

From the desk of Fr. Tim

The Fear of God

With the swinging of the pendulum in recent years we have begun to question a great many of the assumptions that were formed in the 60's. Secular humanism worked hard to alter the face of God. They saw this as necessary because the "God of their forefathers" was perceived as responsible for all the nervous twitches of society.

The towering gothic cathedrals were abandoned for churches that looked more like hotel lobbies. Music was more ordinary, prayer more infrequent, and the stories from the Bible were sanitized. (Noah with no flood, crosses with no nails, or no cross at all, and no end of the world.) Jesus became our brother, the Holy Spirit was reduced to an inspirer of good ideas and the Father was ... absent. The confessional was simply empty, on both sides of the curtain.

This was an unsatisfactory situation. The Church could not react fast enough to this. By the time it seemed to take root in our culture, it already began to pass. Those who still try to maintain this faceless image of God are left to a dwindling audience.

People are looking for something solid, ground that does not move, a truth that does not change with the wind. So what is the truth? Our God is a God of justice and mercy, awesome power and perfect love, the originator of miracles and the shepherd who seeks our lost soul, the almighty, invisible, source of wisdom and life. Of course, the list goes on and on, but what we need to consider here is our response to this truth about God. How do we approach him?

Fortunately, we do not need to be creative with this. God gives us the manner in which we are to regard our creator. It may be hard to admit, but if we devise our own approach, as was the attempt in our recent past, we will make a mess of it. There are extremes that produce terrible problems.

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is fear. When we hear that word we are sure we are considering "old time religion". The fearsome God of the Old Testament is not very attractive to the modern sensibilities. And correctly understood, God is not a proper object of fear.

We cannot properly fear goodness and God is perfect goodness. It is, however, reasonable for us to fear his justice. This is not merely a fear of his punishment of us, even though that too is more than reasonable to fear. It is not a message limited to the Old Testament alone, that God will in the end punish those who

disobey him. It might be said that his justice is even reflected in creation itself. The logical consequence of our disobedience is the damage caused by our sins.

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all who cause others to sin and all evildoers. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears ought to hear.

(Matthew 13:41-43)

Pretty scary. But be careful. Certainly it is a matter of a truthful description of our destiny should we turn away from God. We should fear the reality of judgment in our life, for there is almost no argument that we can present against it. It is what it is: just. But this is not the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The gift is that of what is called by theologians, “reverential fear.” This fear has particular characteristics:

First its motive is the “fear” of offending God, the fear of being separated from him, the fear of not loving him, the fear of not being obedient to him. When a man falls in love with a woman, especially a man with a few bad habits, he approaches her with a fear that he might offend his beloved, especially with his bad habits. This is an analogy of our fear of God. It is not only because he can inflict pain on us. It is because we know we are capable of damaging our relationship with him as a result of our sins.

The second characteristic is a kind of proof of the genuineness of our fear and that it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Our fear has a proper positive purpose in mind. Not only do we want to turn away from sin because of the gift of fear, this gift produces within us an awareness of our need for him. The fear of “losing” him (in the language of lovers) deepens within us our recognition that we cannot do without him. Because of this motivation, we are ready to turn away from the corruption oftentimes caused by clinging (in a disordered manner) to things of this earth.

Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

(Romans 5:5)

Pray for the gift of holy fear.