

Epiphany 4
28/1/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Psalm 111

Mark 1:21-28

On the fear of God

To endeavour to learn a new language – particularly to *speak* it – is to wander into dangerous territory. Even when the words are not lacking, nuances of meaning are often hidden from the learner. Great confusion and embarrassment await those brave who risk a strange tongue.

The world of Scripture is a new language, even when translated into the vulgar tongue. It, also, is riddled with nuance and hidden meaning to trip up the presumptuous novice.

Let's consider the closing thought of our psalmist this morning: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." If a beginning in wisdom is taken to be a good thing, is "the fear of the LORD" the best – or even a good – way to such beginning? Ought we not rather *love* God? We know fear as a basis of relationship, and we agree that love is a much more desirable way to relate. Or, perhaps, we might try to bridge the gap between fear and love by reading "fear" as "respect." "Respect" allows that God could be feared but need not be.

Linguistic refinements like this make an apology for how the psalmist portrays God here. If love is good and fear is bad, then relating to God on the basis of fear is unpalatable. We refine the text to do God a favour. We ought, however, to keep in mind that God generally gets along quite well without our help, and that the text generally means what it says: *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*. This doesn't yet make the sentiment any more palatable but, like any strange mode of expression, it might give us pause: what could this mean?

The distance between our culture and context of Scripture is often obscured by things we imagine we have in common, like cognates between two languages. The Bible is interested in God, and we are interested in God, thus we presume that when the Bible refers to God it does so in the same way that we do. Yet "God" – as a concept – is for us something quite different from its conceptualisation in the Scriptures. In particular, we tend towards the idea that there is only one God, and "God" is in fact a viable *name* for God. Strictly speaking, God can only be God's name if there is *one* God. In the Scriptures, however, the basic assumption is that there are many gods – as we heard from Paul this morning – and that "God" is not so much a name as a type of *thing*.

In fact it's much messier than that, but this much helps us to get inside our psalmist's thinking. For we can say that, in the Scriptures, a god stands for something the present or absence of which we *fear*. Do we fear the absence of life or money? Then Death and Mammon become gods. Do you fear the absence of power? Then that which gives power, mythologised as a god, becomes what we fear, lest it withdraw that power. Because there are many who fear such things, and often in contradiction of each other, there are many gods. The important thing is, then, not whether you fear "God" but whether you fear *the right one* among the many feared gods: the god properly feared if we are going to fear anything.

For us today, “God” means almost nothing like this. Whereas the atmosphere of the Scriptures is polytheism, philosophical pressure has driven us to monotheism. It is this monotheism which makes us squirm – especially in the churches – when it comes to “the fear of the LORD”. Because the gods are no longer a given, we imagine that “mission” is about making the gods – or just “God” – palatable again, and love is more palatable than fear.

But the Scriptures know us. Even if our modern world is emptied of gods, it remains filled with fears. And these fears work on us as they always have. The “-isms” of our world indicate our new pantheon: racism, sexism, nationalism, fundamentalism, conservatism, progressivism, scientism, Islamism... each invoked out of fear. Knowing the human to be a creature which fears, the scriptural question is simply: What is *best* feared?

For this reason the psalmist proposes fear not of a generic “God” but of “the LORD.” It is a subtle nuance which the novice in religious language will miss but it is crucial, and is really only evident in the speaking: Not “the *fear* of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,” as if we might relate to the LORD in some other way but “the fear of *the LORD*,” as if there were other things we might fear. This nuance moves the declaration from our concern about the appropriate emotional response to a God who might or might not be there, to the question of which realities in our life are actually worth worrying about.

“The LORD” – Yahweh, Jehovah – is the name of one God among many, one candidate for our allegiance among many. “There are many LORDS and many gods”, Paul says, “but for us the one God, the Father... and one LORD, Jesus Christ.” Do you fear? Fear *this* one.

But why? Precisely because of the *love* which we might want prematurely to edit into the psalmist’s thought to make him declare that the *love* of the LORD which is the beginning of wisdom. There are as many lords and gods as there are contradictory fears and desires in us; these things we serve and invoke over against each other. In Paul this morning we saw the logic of fear and love set in their proper place in relation to God. Yes, there are real fears – real enough to cause division in the young Christian community about what could be eaten, and so who could eat with whom. A fear of the gods of old and a fear of a loss of freedom clashed to fracture the community; dividing the communal mind and rendering asunder the communal body is what fear does.

The unity of the body, or its division, is the sign of the Spirit active within it, the sign of what is feared. There are many lords and many gods, Paul acknowledges, but *for us* there is one God, the Father, *from* whom are all things and *for* whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, *through* whom are all things and through whom we exist. All things are from and to the Father; this we might call the “generic” function of a god: the beginning and the purpose of the world. The specifically Christian nuance is in the “through” used with respect to Jesus: “one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

To live in and through the crucified Jesus is to live in and through the victim of human fear. It is to see where fear takes us – the cross – and what it takes from us, even the God we might think demands the cross.

But, *just so*, to live through the crucified Jesus is also to see grace in action because our fear and loathing is not met with God’s own. In the world fear begets fear; in heaven, fear is just one more human characteristic God can use to reveal love and bring healing.

The *fruit of fear* is a broken body and blood poured out. *Grace* is the broken body raised and given to teach that with this God there is nothing to fear.

To learn a new language is to wander into dangerous territory. Even when the words are not lacking, nuances of meaning are often hidden from the learner. But when *God* speaks *our* language – takes our words and actions seriously – there is no embarrassment, even when God uses those words and or interprets our actions in the wrong way. God’s creative work with us is to change our grammar, to speak our words and ways in such a manner as to re-make us and, in this, to make possible us a new beginning in wisdom and in love.

The fear of *this* LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever. (Ps 111.10).

[Amen.]
