

## *Where is God... When I Doubt?*

Date: 8 April 2018 Text: John 6: 60 – 69 Rev. Peter Couatts

It is so easy to miss in the gospels the many people who struggled with their beliefs about Jesus. For example, Jesus performed the miracle of feeding the 5,000. That evening he walked on water. Dramatic evidence of how the power of God dwelled in him. The following day the people he had fed chased after him. Jesus told them “the only reason you are here is because I gave you food. What you need is the true spiritual food that I provide.” The crowd didn’t get it. Some asked (basically) “Show us how we can produce bread out of nothing”. Jesus answered, “That’s not the kind of work you are to do. Your work is to believe in the one whom God has sent. I am the bread of life that has come down from heaven.” Now many of those people couldn’t accept that. They said, “Isn’t this Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph? We know his parents! How could he come down from heaven?” Jesus responded with more teaching to further explain what he said. As we read this morning, “When many of his followers heard this they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” Consequently we read, “Because of this many of his followers turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Not everyone would accept what he claimed about himself. Not all believed.

Even after Jesus own resurrection, some still doubted. The apostle Thomas, famously said, “Unless I have the concrete proof that comes from me putting my own fingers in his wounds I will not believe.” Then for me the real kicker was Jesus appearance to the apostles before his ascension, as we read in Matthew. It says, “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.” Even then, even after all that the 11 apostles experienced, some still doubted. And they were there!

Pope Francis told a crowd at a general audience: “Who among us has not experienced insecurity, loss and even doubts on their journey of faith? Everyone! We’ve all experienced this, me too. It is part of the journey of faith, it is part of our lives. This should not surprise us, because we are human beings, marked by fragility and limitations. So do not panic. We all have doubts.” We all have doubts, in part, because of the nature of faith. One of my favourite definitions of faith is “reason gone courageous”. It is taking what Kierkegaard famously called “the leap of faith”. The evidence of the Gospel, our experience in life and our experience of God in life will only take us so far all on its own. Then we have to consider going the further step. To have faith. Faith is also defined as a trust – and sometimes faith asks us to trust in the midst of uncertainty. Which is all fine and good, and all makes reasonable sense, but it does not discount the difficulty that the struggle of doubt can be in our experience. I think the 17th century philosopher and Christian Blaise Pascal put it well when he wrote, “There is too much to deny, and too little to be sure”.

Which all implies that doubt is not an opposite of faith, but perhaps a component of faith.

“Living Faith” is our denomination’s statement of Christian belief. The framers of this statement did us a great service by acknowledging the reality of doubt. We read “we are not always certain that God is with us”. To me, personally, this is a liberating statement. It helps me appreciate that the struggles with doubt that I’ve had are not bad, or wrong, or unfaithful. Rather, it is to be expected. A survey conducted in the US 9 months ago found that 25% of Christians were currently experiencing doubt and 40% of Christians have experienced it but worked through it. We’ll come back to that.

Doubt is the shadow of faith, and doubt comes in many forms. It can be the intellectual struggle with some precept of faith that you find hard to accept. It can be the failure of the body of Christ – the Church – which regularly fails in its attempt to live as Jesus would have us live. It can be the tension and disappointment arising when God did not live up to expectations. This last cause was the one I struggled

with about 12 years ago. And I can tell you from experience: there are few things more awkward than a preacher struggling with doubt! But week after week I was confident that I was keeping it together, keeping my doubts hidden, not letting doubt affect ministry. And I believed that until a retired minister who was a part of our church said one Sunday after worship, “Don’t worry Peter. Every pastor loses their faith at least once during their ministry.” I was shocked and embarrassed (apparently my doubts were showing!). But I was also encouraged. Essentially he said to me: don’t worry, doubt is normal. You can work through it.

An author I’ve read calls this kind of moment “the sacrament of doubt”. A sacrament is a means of grace to connect us with God. It’s counter-intuitive, but doubt can be a means of grace that connects with God—a sacrament. Faith and doubt are intimately linked in our quest for meaning. On the one hand belief can provide a safe harbour in the turmoil of uncertainty. On the flip side doubt can restrain the arrogance of certainty. Doubt can make us more open-minded about God. It can also make us all better theologians, prompting us to explore the cracks in our faith and to search for greater harmony between our beliefs and experience. Christians too quickly define doubt as that slippery slope that can lead, inevitably, to unbelief. But doubt can take us in the polar opposite direction, if we take our doubts seriously, if we doubt our doubts as much as we doubt our faith. Our prayer can like the request made of Jesus, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” Our God is a God of grace, who wants to come to us in our need. Doubt, I think, is one of God’s mechanisms to help us move on to a deeper appreciation and relationship with God. The Presbyterian writer on spirituality, Frederick Buechner, has written, “How could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there was no room for doubt there would be no room for me.” And there must be room for us if there is ever to be hope that faith could ever become a deeper thing.

So how can God convey grace through the sacrament of doubt? If we sense God’s absence we can respond by becoming more attentive for God’s presence: pray, attend worship. These are means of grace. It is common for people to respond to doubt by neglecting their spiritual

practices but this response tends to erode faith more. Maintaining your fellowship with people of faith also helps because they are examples of lived faith. When I was a youth I was greatly influenced by a teen who was a little older than me. He had a freedom to talk about his faith with a confidence that I didn't have. He had an expression of faith that made me want more. And I have always been grateful for the way he illustrated the life of faith, for it helped me see how I could live the life of faith. His name is Bob Smith.

Third, deal with your doubt. Doubts arise from what we think about faith so dealing with doubt takes thinking about them. If you are having questions about your faith, seek answers. Turn to scripture. Read something on the issue. And you can take a fourth step: talk to someone about your doubts. Most doubting Christians don't, to their loss. They don't because they would feel exposed, embarrassed, guilty, or think they will be judged. But if we accept that every Christian has faced doubts then most likely the person you confide in will be quite sympathetic! By talking with another you can discover a different point-of-view, find support, encouragement. Feel free to talk to me—it's part of my role. Finally, let your faith story (your spiritual autobiography) hold you through your time of doubt. Recall the times from your past when you felt confident in faith, when you knew God's presence with certainty. Affirm what you still hold sure in your faith as a balance to what does not feel so sure in the midst of doubts. Encourage yourself, saying to yourself "I have felt more certain in the past, and I can again as I work through this time in my faith."

Doubt is the gymnasium for the soul. Rather than viewing doubt as a threat to our faith we should understand it as the place we exercise and strengthen our faith. Good workouts always leave you a little sore. And doubts have that effect on us. Doubts are the growing pains of faith. They always come unbidden. But we can deal with it in one of two ways: we can use doubt to nourish us or let it become toxic. It really depends on how we look at doubt. If doubt becomes a sacrament to us, then it need not be a place that threatens faith. Rather, it can be that experience that moves us deeper farther further into God. Thanks be to God.