

IT IS I: FEAR NOT

By EDWARD MALATESTA

FEAR IS an experience of disturbance in the face of something we perceive as an evil, and whose effect upon us we believe we cannot prevent or offset. All of us experience greater and lesser fears according as we are faced by bigger or smaller evils.¹ We fear the explosive temper of the person who can say things that will hurt our sensibilities. We fear the failure of the efforts we expend on a project or enterprise, because of the humiliation that can be caused for those we love. We fear the illness that overtakes our dear ones, the progressive limitation of our own powers. And each one of us, besides his or her own bundle of individual fears based upon personal temperament and specific circumstances, carries as well a share of the burden of collective fears before evils which threaten whole groups or nations or peoples, indeed, in some cases, all dwellers on our planet. In the present socio-political context, millions fear starvation; countless workers fear unemployment, practically everyone fears economic loss, the energy crisis, growing violence, racial hatred, possible world war. Such radical changes have taken place in our global city during the last few years, and so many others no less radical continue to occur, that the lives of practically all men and women have become the prey of new fears.

Persons who seriously strive to live a generous religious life in the Church – whether of a more conservative or more liberal strain, and I use these terms here in a positive, non-pejorative sense – experience still other fears proper to our religious community at this moment of its history. Conservatives fear that catholic belief, morality and devotional life have been seriously compromised, and that certain tendencies within the Church, if allowed to continue unchecked, will lead to still greater infidelity to God's will for his

¹ The particular forms of fear that provide the basis for our reflections in this article are understood as being objectively grounded. We will not be speaking of irrational fears which need psychological or psychiatric remedies. Nor will we consider directly the fear which is awe before the power and mystery of God, or 'reverential fear', that loving attention to the Lord and his ways which creates and sustains a sensitive, devoted obedience to the Father's will.

Church. Liberals fear that still too many obstacles within the Church itself prevent announcing God's revelation in a way that the honest, searching modern mind can understand, and hinder ways of living the gospel that allow our contemporaries to see it realized. All fear – often for opposite reasons – that the Church is failing to be a relevant sign of salvation in the contemporary world. These fears distress especially those whose lives are totally committed to witnessing to the Lord and his teaching: priests, religious, and apostolic laity. It would not seem an exaggeration to say that fear, in more cases than we might suspect, may well be a strong motive for renouncing special forms of commitment or the Church itself.

Confronted by such fears, we who proclaim to be believers should ultimately look to the Lord our God for understanding in faith, for courage in hope, and for present and ultimate deliverance through love. Experience proves, however, that in face of the evils which annoy or overwhelm us, we often allow ourselves to dally with or become submerged in selfish sadness, agitated worry, unfounded discouragement, destructive bitterness, and even paralysing despair. And when we do turn to the Lord, we often fail to do so with our whole heart, our whole mind, our whole soul, and all that we have, because our faith, hope and love express less than the total gift of ourselves. We do not really believe that he can take us as we are, in our concrete circumstances, and heal us and save us. So we remain like persons dying of thirst on the edge of an oasis, because we refuse to bow down and drink from the stream of live-giving water that he has provided for us in abundance.

The compassionate Father, who invites us to turn towards him, draws us to himself by revealing himself to us in Jesus, his Son and our brother, through their holy Spirit of power and fortitude. Jesus, risen and present in our midst, by his word, his sacraments, his brothers, says to us who are assailed by so many fears, what he said to his disciples: 'Let not your heart be troubled or afraid',² – 'Peace be with you'.³ The exhortation 'Fear not', spoken by the angels to the women who discovered the empty tomb,⁴ and by Jesus in his meeting with them,⁵ and in his appearance to the disciples,⁶ applies to us as well in our own mysterious relationship to our risen Lord. We should not fear, either, in the moments when he manifests himself as present in the disconcerting light of his inspirations, or

² Jn 14, 1. 27.

⁵ Mt 28, 10.

³ Jn 20, 19. 21. 26.

⁶ Lk 24, 37–8.

⁴ Mt 28, 5; see Mk 16, 6.

in the times of darkness when he seems to hide himself from the scene of our struggles.

Both St Luke and St John emphasize that the risen Jesus, who consoles his disciples and us by destroying their fears and ours, is the Jesus who bears upon his risen body the wounds of his passion and death, the permanent signs of his own confrontation with the ultimate evil each human being must encounter.

As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them. But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit.⁷

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you'. When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.⁸

The lesser deaths that form the object of our daily fears foreshadow that final liberation from all in creation and in our very selves which limits and diminishes us; it will take place when the Lord calls us to pass finally and wholly from this world to the Father. This last passover frightens us because it is the great unknown inviting, in perfect faith, hope and love, the total gift, the unqualified yes, the abandonment of ourselves without reserve into the Father's hands.⁹

One of the marvels of God's merciful dealings with us is that Jesus himself knew sadness, fear and disturbance as the hour of his own death approached him.¹⁰ The best contemporary scripture studies help us to have a new awareness of – or perhaps even to discover for the first time – certain aspects of the humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹¹ Just as he could hunger and thirst, be weak and fatigued, so too he could experience fear before pain and death, that instinctive horror and revulsion of men who were created for joy and life. But the Word who became flesh lived a life like ours. He shared not in sin, but in the heritage of sin which is death.

It is highly instructive for us that the evangelists describe Jesus's fear in the face of death in a context of prayer, and that Luke especially highlights the fact that because he was suffering, he prayed the longer.¹² The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews describes Jesus's prayer in poignant terms:

⁷ Lk 24, 36–8.

⁸ Jn 20, 19–20.

⁹ See Lk 23, 46.

¹⁰ Jn 12, 27; Mk 14, 33; Mt 26, 37.

¹¹ See J. Guillet, *The Consciousness of Jesus* (New York, 1972).

¹² Lk 22, 44.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.¹³

His prayer was answered in his being saved from the power of death because he learned in what he suffered to obey in a new way. Precisely because he himself, by reason of this obedience, followed to perfect fulfilment his own vocation,¹⁴ he became and remains the source of salvation to all who obey him.¹⁵

It follows then that we too shall overcome our fears, and even be ultimately delivered from the power of death if we, like Jesus, make our prayer, even with tears and loud groaning, to the Father who can save us. Just as Jesus, because of his unswerving faith in his Father and his enduring love for the Father and for us, emerged victorious from his battle with the world, its prince and all the powers of darkness, so too shall we be victorious over the world, sin, death, and all evils through our faith and our love.

However, a subtle temptation can paralyse the heart of the religious person who can accept, desire, and be willing to strive for all that we have mentioned up to this point. This temptation is the painful fear of not being accepted by the Father because of unworthiness, weakness, sinfulness. Such painful fear can so grip our hearts as to render them insensitive to the healing anointing of the word of God, under the action of the holy Spirit; and thus we can become forgetful of the proof given to us in Jesus's life and teaching that God our Father is himself infinite and eternal love, whose compassion in our regard knows no limits. Such a temptation may have been that of Judas, overcome with remorse at his infidelity, and imprisoned within the limits of his own self-hatred. He inflicted upon himself the greatest of evils, rather than allow himself to be healed and restored to unity with his Lord whose death, even though occasioned by his betrayal, could have enabled Judas to accept his own with trust, whenever and however the Lord would eventually come and call him to be forever with himself in a friendship whose bonds could never again be weakened or destroyed.

The beloved disciple teaches the faithful he addresses in his First Letter to beware of many errors, including the error of fearful

¹³ Heb 5, 7-9.

¹⁴ See Jn 19, 30; 13, 1.

¹⁵ Heb 5, 9-10.

despair. Our hurt can only be at peace when we recognize that God our Father is greater than our hearts.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God.¹⁶

He knows of what we are made, the temptations that assail us, the deepest longings of which we are capable. By believing in love,¹⁷ in his eternal love for us manifested in the mission and offering of Jesus,¹⁸ we experience hope, that hope which delivers us from the fear which leads to despair.¹⁹

Only the revelation of the truth of the Father's love, taught and exemplified by Jesus, realized and interiorized within us by the action of the holy Spirit, frees us.

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free'.²⁰

We who form the little flock of Jesus's disciples should not fear, even in the face of privations in this world, for he has assured us of the greatest treasure of all: the Father's gift to us of the kingdom of heaven.²¹ Jesus does not promise us that we will be free from contradictions and persecutions. On the contrary, he prepares us to face such trials without fear.²²

The seas upon which we travel may be turbulent. Jesus may seem to be asleep,²³ or even absent.²⁴ But our faith in him should be such that we never doubt his power and his care. Indeed, believing that he is always in our midst, hearing him say to us, 'It is I; fear not',²⁵ we can be assured that we already possess to some degree the goal towards which we tend through the trials of this life . . . himself,²⁶ the perfect vision of him as he is, in the fulness of his risen glory.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now;

¹⁶ 1 Jn 3, 20.

¹⁷ 1 Jn 4, 16.

¹⁸ 1 Jn 4, 9. 10. 14.

¹⁹ 1 Jn 3, 19-22.

²⁰ Jn 8, 31-32.

²¹ Lk 12, 22-40.

²² Mt 10, 26; Lk 12, 4; Jn 15, 18-22 etc.

²³ Mk 4, 36-41; Mt 8, 23-27; Lk 8, 23-25.

²⁴ Jn 6, 16-21.

²⁵ Jn 6, 20.

²⁶ See Jn 6, 21.

it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.²⁷

Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world.²⁸

In the changed life which awaits us, the tears of our fearful hearts will be turned into joy. Petition for deliverance will give way to thanksgiving for God's marvellous deeds. There will be no more darkness, but only light; no more violence but only peace. Hatred will disappear and love will reign. Lying will yield to truth. Greed will be replaced by sharing. Divisions will close and all will be one in the Father and the Son who are one, because of their holy Spirit.

The celebration of the holy Year should be the pilgrim Church's celebration of hope. While keenly aware of those many areas of individual and community life in both ecclesial and civil society which need renewal and reconciliation, we must be equally aware of the healing power of God's Spirit sent to us through the paschal mystery of Christ.

Only those who recognize that they possess God's Spirit, God's power, can overcome fear in the face of the obstacles that threaten to overwhelm them and prevent renewal and reconciliation.

Perfect love casts out fear, because perfect love means the love of God, in the twofold sense of his love for us and of our love for him, brought to perfection, to efficacious realization in our midst, to the transformation of hearts.²⁹ The Father's love teaches us through the Cross of Christ, the utter depths of Jesus's self-giving in face of fear.

Because God so loved each of us and all of us in Christ's paschal mystery, we can be empowered to love him and each other in the way Christ did. The only way to overcome fear is freely to say 'yes' to those evils (personal sin of course excepted) which we cannot escape and which may eventually crush us, as they crushed Jesus, while at the same time doing all we can, as he did, to prevent evils from overtaking others. At the moment of his own arrest, he asked that his disciples be allowed to remain free.³⁰ He who by the Father's will had saved others from illness and death, would by fidelity to that same will heal all from eternal death by being unable to save himself from the cross.³¹

²⁷ 1 Jn 3, 1-2.

²⁸ Jn 17, 24.

²⁹ 1 Jn 4, 18.

³⁰ Jn 18, 8-9.

³¹ Mk 15, 29-32; Mt 27, 39-44; Lk 23, 35-39.

By the presence in us of Jesus's own Spirit,³² we can share in the saving work of his paschal mystery. Overcoming all fear by following the inspirations of his indwelling Spirit, we too can become ministers of renewal and reconciliation.

Postscript

In his first footnote (p 119), Fr Malatesta states that he will 'not consider the fear which is awe before the power and mystery of God . . .' One of the most profound and succinct statements on the subject of right and wrong christian fear is that of the fourteenth century english mystic, Dame Julian of Norwich, which we reproduce here in full.

For I have understanding of four sorts of dread. One is that state of fear which comes upon a man suddenly in his frailty. This dread does good, because it helps to purge a man, as sickness does or any other pain that is not sin. All such pains help a man if they are patiently accepted. The second is the dread of pain, by which a man is stirred up and awakened from the sleep of sin. For the man that is hard asleep in sin is not able, at the time, to receive the soft strengthening of the holy Ghost until he has felt this fear of pain, of bodily death, and of ghostly enemies. This dread moves us to seek comfort and mercy of God. And thus this dread helps us as giving us an entry, enabling us to come to contrition through the blissful touching of the holy Ghost.

The third is doubtful dread. In as much as it leads to despair, God wills to have it turned into love in us, by true knowing of love; that is to say, that the bitterness of doubt be turned into the sweetness of kind love, by grace. For it can never please our Lord that his servants doubt in his goodness.

The fourth is reverent dread. There is no dread in us that fully pleases God, but reverent dread. It is full soft; for the more it is had, the less it is felt, because of the sweetness of love. Love and dread are brethren; and they are rooted in us by the goodness of our Maker; they shall never be taken from us without end. It belongs to us, of kind, to love; and of grace, to love; and of kind, to dread; and of grace, to dread. It belongs to the Lordship and to the Fatherhood to be dreaded, as it belongs to the Goodness to be loved. And it belongs to us that are his servants and his children to dread him in his Lordship and Fatherhood, as it belongs to us to love him in Good-

³² See Jn 19, 30.

ness. And though this reverent dread and love are not both-in-one, but two in property and in working, yet neither of them may be had without the other. And therefore I am sure that he who loves, dreads – though he feels it but little.

All dreads, other than reverent dread, which are proffered to us, are not truly holy, though they come to us under colour of holiness. And hereby they can be known separately. The dread that makes us hastily to fly from all that is not good unto our Lord's breast, like the child into its mother's lap, with all our will and with all our mind; knowing our feebleness and our great need, knowing his everlasting goodness and his great love; seeking unto him only for salvation, cleaving to him with sure trust – the dread that brings us into this working, it is kind and gracious, good and true. And all that is contrary to it, it is either wrong, or is mingled with wrong. Then is this the remedy – to recognize them both, and reject the wrong.

For the kind property of dread, which we have in this life by the gracious working of the holy Ghost, the same shall be, in heaven, before God, gentle, courteous and full sweet. And thus we shall, in love, be homely and near to God, and in dread, gentle and courteous to God: both qualities united equally. Desire we then, of our Lord God, to dread him reverently and love him meekly and trust in him mightily. For when we dread him reverently and love him meekly, our trust is never in vain. For the more that we trust and the more mightily that we trust, the more we please and worship our Lord in whom we trust. And if we fail in this reverent dread and meek love (God forbid that we should!), our trust is at once misruled for that time. And therefore we greatly need to pray our Lord for grace, that we may have this reverent dread and meek love, of his gift, in heart and in work. For without this no man can please God.³³

³³ From *The Revelations of Divine Love* ch 74 (ed. James Walsh, London, 1973/ St Meinrad's Abbey Press, 1974), pp. 189–91.