

THEME: COURTING DOUBT – EXPLORING DOUBT AS A WAY OF GROWING IN FAITH

READINGS: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11/ James 1:1-8/ John 20:24-31

SERMON

I think it was last year that I was listening to an award winning Gardener being interviewed on National Radio (around the time of the Ellerslie Flower show). The woman being interviewed knew her stuff and loved her garden. She said her earliest memories of gardening involved skipping Sunday school to view the Botanical garden close to the church and then using the money her mother gave her for the offering plate to purchase plants. That led the interviewer to pursue questions along the line of faith. So what now, has your garden brought you closer to God? She avoided the question. She spoke about something else. The interviewer asked the question again. Has your garden and its beauty brought you closer to God? Unable to avoid the question now, the woman replied, "I don't believe in God anymore! When my daughter-in-law was suffering with Cancer we prayed and prayed and prayed for God to heal her. She died in pain. God failed us. He is not real to us anymore." I totally understand and sympathise with her disappointment.

Life, even with God around, it seems, is a puzzle. Perhaps it is best viewed without God – for it removes any complications of trying to figure it all out. A life without God is one without purpose however. Ultimately everything is meaningless and futile. Even joy is a routine because in the end it does not matter at all. The writer of Ecclesiastes recognizes this and explores life through these lenses – the futility and meaninglessness of it all.

In Ecclesiastes the search for meaning leads the writer to consider many different areas of life on earth. He explores wisdom and toil and also considers political power (4:13-16), riches, large families, and long life (5:7-6:12). In each of these areas he encounters “meaninglessness.” As we read his reflections, we are struck by two inescapable facts of human existence that are the source of his anguish: (1) death and (2) time - the inability to control and know the appropriate time to do anything at all. It must be noted that it was of crucial importance for a wise teacher to know the right time. The Books of Wisdom do not give a list of truths that are always, everywhere appropriate, but a series of principles that are to be applied at the right time. They know the conditions under which they should answer a fool (Prov 26:5) and when they should refrain (Prov 26:4). As a wise man, the author of Ecclesiastes is aware that: “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven” (3:1). He also understands however that he could not share God’s knowledge of time. As a human being, he could never be certain that a given moment was the “right time,” and this lack of knowledge, this lack of certainty, frustrates him to the point that he thinks that life “under the sun” is meaningless. Humans cannot know what will happen to them in this life or the next. Like fish that are entangled in an evil net and like birds caught in a snare, so people are ensnared in an evil time when it (death) suddenly falls on them. And so we know one thing for certain. We know that there is an end to it all (9:5) – and this knowledge frustrates the Preacher so much that he reflects on it a great deal. He concludes that death renders every human “achievement” and status useless. His final words, “Growing old and dying is like watching the storm clouds move in and ruin a sunny day” (12:1-2), like an unmaintained house falling apart (12:3-5). It is like a severed rope, a broken bowl, like a shattered jar (12:6). Life he says is full of trouble and then you die (1:12-12:7). So what’s the point? It’s very depressing isn’t it?

There are momentary lapses in the dire expose` of futility in Ecclesiastes (2:24-26; 3:12-14; 3:22; 5:17-19). In these few verses he says seize the day (*carpe diem*). Eat,

drink and enjoy yourself; Rejoice and do good in life. But the writer, in saying so, has his tongue firmly pressed to the side of his cheek for he believes that any enjoyment that a person is fortunate enough to have is superficial and temporary. In the darkness of a life that has no meaning temporal pleasures only lighten the burden. In his mind the author sees any joy as *a narcotic that numbs the recipient to the true nature of reality* - 5:20 (Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 1998).

All this meaninglessness, this evil, casts doubt on a compassionate and caring God. Ecclesiastes sees nothing in the present or the in near future that gives him any confidence that God will reward the righteous on the one hand and punish the sinner on the other (7:15-18; 9:1-12). He says, “There are righteous people who are treated as if they did wicked deeds, and there are wicked people who are treated as if they did righteous deeds” (8:14).

The Preacher’s God is distant, occasionally indifferent, and sometimes cruel. But God to the Preacher is the generic form *Elohim*. He does not address God in Covenantal terms or by his personal name YHWH the LORD. This leaves a sense of distance between the Covenant God and the writer of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes sounds modern because it captures the despair of a world without God. The difference is the modern world believes that God does not exist; Ecclesiastes on the other hand believes that God exists BUT questions his love and concern (5:1-7). And this is precisely the point of our topic today – that asking faith questions is Ok! This is the great aspect of Jewish OT theology – faith in God is not so defined to rule out questioning God. For example the Lament Psalms (*Psalms 12, 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129*) Why? When? How long? – are the cries of the people seeking to know.

You use Doubt not faith is the pathway to understanding – I'm referring to the essence of Cartesian logic of Rene Descartes`. We doubt so we search for answers. Like Thomas! But we must know Doubt is quite separate to unbelief. Doubt is faith seeking understanding – that is so because doubt rests upon a faith commitment (Leslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 1995). Lord I believe Help my unbelief! (Mark 9:24). Doubt is not skepticism – the decision to doubt everything deliberately; it is not unbelief – the decision NOT to have faith in God (anymore) like the sad story of the Gardener at the start.

In Paul Tillich's Book *Dynamics of Faith* –he examines the conflict between Faith and Doubt. He says the element of uncertainty in faith cannot be avoided, and must be accepted. Tillich says that faith is certain, insofar as it is an experience of the sacred, but that it is uncertain, insofar as it brings finite beings into relation with an infinite reality. Tillich argues that doubt is included in every act of faith. Doubt isn't the opposite of faith. It is an element of faith.

Doubt rests on a faith commitment and is more closely related to Faith than it is to unbelief. Doubt is simply the default mechanism of our human mind and its limits to realise the fullness and certainty of anything beyond ourselves. Our faith system, when it fails us we default to doubt – not unbelief. Doubt and faith co-exist in us like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Faith and Doubt, twins as they were, possessed a person like Didymus/Thomas, himself a twin whose faith – he is still here – is strengthened by Doubt – when his questions are satisfied.

Many people who have held doubts – and who sought to address those doubts – became and have become great Christians – here's one writing about his conversion ...

"You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting

approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England" (C.S. Lewis, Surprised By Joy).

Such is the message of the Fourth Gospel. We can say the Gospel of John is a Gospel of Doubt. The apex verse in John is John 20:31: "These things are written so that we might believe Jesus is the Christ the Son of God".

The word "Believe" on its own appears 90+ times (give or take) in the Gospel of John alone (33 times in all of Matthew, Mark and Luke). The recurring phrase in John is "that ye may believe". The pointed phrase – is usually directed at familiar faces - and it is not the Jews. Jesus is speaking, "And now I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, you might believe" (John 14: 29); "Believe God, believe me" (John 14:1). These sayings of Jesus were not directed at strangers but at friends, his friends. And if we read the Gospel closely we come to realise that it was not written for the unbelieving world but for the Believing community - a Believing community whose faith is but incomplete. A doubting community nevertheless! The lesson of Doubting Thomas cannot be escaped. We believe in our doubt.

I quote C.S. Lewis again ...

"I think the trouble with me is lack of faith. I have no rational ground for going back on the arguments that convinced me of God's existence: but the irrational deadweight of my old skeptical habits, and the spirit of this age, and the cares of the day, steal away all my lively feeling of the truth, and often when I pray I wonder if I am not posting letters to a non-existent address. Mind you I don't think so—the whole of my reasonable mind is convinced: but I often feel so" (C.S. Lewis, Letter to Arthur Greeves, 24 December 1930).

We believe in our unbelief. And who can blame us – God is shrouded in mystery. He cannot be described and if we try to prove him in an apologetic argument or in a scientific experiment it cannot be done. His name is revealed in a cloud to Moses in the Old Testament – and we cannot say He is like this or like that because He is who He is! I AM WHO I AM!

When Jerusalem fell to Titus and his army in AD 70 and the city wall and the temple was being razed to the ground, the Roman soldiers were eager to see what was inside beyond the Holy of Holies. They wanted to see what the Jewish God Jehovah looked like. So they tore through the walls, and to the inner sanctuary, and finally behind the veil – and there in the Holy of Holies was nothing. Beyond the Holy of Holies behind a wall there was nothing. Only bare earth! No earthly image or heavenly cloud – God cannot be contained by images or by our finite human perceptions. He is Who He is! I AM WHO I AM!

The second aspect of the importance of John is found in its context and in relation to the theme for us as a Church at St Georges this month of June. The people of the Gospel are a community. They lived and had faith in Christ – in the same city as many other Christian communities but nevertheless they were separate. It was a community that existed quietly on its own but in isolation to other faith communities – they felt they were different. Not unlike us – at times perhaps we get the sense that we are alone in our faith. Not so – many other Christian communities are meeting all over this city as we are today. In Epsom alone while we are here, the Saints at Ngaire Ave are about to gather. Later in the same building at 2pm this afternoon the Japanese church will gather for their service. The Catholics in Banff Ave and Gilgit Road are also meeting perhaps into their second service of the day; the Presbyterian congregation in Gardner Road, as are the Methodists and the Baptists in Inverary Ave not a mile from here, are gathering to worship God in the name of Jesus Christ. There are also the other Anglicans up the road at St Andrews Road – and those are just the ones listed in the

Phone book for Epsom let alone the Super City of Auckland. Today there will be Christians meeting for worship and Bible Study in a home not far from your own – and throughout this week. They may even meet next door like where I live, perhaps in a different language. Yet at times we seem to be worshipping God in isolation from other believers. Such was John's community, a community in fear of the outside world not least because of persecution and false teachers and heresy. As a church we are not being persecuted but we must guard the truth very closely like John's community. Guard the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Saviour of the World through his life, death and resurrection. This is the meaning of our existence as a community at St Georges and as individuals.

And that is the message of Ecclesiastes - Despite its pessimistic theology a second voice is heard at the end through which we can view the Book. At the end he says to his son - Do not forget God (12:1)! He directs his son to fear God. He calls him to a right relationship with God. He urges him to keep his commandments – and reminds him that all deeds are brought into the light of God in the end. God will bring every deed into judgment. He invites his Son to live in the present in light of the future. He says respect and obey God for that is what life is all about. However, the message of Ecclesiastes is enhanced by the existence of lots and lots of questions – we have called it doubt – and by-passing all the philosophical hypothesis of life itself – we arrive at one certainty that God brings all things to an end UNTO Himself.

Ecclesiastes is therefore right in one way – the world without God is meaningless. Without God, even enjoyment is a routine. The message of the Book is that life remains painful but that the one activity which makes it livable is to surrender one's life, in fear and in obedience to the LORD (YHWH).

AMEN

Becoming a follower of Christ leads to service.