peter before the divine power manifested in the Word which brought the miraculous catch of fish. Depart from me Lord for I am a sinner. Peter had come up against a power that went beyond him. But what was formidable in his experience was the intimate proximity of that power. For what he tried to do laboriously every day of his life in his work as a fisherman had been accomplished by the Word of power in a moment. This was not the reduction to nothing of Peter's own efforts and skill, but the revelation of the power which lay behind what he had tried and failed to do. Peter's labours were situated in the very movement of divine power and skill which brought forth fish where there had been none. In other words, in that moment of truth Peter was given a glimpse of the formidable reality which lay behind the ordinariness of his routine existence. And Peter was open-mouthed in awe. His judgment on his situation was profoundly religious – Depart from me, I am a sinful man. This is man in his real situation acknowledging that he is not God, recognizing the distance which separates him from the truth of God, and appalled by the prospect. I am not God. I am not the Christ. Such is the basic religious attitude which commands all others. It is this which makes it possible for God to call man to himself. For how can he call him who is unaware of a distance between? How can he hear whose ears are full of the sound of his own importance? What can God communicate of his own mystery and of the mystery of man to one who thinks he already has all the answers? But when in the presence of the unlimited power of God and of his truth man begins to be aware of himself, he begins also to realize for the first time how unaware and ignorant he has

been of himself and of his own situation. Then in the light of God's presence he can suddenly find himself walking along the razor edge of a precipice. He may suddenly realize all that is at stake in his own life and in the existence of mankind. Much that he thought was absolute will be seen as arbitrary, what were dismissed as trivialities may take on a new importance. But deeper than this, it is the realization of the factitiousness of his very being, the understanding that God does not need man in order to exist, that makes man tremble with a true religious fear. That fear is the awareness that all my life I have been the bearer of something infinitely precious and I have never realized it.

Such fear is healthy and for salvation for it is the first movement towards a realistic judgment of man by himself in a deeper self-knowledge grounded in the truth of God. For this meeting with God brings man up against the fact that he is creating his own destiny at every moment, and perhaps had been doing it without thought. It may be seen that this self-made destiny is a living falsehood which the truth of God must at some time eliminate. Hence in the presence of the power and truth of God man can find himself in a situation where his future is swept away and he is deprived of the becoming he had so carefully planned. Fool – this night I require your soul of you.¹ Here we touch the root of all fear – the actual possibility that the future will be removed from our control, either totally or in part. Many have taken their lives in a last attempt to assert their control over at least one fragment of their future – the moment of death, rather than face the terrible dark of a future which has completely escaped their grasp. Is not this the root cause of the present fear of the H-bomb? Does it not stand for the possibility that the future of mankind, that my future, may be suddenly obliterated? What is the sense of my being when the possibility of my becoming is taken away from me? Such a fear strikes all the more deeply in the context of a new-found pride in human achievement and progress and a desire to create a new world. Take away from man all hope and he is left only with a stark fear before an entirely precarious future. For this is not simply a fear of the unknown: it is a fear that the unknown may be simply an empty void.

But for the christian this meeting with God is possible only in Christ in whom all things were made. If the meeting inspires fear it also infuses hope and joy. It is possible to rub shoulders with Christ

¹ Lk 12, 20.

for years without experiencing this religious fear which marks the beginning of each step in the deepening of man's relationship with God. Indeed it is necessary that we should first of all know Christ the man, become at our ease with him and respond confidently to his, 'Fear not, it is only I'. It is only by being first penetrated by the ordinariness of Christ that we prepare the ground for being seized by his extraordinariness. This is one sense of the mysterious necessity of Christ's suffering and death. Without death, resurrection is nothing. There would be little use in having Christ as God were we not first of all convinced that he is man. In this we have to follow the pedagogy of the gospel where the disciples came ultimately to know as God 'this man Jesus of Nazareth'. We can only begin to have a religious awe of the extraordinariness of Christ when we realize that it is contained within his ordinariness. Then we can see resurrection in death and the rebirth of mankind in the ordinariness of sacramental washing. Thus fear of the Lord does not evacuate the importance of what is simple and ordinary, it heightens it immensely, so that a cup of cold water given for the sake of the name of Christ can lead into the kingdom of God.

In Christ we see the only God we know, one who is bound up with the destiny of man, and to such an extent that were it possible to annihilate man then God too would cease to exist. And this not because of any necessity other than the fact that God himself has preferred that it should be so. So in each formative decision and in the detail of my life God is involved. This presence of Christ at the heart of humanity and of all reality is a source of reassurance and hope for man who has been given the power to become the son of God in the Son. But what a formidable power that is, and what a responsibility it entails! Here lies the true religious fear which binds man to God in Christ in the forging of a destiny which goes beyond man and yet carries him with it. In Christ we become our true selves, but not by ourselves or of ourselves. We know what we are but not what we shall be. The destiny God has given us in Christ is a gift of power, but a power which we can never dominate. That destiny demands a constant judgment of ourselves and also a constant revision of that judgment. And behind it all is a power that cannot be thwarted and a judgment which has already been made irrevocably in Christ. So within the very experience of fear of the Lord there is the seed of hope which germinates in a more vivid sense of the importance of the here and now of my present situation. Here we are on the high road to wisdom, to that loving appreciation of everything, that deep

and loving respect of the mystery of all that is created. Wisdom which can only be born of an intimate loving contact which seizes the reality of things from within in the contemplation of their secret. Wisdom which is always ready to discover the extraordinary in the ordinary, finding not simply sermons in stones and books in running brooks, but the kingdom of God in a mustard seed or a fisherman's net.

Fear of the Lord will always remain with us, because fear is part of us and God does not destroy what he creates. But the direction given to fear by the grace of Christ makes it an integrating force in our lives. It becomes a fear which opens our eyes, not in terror, but in wonder and awe at the mystery of the presence of God in Christ at the heart of all creation: a presence which is a judgment of mercy and love inviting us to enter with all the forces of our being into the great movement of creation on its way back to the source whence it came. So fear becomes part of hope in so far as christian hope demands that we engage ourselves in the here and now of the urgency of salvation, without anxiety but with attention. For hope is ever alert to the graceful moment held out by God, ever fearful lest it miss the God-given opportunity. Such fearful hope is the antidote to any recipe or formulae type spirituality which attempts to reduce everything to a cut and dried set of rules. It counteracts too any sort of cocksureness about our own pet ideas. Fear brings a realistic note to our lives which are a constantly shifting pattern of motivations and activities and attitudes, not an immovable and unalterable structure. This christian fear introduces the note of realism into our love. For how can we say in this life that we really love if we are not afraid either of losing what we love, or of losing our love itself? It is only such fear which strips love of presumption and self-complacency and roughness. The fear that is part of love reveals not only the need but the possibility of a continual growth of love. There is always room to be afraid that we are not loving enough or in the right way, and the love which is without this respect and awe before its own mystery is shallow and ephemeral.

Blessed is the man who is always afraid, says the psalmist, and the christian tradition has echoed him. For there is a specifically christian fear. How could it be otherwise when Christ himself knew the grip of fear on the night of his agony. Somewhere and sometime, those who live in Christ will have their share in his fear and go with him to the depth which gives a new dimension to the prayer, 'Father! Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'