

Holy Fear

By Rev. Nathan Cole

Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. Luke 2:10

When angels appear in the word, most often they begin with a message to not be afraid. This is because we find that most of the people are afraid when they see an angel. Why was it so common to be afraid when having a vision of angels?

This is something that we see both in the Old and New Testaments, that people are afraid when visited by angels, and seem to assume that they are about to die. Perhaps that fear is based on some ancient idea that angels come and warn people who are about to die. We have some indications that this might have been true in certain situations (EU 68; HH 449). However, more directly we see that the fear is based on a perception of the holiness of the Lord and a consequently is holy fear.

Holy fear can be a combination of different responses. Holy fear at its heart is love to the Lord, a love that fears to harm what it loves.

"The fear that goes with love is a fear lest harm is done to the Lord in any way, or to the neighbour in any way, and so to good and truth in any way." (AC 3718)

"be it known that this fear is love, but love such as is the love of little children toward their parents, of parents toward their children, of consorts toward each other; who fear to do anything which displeases, thus which in any way does injury to love." (AC 8925)

Love wants to protect those it loves, and there is a kind of healthy fear for the safety and protection of others. A quality of this fear is also that it guides our own behaviour and helps us guard our actions from harming those we love.

Holy fear also can be tinged with sense of unworthiness compared to the Lord, and an awareness that our lives may currently be at odds with the Lord. That can in turn lead to genuine fear of hell along with the Holy fear. Fear of hell can be helpful even though it is not a loving fear. It still can keep us on the right track because it makes us afraid of doing anything wrong. The fear itself is not really good, but it can be considered a useful intermediary step towards leading a good life.

The fear of hell is also dangerous because it can get us to focus on ourselves and fear for our own happiness rather than being concerned that we do nothing to hurt others. Hell doesn't mind us being afraid of them, because that fear can keep us in a state of panic and inaction.

In contrast, when the Lord sends an angel the first message is to not fear. If we can let go of fear, especially fear centered on our own selfish loves, it becomes much easier to see the truths from the Lord and the best way forward. In contrast the Holy Fear that shows us our own weakness in comparison with the Lord is what allows the Lord to raise us up. It doesn't matter that we are nothing good on our own because the Lord will give us all His goodness.

It is only after we recognize how much we need the Lord that He can revive us with His Love and life.

"Saying unto me, Fear not," signifies resuscitation, and then adoration from the deepest humility. That it is resuscitation to life, is a consequence of what went before (n. 55); and that it is adoration from the deepest humiliation, is evident, for he fell at the Lord's feet. And as a holy fear seized him, the Lord said, on his being resuscitated, "Fear not". (AR 56)

"Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people, ... As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, Who have been since the world began, That we should be saved from our enemies... To grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear," Luke 1:68-74