

29 May 2011 St Michaels Studio City
A Easter 06
RCL John 14.15-21 11 Peter 3.13-22

Sometimes God Frightens Me
The Reverend Canon Mark Shier

Sometimes God frightens me. While there is much in our religion, that is, our understanding of the nature of God and our place in His universe, while there is much in our religion that is comforting, there are other elements that are frightening. I hear little about this in responsible Christian preaching and teaching. Oh, there is much calling down of brimstone on those who are not like us, but I hear very little responsible thinking and praying about the terror attendant on divinity. Let me tell you of some of my unsettledness; perhaps you share some of this.

One is simply the vastness of God, Her infinity. I have the natural human desire to comprehend things, to know what my life is about, to control my little corner of the world, to avoid that which I don't understand and can't control. God is neither understandable nor controllable and when I really pay attention to that, fear grows within me.

Then again, God places demands on me, demands that I often find burdensome and that I do not satisfy very well. God is holy, which is a kind of mixture of stunning glory, complete otherness, and pure goodness. That alone is unsettling. Even more so when we add in God's demand that I be like God. We are made in Her image, we are meant to be holy, and most of us botch the job quite royally. The moral demands of holiness – things like patience, kindness, understanding, acceptance, perseverance, trust, compassion, love – the moral demands of holiness and my weakness before those demands scare me.

The third thing that scares me about God is the way God's love works out in our world and in our lives. One of my virtues – and I don't have very many – is that I have a strong sense of God's absolute and infinite love for each and every one of us. I know that I can trust that love. I know that that love is always on my side, always works for the benefit of God's children. So I don't understand the pain in our world, because if I were running things I wouldn't allow things like cancer, hunger, war, rape, deceit, disloyalty, inadequacy, abuse, confusion, theft, loneliness, death. If I were running things, Jesus would not have died, especially that horrible, tortured, humiliating death. I know the glory of resurrection, but I still don't think I could bring myself to look upon death with any kind of composure.

The fourth reason – and I suppose this is a subset of reason number three – God frightens me is that I read the Bible. Again, while there are comforting sections of the Bible that I clutch to my heart with bands of steel, there are other parts that leave me scared, especially when I realize how very like I am to those weak, confused, sinful men and women of the biblical saga. They are as stunned before the activity of God as I am:

- I. I read in the Bible of Adam and Eve thrown out of paradise because they did not obey God. I look at my own disobedience, and I tremble.

- II. I read in the Bible of the death of David and Bathsheba's son, the first one, the one born of their adultery. I read of the death of the innocent for the sins of the guilty, and I tremble.
- III. I read of the suffering of Job, beloved by God. I wonder if I am as beloved and wonder about my own suffering, and I tremble.
- IV. I read in the Bible that if I am smart and religious, I will fear the Lord. While I think that word "fear" ought to be understood as "respect," I still wonder about fear.
- V. I read in the Bible about Israel and Judea, nations created by God for Her beloved people. I read about how God destroyed them because they did not obey His demand that they care for the weak, the vulnerable, the poor, the orphaned, the widowed, the sick, the dying. I look at my own nation – our indifference to the sick, the poor, the vulnerable; our arrogance; our lack of respect for other nations; our acceptance of corruption in government; our fear of those who are different, our acceptance of the shallow and bland, our refusal to stand up to religious and cultural bullies. I look at my own nation, and I tremble.
- VI. I read in the Bible about a religion fallen into complacency, about taking God for granted, about excluding those who could not obey the demands of the Law, about indifference to the vulnerable, about blindness to the compassion and love of God. I look at my own religion, not the controversies that are so much on our minds but our assumptions, our acceptance of the status quo, our refusal to challenge the power of the state in the name of religious liberty for all, our refusal to be generous with our resources, and I tremble.

I think if we are not frightened by God we have not been paying attention.

So, why, you may ask, is Father Mark still a priest of this frightening God, still standing up there in funny clothes, still bowing down in humble adoration before the throne of God, still leading us in worship at the altar and the pulpit? The answer, of course, is that we have been telling only part of the story.

There is reason that we Christians are known as the religion of the loving God, the religion of loving sacrifice, the religion of resurrection that is really about eternal love. We fail miserably in doing justice to love, divine and human, but nonetheless love is at the heart of our religion, and as one wise New Testament writer said, love casts out fear (1 John 4.18). We may not comprehend God, in fact, we never will, but if we love God, we will not fear God. Imperfect love lessens our natural fear; perfect love casts it out altogether.

Why should we love God? The simplest answer is because God loves us first (1 John 4.19). Christian thought sees all of creation, the full sweep of history from the first big bang to the last recorded syllable of time, as an act of love, that God made everything because God saw that it was good (Genesis 1 - 2). There is a passage from the prophet Isaiah that lists a multitude of blessings in the land and then closes with this: "Everyone will see this and know that I, the holy Lord God of Israel, created it all." (Isaiah 41.17-20) Creation is good and, because it is good, it is loved by God. You and I are an integral part of that creation and so we are loved, too.

But we have even more reason to love God, and that reason is Jesus of Nazareth. Our whole reason for being, as the Christian religion, is that in Christ God has come to us, God has lived with us, God has loved us, God has taught us, God has died for us, and God has been resurrected for us. God lives in Jesus in a wonderful fashion (we call that the Son of God, the Word of God). Christian thought sees God acting in Jesus as the continuation of the creation of *Genesis* 1 and 2; in Christ, God is acting to re-create the world. God is acting to incorporate everything into Christ, as our Gospel reading from John says, so that we all may live with the life-power, the vitality, of Jesus. That's the Spirit of God. It is in Jesus; it is in you and me. And that Spirit binds us all together in an intimate reality, in a loving bond that transcends our experience in this world and even our ideas, our concepts, of union and communion. That vitality in us is as assured as the strength of the vine gives life to the branches. (John 15.1-8) That vitality, that willingness of God to strengthen His people, to act *for* them, to act *in* them, has consequences, chief among them is lack of fear as we read in today's *First Peter* reading: "Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord." Or as another translation puts it: "stop being afraid... Honor Christ and let him be the Lord of your life." (3.14-15)

So, at our best, we don't fear God. We will not always understand God, but we can always love God, because God has loved us first, and God is always in our corner, first, last, and always. Let God's love cast out our fear. Let our love cast out our fear. Amen.