

Fear of the Lord as our starting point

Sermon by Andy Wurm, Pentecost 13, 19th August 2018

From Psalm 111 – ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’. Is that an instruction about how we should relate to God or a description of how we relate to God? It’s both actually.

First let’s consider the fear of the Lord as something helpful. A couple of years ago an American theologian was speaking in Adelaide. In one of her talks she spoke about when her husband died. His funeral began with his coffin being brought into the church and she walked in front of it, carrying her grandchild. She said that as she led his coffin in, *she had no faith*. But it didn’t matter, because *everyone else there did*. Her statement shows how much Christianity is a communal faith. The significance of your personal beliefs and doubts belongs in the context of the community. What matters most is the faith of the community. That’s what it means to recite a creed for example. So, when in our Sunday Eucharist, we are instructed to *together affirm the faith of the Church*, we are not being invited to re-commit ourselves to what the church tells us we have to believe, nor are we all claiming that what the church says is right. Rather, we are affirming that it is the corporate belief of the community and therefore, as the communal faith, it is something we are part of, but don’t have ownership of. So, today I may disagree with a line of the creed, or not even understand a phrase, but that doesn’t make me a hypocrite, because I am affirming the faith of the church, not my personal faith that I alone came up with and have spent years refining and perfecting so that it perfectly captures who God is. That’s why for that woman, the American theologian, her faith, or lack of it, while grieving her husband, doesn’t matter - because it’s something that she can come and go from. She can pick it up and put it down, and that’s okay.

What this points to is that faith is something bigger than yourself and the notion that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom is also about that. You can see it as referring to awe – being in awe of God, and everything else falls into place. It’s a bit like the feeling a person might get before taking on a leadership position: they feel the weight of what they’re about to take on. It’s not that they won’t be able to do the job, but just that it’s something bigger than themselves.

During the Second World War, there were Jews in Auschwitz concentration camp. One day, some of them decided to put God on trial. God was supposed to look after his people, to be full of compassion for the human race and to be all-powerful. Looking at the horror around them, they judged God guilty of failing to be that and worthy of death, so they put God to death. Then the rabbi said ‘God is dead, and now it is time for prayers’. (From Karen Armstrong *A History of God*.) That’s an amazing ability to critique God and hold faith in God at the same time – an ability that is only possible for people who hold God to be bigger than what their religion tells them and bigger than what their own thoughts can manage.

The institutional element of religion is important, and applying our critical minds to it is too, but beyond those, lies adult faith, which is mystical and open to what no-one can fully grasp, and no-one has a monopoly on. In fact, the mystical involves allowing God to grasp you and begin to shape you. In this context, *the fear of the Lord* is respect for what we cannot grasp or control.

The other way we can think of the fear of the Lord is that it’s a good description of how we often react to God. It makes sense if we think that God comes to us disguised as life. I don’t mean that everything that happens to us is God manipulating things to test us or get us to do something, for example, but

that in the ordinary events of our lives, God is present, inviting us to grow in some way. If we are made in the image of God, as we are told, then it means we are made to be like God, in the sense of being loving and compassionate, finding joy in life and connection with other people and the world around us. As none of us have fully got there, it makes sense that God is always offering us the opportunity to become more loving, to find more joy and to grow closer to others and the world around us in our own way. That's how we become co-creators with God, creating a world of love and goodness together.

So, for example, when I failed a subject at university, because I hadn't actually done what was required for my final assignment, God didn't make that happen, but there was something of God kind of stirring me up to accept my failure and have another go, resulting in a better outcome than I could have imagined. God doesn't necessarily want us to get A's on our report card, but God wants us to become fully alive. St Ignatius says that the glory of God is humanity fully alive. It means God wants what is best for us and is happy when we are at our best.

This is where the fear of the Lord comes in though, because it is at those points of possible growth that fear often arises. It could be a nervous breakdown, in which there is also the opportunity to become a stronger person. It could be a new friendship or a friendship moving to another level, inviting us to open our heart or move closer to another. It could be a death of someone close, inspiring us to realise our own mortality and consider anew what matters most to us. Even in hardship and challenging times, God may be offering us some new way of growing or stirring us to extend or deepen ourselves.

Wanting to grow and become more than we are, would seem to be an attractive thing, but we don't always see it that way, because it involves giving up control – at least to some degree. It requires going into the unfamiliar or going into what we may have previously been afraid of or rejected. It might mean doing what is frowned upon by others – maybe leaving a relationship, or rejecting a job with good pay, or it could mean doing something socially questionable like following the path of someone who is said to have risen from death. In this way, we often begin our path to wisdom (growing into what we can be) by being afraid of the opportunity being presented to us.

The story of Jonah is a story of someone who was invited to undertake a task which, if fulfilled, would make him more of the person he was made to be, but he was afraid of it, because there were consequences he didn't like, so he ran away and ended up being swallowed by a whale. God always has Plan B. When we run in fear from an opportunity to grow, God will offer something else, at some point, because God wants the best for us.

When we do run away from the God who comes to us disguised as life, it doesn't matter too much, because there is something bigger than ourselves, something bigger than our faith, or our fear (which is the opposite of faith) and that is God, so we just have to accept our failure to respond and take it up next time.

Jesus is always calling us to die to our false selves, that is, die to the life that is anything less than we could be, so we have this ever-present invitation to grow, but also sometimes circumstances thrust upon us the chance and often the need to grow, such as when we lose something or someone. We may be afraid at first, but the important thing is to remember that God is bigger than our fears. The power behind us is always greater than the challenges we face.