

“Fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom” , and both wisdom and fear of the Lord are gifts of the Holy Spirit. But that sort of 'fear' is awe and wonder when we are aware of the awesome, Wonderful, terrifying presence of God. It is the other form of fear, the terror that paralyses, that is one feature of the Resurrection-appearance stories of the Gospels.

Reflecting last week at the Vigil on Mark's curious conclusion to his Gospel we noted the fear of the women who went to the tomb. So despite the instructions of the man in white who was seated in the tomb, to go and tell Peter and the brothers that he has gone before them to Galilee, they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

Fear is also the response of the disciples in John's Gospel to the death of their Lord. Despite the fact that they should be celebrating the feast of Unleavened Bread, a seven day feast which ran from Passover onwards, the disciples are in hiding, behind locked doors. The Jewish authorities having got rid of Jesus with a clinical strike in the darkness, it would be a natural fear that they might now go after the disciples and kill off the movement effectively and literally. Fear often causes paralysis. You might think they would be better off high tailing it back to Galilee. However, they would want to go through the appropriate mourning ritual for their friend and teacher; they would want to keep the feast in the proper manner; and they would be looking towards their own safety; incompatible desires. So they do nothing except hide away, terrified at the sound of every footstep outside.

Along with fear, another characteristic of the Resurrection-appearance stories is doubt. When Jesus appears to the disciples in Luke's Gospel, they cannot believe that the one before them is anything but a ghost. Jesus shows them his hands and feet, marks of his identity with the one they knew, but still they doubt. Jesus asks for something to eat, food was always a significant other in his life, to prove he is not a ghost. When Jesus meets the disciples on a mountain in Galilee at the climax to Matthew's Gospel we hear that most believe but some, even at this moment of revelation and commission, doubt. And, as we have just heard and know so well, Thomas in John's Gospel refuses to believe the stories of his colleagues. He is the patron of all those since the Enlightenment who have a scientific inclination and who believe the only valid truth-criterion is what we can see, touch, measure and pragmatically examine. Anything that falls outside the empirically verifiable is nonsense.

We hear the same today from the likes of Professors Richard Dawkins and Brian Cox, for whom science is the only truth and we who believe in things beyond our senses are senseless. The philosophical high point of this way of thinking came with the Vienna Circle at the beginning of the twentieth century. The younger Wittgenstein was an interested on-looker. It was popularised in England by Freddie (AJ) Ayer in

his book "*Language Truth and Logic*". Only statements that could be empirically validated, albeit sometimes in principle rather than in practice, were able to be judged as true. The acid test was whether a statement could be falsified meaningfully. Such a statement as 'God exists' cannot be falsified as the believer will under no circumstances allow that the statement 'God does not exist' can be true. Whatever happens, however dreadful, is the will of God or part of God's hidden purpose. If the falsification is meaningless (as a believer would insist) then the statement itself is just as meaningless.

The wind left the sails of the Vienna Circle when it was realised that the falsification of their own basic principle is not possible either. Their own fundamental proposition was, according to its own rules, strictly meaningless.

Such rigid empiricism rules out the possibility of saying anything about the spiritual, the beautiful; poetry becomes no more than sounds, and life is immeasurably diminished. We are all reduced to being Mr Spock, with no emotion, no soul, just remorseless logic.

And Thomas was for a week their patron. He wants to touch or else he will not be shifted from believing his companions are deluded. He sees and he believes. When he believes, his fear disappears too.

Fear and doubt may be thought of as complimentary negative emotions which oppose faith and belief. Fear is certainly negative and causes paralysis, inaction. Doubt, however, has a more positive aspect. Doubt is not the opposite of belief. The two can, and often do, work together. Doubt is to faith as fear is to courage. The courageous person is not someone who has no fear. It is the one who overcomes their fear to act, to all appearances, as if they have no fear.

So the faithful person is not one who has no doubts but one who lives with doubt, great and small, but who continues to trust despite those doubts. Doubt, questions, uncertainties should stimulate the desire for answers. People with questions know they do not have the answers. Their attitude, if not rejection, is to wait in humble expectation. St Theresa of Calcutta, who lived in the silence of God for most of her active life as a missionary to the poor is the great example of such humble waiting.

Waiting in humble expectation, growing through the questioning that doubts raise can lead us to know the awesome presence of God which is fear of the Lord and the beginning of Wisdom.