

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – November 4, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,200 words

Notice how Jesus taught the commandments in terms of “love”: “You shall love the Lord your God... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But Moses, in the first reading, prefaced the commandments with the concept of fear: “Fear the Lord, your God, and keep... all his statutes and commandments... and thus have long life”, he said. Yes, Moses does also speak of loving God – but that context of “fear” remains. Moreover, we probably have all heard a certain idea repeated, to the effect that the God of the Old Testament was basically angry and fearful, whereas the God of the New is merciful and kind and so forth. Could our first reading and the gospel possibly verify that claim?

Well, the words of Moses are certainly not the only time that we encounter the concept of “fear of the Lord” in the Bible. In fact, upon further study we see that this type of fear is actually a gift of the Holy Spirit.¹ We read verses such as, “The fear of the Lord is the first stage of wisdom”;² even our Blessed Mother proclaims that God’s “mercy is from age to age upon those who fear him”.³ A different picture of fear thus emerges, distinguishing it from the garden-variety fear that we all experience when something frightful comes our way. The fear of God, in fact, leads to the fulfillment of his commands; it makes us wise; it obtains his mercy. In sum, it is a gift from God himself, which enables us to live in hope.

Indeed, as we go deeper on this theme in scripture, we see that the fear of the Lord described is not what we call, in Church teaching, “servile fear” – in other words, the fear of a servant or slave; the fear of one who is afraid of the consequences of his actions.⁴ Such servile fear is a common reaction, especially for those who do not have a strong relationship with God or still have some attachment to sin. We see servile fear in action when Adam and Eve hid from God in the garden because they were afraid of him, knowing how they had disobeyed.⁵ We see it in our own lives, as well, at times, when we are more afraid of the punishment that may be our due for some sin, than of having offended the God whom we love.

No, true fear of the Lord is what the Church calls “filial fear” – the fear of a son or daughter, of one who knows he or she is loved; the fear of one who does love God, in spite of having failed him through so many sins.⁶ Filial fear leads us to avoid sin not so much because of the punishment that it merits but because we do not wish to offend the Lord. Thus Pope Francis taught in one of his Wednesday audiences, “we know well that God is Father, that he loves us and wants our salvation...; thus, there is no reason to be scared of him! Fear of the Lord, instead, is the gift... through which we are reminded of how small we are before God.... This is fear of the Lord: abandonment in the goodness of our Father, who loves us so much.”⁷

The truth is, we often experience a mixture of servile and filial fear, depending upon where we are in our ongoing process of conversion. Perhaps there are some sins that we still really enjoy committing. But then there are those sins, also, that we now feel we would never commit, out of a well-ordered love of God. Therefore, the traditional Act of Contrition expresses both types of fear, to cover all the bases, as it were: “O my God, I am heartily sorry for having

¹ Cf. Isaiah 11:2-3.

² Proverbs 9:10.

³ Luke 1:50.

⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1828.

⁵ Cf. Genesis 3:10.

⁶ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1828.

⁷ Pope Francis, Wednesday General Audience of 11 June 2014, accessible at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140611_udienza-generale.html.

offended thee, and I detest all my sins [1] because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell” – servile fear – “but [2] most of all, because I have offended thee, my God, who art all-good and deserving of all my love” – filial fear.

But the goal for each of us is to mature beyond servile fear in every area of our life and grow into the gift of an authentic fear of the Lord. The renowned spiritual theologian, Fr. Adolphe Tanquerey, wrote that filial fear is needed to avoid falling into an “unbecoming familiarity” with God, “speaking to Him with too much boldness, and treating Him as an equal”. Tanquerey continued, “No doubt, God Himself encourages certain souls to a sweet intimacy, to an astounding familiarity with Him; but it is for Him, not for us, to take the initiative”.⁸ Think again of Our Lady, who expressed such reverence and humility before God – and also sang of the holy fear of him as the key to obtaining his mercy in every age.

Well, how can we cultivate this gift? We should regularly spend time meditating on God’s greatness, grandeur, and majesty.⁹ Think of the words of the first Eucharistic prayer – the Roman Canon – immediately after the consecration: “we, your servants and your holy people, offer to your glorious majesty... this pure victim, this holy victim, this spotless victim, the holy Bread of eternal life and the Chalice of everlasting salvation.” The prayer continues further down, “In humble prayer we ask you, almighty God: command that these gifts be borne... to your altar on high in the sight of your divine majesty, so that all of us... may be filled with every grace and heavenly blessing.” The Church’s prayer forms us in holy fear.

We should also regularly examine our consciences.¹⁰ A healthy sense of sin and how deeply it offends God – the same God who is always willing to forgive us – helps to excite within us this gift of the Holy Spirit. We thus become more sensitive to sin and more humble before the Lord. In the words of St. John the Baptist, “he must increase; I must decrease”.¹¹ The humble heart is fertile ground for the gifts of the Holy Spirit to take deeper root and grow. We have received those gifts in seed form through Baptism and Confirmation: it is up to us to cooperate with God so that they unfold and flourish as we come to greater maturity in Christ. As the psalmist said, “A humble and contrite heart, O God, you will not spurn”.¹²

We see, then, that the fear of the Lord spoken of by Moses is indeed related to the love of God – and, by extension, to the love of neighbor. For as St. John wrote, “If any one says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love the God whom he has not seen”.¹³ A healthy, filial fear of God helps us to love the right way. Depictions of God as angry in the Old Testament and loving in the New are facile caricatures and we rightly dismiss them. Therefore, may the Lord cause the gift of holy fear to grow within us so that we may keep his commands faithfully, loving him and our neighbor now, each day, and unto eternity.

⁸ Adolphe Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life* (Tournai, Belgium: Desclée Publishers, 1923), pp. 623-624.

⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 624.

¹⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*

¹¹ John 3:30.

¹² Psalm 51:17.

¹³ 1 John 4:20.