

Live in Reverent Fear

1 Peter 1: 17 – 23

Luke 24: 13 – 35

Purpose: To explain the concept of “reverent fear” in the light of a gospel of love and freedom.

“Live in reverent fear!”

The words literally leaped off the page at me as I began the task of preparing this sermon. I have to say, I met them with a deep sense of foreboding. I could almost feel the goose bumps of my own anxiety as I read them.

“Live in fear!” Reverent or otherwise! That’s not what I normally preach. There have been too many fire and brimstone sermons in my own history for me to want to proclaim such a negative gospel. To the contrary! , Through out my ministry, I have stood at lecterns like this one and used every means at my disposal to attempt to achieve almost the exact opposite.

“Fear is no basis for a productive relationship with anyone, let alone with God!” you will hear me say. “Love is only secure foundation on which to build our relation with God.”

“Love liberates,” I will say. “Fear paralyses!”

“Fear close relationships down, love opens relationships out. Love sets us free to act creatively and productively to offer joy and hope to those around us. Fear makes us insecure and incapable of action. Love, not fear, is the only proper basis for a worthwhile relationship with God!”

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Of course, not every one sees it like that. An elder of a congregation in which I served many years ago would often scold me for the way in which I made my pastoral visits. I liked to telephone people before I landed on their doorstep. He never quite got used to that..

“You’ve got it all wrong,” he used to tell me. “You’ve got to catch them unawares. You’re meant to discover them in the act of doing what they shouldn’t really be doing. You’ve got to put the fear of God into them. That’s your job!”

Two decades later I still have his voice ringing in my ears. “You’ve got to put the fear of God into them. That’s your job!”

But, I’ve never seen it like that. I’ve never believed that putting the fear of God into people was what in Christ I was called to do. Instead I’ve always believed that my role is to be an instrument of God’s grace rather than God’s wrath; an instrument of peace rather than

insecurity. I've never believed that it's possible to scare the living daylight outside of someone and still expect them to discover the awesome mystery of God's love and grace.

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That's not to say that fear is entirely a negative emotion! If you ride a bicycle from Brisbane to Sydney as I did a few years ago, you soon realise that a little bit of fear helps. When your competing for road space with the B-doubles as they go whizzing past, it's wise to know where the verge is. A little bit of fear helps you to avoid being squashed.

A parent trying to teach their child that if they pull the saucepan from the stove they're likely to get burned may well find that a little bit of fear helps.

On the steep slopes of a mountain, or in a canoe amongst the cascading rapids of a fast flowing stream, the careful adventurer will assess the risks. That little bit of fear allows them to assess the risk and plan the actions which ensure they will stay safe.

Fear is not an entirely negative emotion. So is there a place for fear in our relationship with God?

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Clearly, the author of the first epistle of Peter thinks so. "If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially, live in reverent fear," he writes.

But notice that when he does, he is not first and foremost speaking of the foundation of our relationship with God.

To the contrary! He identifies two acts of love as that basic foundation of our relationship with God. The first is God's loving act in Jesus. "We have been ransomed," he says, "with the precious blood of Christ." The second is our loving act of trust. "Through Jesus," the epistle writer says, "we have come to trust in God, who raised Jesus from the dead."

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So when he speaks of "reverent fear" the epistle writer is not talking about the foundation of our relationship with God. Instead, I want to suggest to you something quite different to what my elder friend from so long ago had in mind. I want to suggest that he has in mind the preservation rather than the foundation of that relationship that is built upon God's love for us our loving response in return.

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Perhaps I can best explain it like this:

Imagine your most committed, loving relationship! It doesn't have to be a marriage though mine is. It can be a close friend or a valued relative.

But for me that relationship is my relationship with Anita. Almost thirty years ago now, I met the most wonderful woman in the world. I thought so anyway. I loved her and she

loved me. Since then our love has grown richer and deeper. This year we will celebrate our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. That loving relationship has become one of the most precious things in my world. I don't know where I'd be without it. I want Anita to be part of my life forever and I'm pleased to say she feels like that with me.

So we work to preserve that relationship. In fact, our life together becomes so important to us that it shapes our individual lives. She's learned to live with my bad habits (not that I have any) and I've learned to live with her idiosyncrasies. It's not that she is scared of me or that I am scared of her. Rather we fear the loss of each other. We fear the absence of that precious relationship.

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To live in reverent fear is a bit like that. It is to live in the knowledge of the wonder of God's love. It is to allow our individual lives to be shaped and disciplined by the awesome mystery of the most perfectly loving relationship of all.

It's not that we need to live in fear of the one who is the impartial judge of our deeds. The epistle writer knows that! They have already acknowledged that we have been ransomed from those futile ways. Rather the epistle writer wants us to take our relationship with God seriously, to take stock of it soberly and to allow it to inspire every deed we do, every word we say, and every action we take.

The author is wanting to remind us not to risk that future that they wrote about in last week's epistle lectionary which assured us that in Christ we have an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and undecaying.

In fact, if we do that – if we live in reverent fear; if we live in the contemplation of the awe inspiring wonder of God – the end consequence, the ultimate outcome, is that we don't become cringing, powerless, closed in, scared and insecure. Instead, love is set free to grow and develop – not just in or relationship with God, but also in our relationships with each other.

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That's where the epistle reading this morning leads us. The end result is mutual love, deep love for one another because as it's author reminds us "we have been born anew of imperishable seed through the living and enduring word of God."

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So I need not have worried when I first read those words "Live in reverent fear." My job this morning was not to put the fear of God into you. I still believe that my role is to be an instrument of God's grace rather than God's wrath; an instrument of peace rather than insecurity. Our evangelical role is not to scare the living daylights out of people hoping they will come to experience the power and awesome mystery of God's grace.

I'm still going to tell you as I hope I have said many times before, "Love, not fear, is only secure foundation on which to build our relationship with God." Love sets us free to act creatively and to productively offer joy and hope to those around us.

And I'm going to add that this awesome, mysterious, loving relationship with God is so rich and precious that it's worth preserving: We don't need to fear God, but reflecting seriously and soberly on what life might be like without God's love is an important part of a Christian spirituality.

Like the epistle writer I'm going to say: "Live in reverent fear." Contemplate the awesome mystery of God's grace. Nothing is more valuable than being loved by God. Preserve it! Be nourished by it! Grow in it! Let it shape your life! That's what makes you creative and productive in God's community of justice and peace.