



Loosening the knots:

Fear of the Lord

Brian McClorry SJ

The way in which we commonly use the word ‘fear’ to express a feeling of our own power being limited, without a sense of awe, inhibits us rather than impelling us, says Brian McClorry SJ. He finds that scripture and experience illustrate the transformative potential of an expectant awe that cuts through our certainties and welcomes us into mystery. And if the gift of ‘fear of the Lord’ seems somewhat elusive, perhaps that it is helpful way for us to remember that the gifts of the Spirit can only be given, rather than claimed.

‘that sense of a slight shift of cargo while becalmed.’¹

The list of the gifts of the Spirit (like that of the [‘seven deadly sins’](#)!) used to be memorised in catechism classes: ‘wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord.’ My sense is that these gifts are neither isolated nor self-standing, but connected and make up a whole which is for the wellbeing of community. ‘Fear of the Lord’ colours and shapes all the gifts of the Spirit, and may itself have a life and relevance within the Covid-19 pandemic and in whatever post Covid-19 Church and world might emerge.

Some Scripture

An event, a happening, predates all the gifts of the Spirit. There is the gift, the coming and receiving, of the Spirit narrated in the event of Pentecost (Acts 2:1ff) and in John’s account of the risen Jesus among the disciples (John 20:1-29). What results from these events is told in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of the New

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Testament. There is a narrative, a history, where the ‘gifts’ have life.

Paul (in the course of 1 Corinthians 12-14) details a wonderful variety of these gifts, services or manifestations of the Spirit and carefully notes: ‘To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good’ (12:7 [NRSV]). Community matters. The

traditional seven gifts may look towards these texts, though a list misses a sense of narrative. Still, the list is commonly said to originate in Isaiah 11:1-2 where the Spirit of the Lord will rest on a descendant of David. And Isaiah’s list ends with ‘fear of the Lord’. However, Isaiah’s next verse begins: ‘His delight will be in fear of the Lord.’ It is good to find that ‘fear’ and ‘delight’ are good neighbours. And more community – or connectedness – beckons. In Psalm 111:10, ‘fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’. The gifts have narratives and linkages. And for the New Testament authors, they are held in the person of Christ – the descendant of David.

There may be a 'fear of the Lord', but 'fear' in relation to God has a bad history. It seems to have more to do with a fear of 'hell' rather than fear of the Lord. In his traditionally short catechism, Herbert McCabe expresses 'fear of the Lord' as 'the gift of wonder and awe in the presence of God'² – which sounds about right.

'Awe' is a definite word. It's not the same as a frisson when about to row across a choppy wind-swept river against the tide, or climbing a vertical rock face with neither expertise nor guide. 'Awe' is more than 'very difficult' or 'impossible' – it is tied in with mystery, with the uncontrollable and unfathomable, with what is 'holy'. It rests on beauty³ and on wonder – those fitting and unbelievable attractions. For Diarmaid MacCulloch: 'One great encouragement to sin is an absence of wonder'.⁴ 'Wonder' might well be seen then as an encouraging partner for 'awe in the presence of God'.

Indeed, 'awe' has all the arresting uncertainty of [love, of loving and being loved](#) – a creative vulnerability. Paul is clear that: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.' (Romans 5:5) 'Fear of the Lord' is bound up with God who is love (1 John 4:8) and light (1 John 1:5). Light and love can be hard to come by, especially if what we look for is certainty, or mistake awe for certitude.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of the gifts of the Spirit as completing the 'virtues' of those 'who receive them'.⁵ The sense of completion is promising, even if here the list seems to assimilate 'gifts' to 'virtues' and perhaps downplays the direct or immediate bestowing activity of the Holy Spirit.⁶ That it is the Holy Spirit who is given and who brings the Spirit's gifts is a delightful and central reality, which reminds us that these gifts are never independent of the Spirit's presence.

'Awe' describes the sense that we have encountered 'mystery', not simply in the sense of what I don't or can't understand, but the *presence* of what cannot be fully grasped or expressed. There is 'revelation', so we can name God truly and significantly as 'love', and sense something of the reality of Jesus's relationship to the Father. This does not mean we have seen through the mystery, or that God has ceased to be mystery. It is the mystery of God among us which allows us to see.

Awe and argument

Clearly there is a clash between this 'fear of the Lord' and the fear that makes itself known in distortions of human life evidenced in, for instance, human trafficking, racism, the arms trade, poverty, ecological degradation and... and... It's a long and lengthening list, to which 'the seven deadly sins' might well be added. This clash can be both dispiriting and disabling – and stands in need of 'awe in the presence of God'. Clearly more is involved than preparing to meet whoever, or whatever, may be my *bête noire* and hoping or planning for things to go well. And the 'more' needs that 'awe' which stops us in our tracks and gives an impelling and discerning energy.

There is also a 'clash' when believers try to negotiate their way through intractable disagreements. Paul and Peter are at loggerheads over the mission to the 'pagans', but with some reluctance work their way towards an agreement (see Galatians and Acts of the Apostles 15). It is as if 'awe in the presence of God' can elude fixity and take deep arguments and uncertainties into the new and creative land of ongoing resolution. We may welcome the gift of 'awe' in church difficulties over clericalism and listening.

The long pause

Covid-19 is tragic – deaths in isolation, economic disaster, the curtailing of education across the board. It was also full of extraordinary goodness: local neighbourliness, the dedication and appreciation of key workers, and so on. It was – and is – an enforced, involuntary ‘pause’. For believers it was – and is – also a time when gathering together in mosque, synagogue or church could not shape the believing community. Nonetheless for believers (and unbelievers) this ‘pause’ did provoke consideration and thought. People read more, rediscovered ‘nature’, walked alone. Lives found a deepened reflective and contemplative dimension. People prayed and wondered about prayer and how it connected to life. There was an element of the new in hard circumstances. This ‘long pause’ is also a time when the gifts of the Spirit have been given and experienced. If these realities are not to vanish or be dissipated in a post Covid-19 future, what happened needs to be articulated, listened to and learnt from. Telling and hearing matter.

The prospect is for groups, existing and new, to articulate and listen to people’s experience of this ‘long pause’. These groups could be parish-based and ecumenical, interreligious or non-religious. Covid-19 was and is a common local, national and global experience in which we all need to listen to each other in a spirit of expectant awe. There has been more than a year-long ‘pause’ in ordinary life. A sustained telling of and listening to our experience is a need whose recognition seems long overdue – the needed gift of ‘awe’. For ‘Church’, this awe could contribute to a new narrative, as at Pentecost and in the tensions between Peter and Paul. This is not a million miles away from a good synodal process within the Church.⁷

The crocodile

I remember one small event during ‘social distancing’. A solitary and purposeful walker moved along a narrow pavement. Coming towards him was a large family group of five or six people. When they passed each other the single pedestrian had carefully stepped off the pavement. And the family group now moved along the pavement in a ceremonious single file – a lengthy and impressive crocodile. Hands were raised and smiles exchanged. There are some small moments which resonate: ‘a slight shift of cargo / while becalmed’ – a tinge of awe.

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¹ From ‘Sighting the Slave Ship’ in Pauline Stainer, *The Lady and the Hare: New and Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe, 2003).

² Herbert McCabe OP, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church: A New Catechism of Christian Doctrine* (CTS, 1985), p.48. The traditional ‘fear of the Lord’ is preserved in the later and rather official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1994).

³ ‘When it is experienced beauty tends to be valued, defended and shared: it is one source of justice.’ (Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* [Princeton University Press, 1999]).

⁴ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (Allen Lane, 2009), p.1016.

⁵ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1831

⁶ Jack Mahoney SJ considers this matter in his *The Holy Spirit and Moral Action in Thomas Aquinas* (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021).

⁷ On ‘synodality’ see Cardinal Michel Czerny SJ, ‘[The Church becoming Synodal](#)’ - ‘[Part I: Lumen Gentium and the inverted pyramid](#)’ and ‘[Part II: The preferential option for the poor and the way forward](#)’, *Thinking Faith*, 6 & 11 January 2021.