

Easter 7
21/5/2023

Mark the Evangelist

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5.6-11

Psalm 111

John 17:1-11

The one thing fearful

In a sentence:

Fear is always finally that God will not be there 'tomorrow', but this we do not need to fear

Being human

Most of us have had the experience of not being able to keep watching the news or reading the newspapers, simply because it has become overwhelming: too much controversy, too much complicated debate, too many shot dead, burned in a hotel fire, dragged out of mangled cars or drowned when overloaded boats succumb to the waves.

The news is distressingly un-new; it simply replays over and over with different actors and, not surprisingly, can be overwhelming. We feel threatened by the dangers which leap out of the television screen, knowing that each person caught in the lens might well have been us, or perhaps we are overwhelmed because we feel we should be able to do something about it but can't, or don't know what. When we switch off the screen or radio, or close the paper, we prove the somewhat cynical wisdom: ignorance is bliss.

Over the last couple of weeks, our discussion groups have begun a new book in which theologian David Ford proposes that experiences like being overwhelmed are defining for human beings. We are overwhelmed from birth by family, language and culture. We are overwhelmed by love or grief or by the kinds of things which confront us in the news. Positively or negatively, the human being is inherently susceptible to being overwhelmed, or perhaps even *needs* to be overwhelmed.

In the same way, Ford then goes on to consider desire. Like the various overwhelms which define us, these desires can also be positive or negative and can be quite comprehensive. Desire, then, can also be used to describe the human being: the human is a being which desires, and perhaps which desires most deeply to be desired.

Ford's method in the book seems to be to identify certain aspects of human existence which might be said to be universal, and then to ask how such things are means by which God connects to us. That is, his point is not least that good theology requires good anthropology, and good anthropology points to what good theology needs to address.

The fear of God

I suspect that our experience of fear might be another of those universal human experiences which can be a basis for thinking about God. 'Cast all your anxiety on God', writes St Peter in our reading this morning. Anxiety, or fear, pops up several times in this letter. Peter's community is under persecution, apparently having been marked out as sufficiently different from the mainstream to present some threat to the wider community. But at this point, Peter doesn't suggest that fear is inherently bad. He allows for it but tweaks it: 'Fear God' (2.17), he writes, 'Do not fear what they fear' (3.14).

The idea of fearing God seems strange to us these days. We're more likely to want to speak about 'loving' God, drawing a polemical contrast between love and fear: love (good) *versus* fear (bad). But the Scriptures know us a little better than this. Not fearing would be like not being overwhelmed or not desiring. That is, we can't do it. The question is not 'to fear or not to fear' but *what* we fear, on the assumption that we will fear *something*. Peter's 'do not fear what they fear' invites a *discrimination* between fears, just as we might discriminate between types of love – that 'love' which destroys us or others, versus those that build up.

For Peter, it is only Godly fear which properly makes a claim on us; all other fears diminish us. And in this contrast, we see how fear begins to change meaning when borrowed and applied to our relationship with God. The fears which Peter's community has, and those which most of us have, are social, economic and political. We fear that there will not be enough – not enough money, not enough time, not enough 'me'. And so we act, out of fear, to assure ourselves of 'enough'. We can read wars in this light – not least the current war in Ukraine. Political struggles are about 'enough': consider the debate around the proposed Parliamentary Voice in these terms. We fear that nothing will change, so that we will still not have enough, or that too much will change and we will lose what enough we have. We fear that we will still not be, or will no longer be, free. Even as we oppose each other, we fear the same thing – that we will be lost, or remain lost. To tweak Peter's language here and borrow what he says about the devil, this is the fear which devours, the fear that consumes until nothing is left.

'Do not fear what they fear', Peter writes. Do not fear *in the way* they fear – do not fear that there will not be enough. For the fear of God is not a fear that God is a powerful judge, such that we have to do the right thing in case *we* won't be enough – in order not to be punished for not being enough. This would be merely to replace a clear and present danger of everyday fears with one which is less clear and in the future. We do not fear God because God is *scarier* than the other things we fear.

The one thing fearful

Rather, to speak of fearing God is to let go of fear about all other things, although this is a negative way of putting it. To put it positively, to fear God is to be *free* of the fears which press in on us. Do not fear those things which might diminish you; 'fear' rather the God in whose eyes you cannot be diminished.

The psalmist's 'beginning of wisdom' (Psalm 111.10) is, then, also the beginning of freedom. This wisdom is that the fear of the Lord is not fear at all. It is more like a kind of mindfulness – although not quite in the modern therapeutic sense. It is to be mindful – to be *mind-filled* – not of the unavoidable difficulties and challenges and oppositions which fill our lives, but to be mindful that God accepts you. In all things, we are God's precious children. We must respond to the challenges and threats, but God's acceptance of us is not dependent on that response. And so mindfulness of God's acceptance of us is *liberating*. If God already embraces us before we do anything, then our actions from within that embrace cannot break it – we cannot fall out of God's love because that embrace is never not enough.

In the life we each go home to after worship today, in the life the congregation must negotiate in the months and years to come, in the lives we are given to live with each other, we have enough to do the next thing which will point away from fear to freedom. We have enough to point away from the possibility that we might be loved to the actuality that we are. We have enough to point away from death to life.

In the normal course of things, the ever-present danger is that fear itself might overwhelm us, so that our fear-filled desire for life might in fact lead us to a living death.

But the 'fear' of this God is the gift of freedom from fear because, whatever the future holds, in God we have enough. When a God like this is the one thing fearful, there is none to accuse or fear, only the freedom to do the next good thing which must be done, leaving the rest to God.

Let us, then, not be anxious or fearful about the next thing which comes, because this would be to fear that God will not be there, in that next step. And this we do not fear, for God is faithful, and so not only *must* we step out into tomorrow, but we *can*.
