

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Fear of the Lord

This phrase never used to appeal to me because I've always thought fear an unpleasant and negative reality, unworthy of a good life. There's plenty that agrees with that in the Bible: 1 John says: *Fear is cast out by love; whoever is afraid is still imperfect in love.* But there is another place which says: *To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who fear Him prove themselves wise.* So I set my mind to discover the truth.

A Bland World

Firstly, I need to check whether I'm right about fear. Is it really such a negative thing? It's one of the characteristics of life; anything alive has the power to defend itself, and the power to fear is the (good) switching-mechanism of that good thing. I also know many people who do things like jumping out of planes and climbing rocks, because they actually *enjoy* risk. I wonder if this enjoyment is actually because of the bland, safe world we've tried to make: we need to experience what is venturesome, and brave, in order to convince ourselves we're still alive. That leads me to wonder whether we might not have lost touch with the *built-in* dangerousness of our life. We study the figures for accidents, and crimes, and disease, and death, treating them as unaccountable, unexpected realities. (I am struck by the strangeness, when I hear that the Government has resolved to cut deaths from heart-attack by 30%. Are they laying on some other, better way for us to die? In what world do *they* think we are living?)

The Grandeur of the Truth

Maybe the instinct of our times to exclude God is the same one. Jesus warned that one day there would be *people dying of fear as they await what menaces the world*; just as we try to eliminate the consciousness of death and sin, we also need to eliminate God; after all, God is the one person we can't reduce to familiarity, and turn into an old pal. We will always be in a state of awe before God, because he is *God and not man*, and we cannot dominate him or enrol him in our man-centred view of the universe. It isn't ours to give God his place in the scheme of things: quite the reverse. This humbling of our habitual mind-set makes faith alien to the modern world.

Storm At Sea

This is the world in which, today, we read the story of the storm on the lake. Jesus is calmly sleeping when the worst happens – secure in his trust that all will be well. He is awakened by the frightened disciples, and in them we can see the wrong sort of fear – that crippling reality which robs us of the powers we live by; here are sailors who have lost their seamanship. The awakening of Jesus brings about a huge change. They move from *fear because of the elements* to *awe at the power of Christ*. This awe is not something paralysing, but something which acknowledges the stature of Christ: more importantly, it makes them grow in stature as disciples of one who can command the sea and still the gale. Because of this experience they are inhabiting a greater world, believing in a greater God; they are on the threshold of faith in the Incarnation, because the answer to their *Who Can This Be* is already known to them in the book of Job: *Who harnessed the sea...when I marked the bounds it was not to cross, and fastened it with a bolted gate? Come thus far, I said, and no farther: here your proud waves shall break.*

I've Been There

We should not relegate this experience to the far past, to the world of stories. We have also found ourselves in this boat, with waves breaking over our gunwales, and no sign of peace in our sights. If we've managed to pray in that time, we will know what today's Gospel is saying. To engage the powers of darkness, and find ourselves awakening Christ, is to come through fear to the threshold of faith. *Fr Philip*