The fear of the Lord is clean and endures for ever. *Psalm 19:9*

The fear of the Lord, what does that mean to you? Are we here to put the fear of God into people? Are we here to put the fear of God into ourselves?

Fear is something we do not like. It is a negative word. Why would we associate ‘fear’ with God?

But in the Bible fear is not always to be avoided. In the book of Proverbs for example, chapter 9, verse 10, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The fear of God is something different, something positive, something to be sought after.

The Bible is full of surprises, surprises we often miss because we don’t read it often enough or carefully enough. For example, I was at our Deanery Synod meeting last Wednesday. The topic was our environment, something naturally on our minds as we near the global summit of world leaders. So let me ask you a question, in the Bible who is your neighbour?

Who is your neighbour? Any ideas?

Our first answer is that our neighbour is people. But let me point you to the Bible Jesus grew up with, what we call the Old Testament. In Leviticus 19: 18-20. Verse 18 says, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. OK – that’s fine, but then come three examples of who your neighbour is.

Firstly – your animals. You must look after them properly.

Secondly – your fields. You must tend them wisely.

Thirdly – people. You must treat them with respect.

So when God says love your neighbour he is not just talking about human beings. He is also talking about your animals, your cattle, sheep, elephants, giraffes, penguins, fish, birds. The loss of each species is the death of your neighbour. God takes it seriously.

God is equally serious about your fields, how they are ploughed, how they are fertilised, how chemicals are used, how crops are engineered, how hedgerows are maintained, how land is drained. Jeremy Clarkson may not sound like an angel but his series on farming tells us that what we ask of our farmers is unsustainable. The National Farmers Union voted him Farming Champion of the Year. A voice for the land is a voice for our neighbour.

Finally you get to people. The animals and the fields come first. Your neighbour is your animals, your fields, and then people.

The fear of the Lord is beginning of wisdom – because the first step towards life is knowing that God is different to us.

Take our reading from Isaiah. There are three paragraphs, three sections. Take the middle one first – verses 6-9.

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your way my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Remember the story of Adam and Eve, where did they go wrong? Well obviously an apple was involved. But what was the intention? It wasn’t because they were hungry, nowhere does it say that they ate the apple to survive, they had plenty to eat.

No, listen to the words of the serpent, “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.” See that’s where humanity goes wrong, when we think we can be like God. When we think that over there are the animals and the birds and the insects, and the fields and seas and the air. Those are over there, they are things. And we are over here, we’re like God. All those things belong to us and we can do whatever we want with them.

But then we read Leviticus. Look after your neighbour. And your neighbour is first of all your animals and your fields. People are included, but they are not separate and they do not come first.

In other words – you are not like God. You are not God. You are part of creation. God is different. God is not like us, and we are not like God. We are not over here with God, we are over here with the animals and the land, we are part of creation, not separate from it.

My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways. God is different. That’s the fear of the Lord, the beginning of Wisdom. Knowing God is different.

Then we look at the first paragraph in Isaiah, verses 1-5. “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?”

Jane referred to this a couple of weeks ago, the energy we expend seeking happiness in all the wrong places, all the wrong things. We see this all around us, a society never healthier, never richer, never safer, never better educated, yet beset by anxiety and unease. We look for meaning in all the wrong things.

God says – life, the fullness of life, is abundant, it is without money, and without price. Incline your ear to me, listen, so that you may live.

But we don’t listen, so we don’t live. At least we do not live as God offers. We have not heard that our self-sufficiency is a myth. We still think we are over here, godlike and in control. Not over here, part of a complex and incredible world. But also a fragile and broken world.

So what can God do about this? What does he do about it? The third part of Isaiah, verses 10-11. “

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return until they have watered the earth – so shall my word be that goes out of my mouth, it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose.”

Rain cannot fall without watering the earth. God’s Word cannot be given without making God’s will known.

We meet because we have heard this Word. The Word made flesh, that dwelt amongst us. And his Spirit, sent to those who listen. To remind us that we are not like God, God is different from us, that is the fear of the Lord. It is the beginning of Wisdom because when you know God is different, God is not like us, you can begin to understand that God’s will is for us to be like him. And to see his creation as gift and abundance, and to be part of it joyfully, thankfully, reverently and carefully.

God is not like us – but he wills us to be like him. Which is why humanity is given choice. Know that God’s way is different, and choose to follow it.