

There can be few who do not at times experience the crippling fear that, like a nagging hound of hell, pursues our footsteps. Fear spawns a whole brood of phobias; of water, of high places, closed rooms, darkness, loneliness, even of any change. There are religious fears, including the fear of death. The atomic age has lifted fear of death to morbid proportions, with its threat of the destruction of the world. So too for some, is fear of violence against the elderly and the young.

But we should not seek to eliminate fear from human life. Even if this were possible, it would be highly undesirable; for fear is the alarm system which warns of approaching danger. Without it mankind would not survive. Indeed, rightly used, fear is a powerfully creative force. Every great invention or intellectual advance represents a desire to escape from some dreaded condition. The fear of darkness led to the discovery of gaslight. The fear of pain led to advances of medical science. The fear of ignorance was a reason leading to the great institutions of learning. The fear of war was the cause of the birth of the United Nations. If we lost all capacity to fear we would be deprived of the capacity to grow and invent. In that sense, fear is normal, necessary, and creative. However, abnormal fears are ruinous and psychologically destructive. Sigmund Freud says that a person is properly afraid of snakes in the jungle; but would be neurotically afraid that snakes were under the carpet in their city flat. Normal fear protects us; abnormal fear paralyzes us. Normal fear improves our welfare; abnormal fear poisons our inner lives. The problem is not to be rid of fear, but to harness and master it.

We must face our fears with courage. We must have faith; and love. As St John tells us in his first Letter: (4.18) "In love there can be no fear, but fear is driven out by perfect love: because to fear is to expect punishment". This is not a "namby-pamby" kind of love. Martin Luther King wrote: "The kind of love which led Christ to a cross and kept Paul unembittered amid the angry torrents of persecution is not soft, anaemic, and sentimental. Such love confronts evil without flinching and shows an infinite capacity "to take it". Hate is rooted in fear and the only cure for hate is love. Fear is a major cause of war. Nations have armed themselves to the teeth in the belief that greater armaments will cast out fear. But all that they have done is to produce fear of racial annihilation. Not arms, but love, understanding, and organised goodwill, can cast out fear. Only disarmament based on good faith will make mutual trust a living reality. Will the Tories, the Labour Party, the Liberals, the SNP, ever show good faith and love to one another? Or will they continue to try to tear each other's ideals apart - even when they are for the good of all the people?

Then there are our personal anxieties. Many are afraid of the superiority of others; of failure; and of the scorn or disapproval of those whose opinions we value most. Envy, jealousy, a lack of self-confidence, a feeling of insecurity, or inferiority, are all rooted in fear. The cure for all these annoying fears is a deep and abiding commitment to the way of love. Both St Paul and St John tell us that: "Perfect love casts out fear". Hatred and bitterness can never cure fear. Hatred paralyzes life; love realises it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.

You may think that much of what I have said does not really concern you. But there is one special aspect of fear that applies to more people than many think. It is the insidious fear of superstition that creeps upon us gradually. Often made worse by pretending it is harmless fun. A clinging to superstitious customs is rooted only in fear. How many of you have not used that feverish hunt for a piece of wood to touch? A Church member did it recently even though she could more easily have touched me! Or what about the crossing of fingers? Or even the decorative but spiritually ignored Christian Cross? All of which are used to ward off the evil eye. If they are used as aids to faith, well and good. We know that one ounce of faith has more power than a ton of such baubles. Superstition is based on fear, unchristian fear: on a belief that manual acts and inanimate objects can in themselves affect the progress of luck; good or bad. It leads people to worship graven images. It encourages people to believe in silly predictions based in the stars and signs of the Zodiac.

It was to free the natives from such fears that the earliest missionaries gave their lives in Africa and Asia. To free ignorant people from the power of superstition, such men and women took them the message of faith and love in God as revealed by Jesus Christ. One has only to glimpse the power of superstition in the Borneo jungle to realise what a release from fear Christianity brings. In a land where the cry of a bird can cause a whole village to delay planting crops. Where the falling the wrong way of two sticks can make a tribe uproot their homes and move to another area. Where the croak of a frog can cause a man to believe that the evil eye is on him: so that he gives up all will to live, and dies of hunger. This is the kind of fear that Christianity has tried to remove: with belief in a God who cares and loves, and who casts out fear. Yet we still hear some otherwise sensible people say: "Why not leave the heathen in their happy state; why interfere? Living near me in Borneo in the 1960s a missionary (Ken Nightingale) wrote: "Stay a while in the shadows with these folk. Stay till the laughter has ceased, the food has run out and a sinister 'voice' has sent foodless hunters home in terror. Stay to hear the death wails of pagan mourners, and learn that the heathen do not die laughing".

As I know from my return visits, in spite of over 40% of the population now being Christian, superstition has not been entirely eradicated from the jungles of Borneo. But neither has it been eradicated from the jungles of Sussex. So why not leave the superstitious English heathens in their happy state? Simply, because fear breeds superstition; and superstition breeds fear; in a vicious circle. Please, please, do your part to help eradicate the fear of superstition. You will be helped if you etch this old motto on your heart.

Fear knocked at the door.

Faith answered.

So there was no one there.

For perfect love, and faith, casts out fear - and superstition.