

## Sermon 9 February “Why Did You Doubt?”

As many of you will know, who have heard me talk about my family, I was privileged to grow up in a family of committed Christians. I have never not known God’s love, first spoken about and demonstrated through the love of my parents. I grew up in a thriving community church where I was encouraged to get involved in all sorts of exciting ways from a young age. I went to kids camps and youth camps and Parachute Festival, and growing up, had a confidence in knowing Jesus and knowing about Jesus.

As I grew older and entered my later teen years I have two strong memories that stand out when I think about this question of doubt. Firstly, I was also brought up on a perhaps not particularly healthy diet of stories from missionaries abroad about the global persecuted church. For a time I became a little bit obsessed with the question, was I prepared to die for my faith, or if I was ever tested, would I “fail”? I felt that if push came to shove, I wouldn’t be able to confidently declare that Jesus was Lord of my life, that I would betray God. This caused me a lot of angst.

The second incident happened after I had begun my theological study. I was immersed in new ways of speaking about God, new approaches to reading the Bible, new methods for shedding light on age-old questions of humanity. I remember one evening, again after church, sitting in the car with my then boyfriend, Tom. Crying and crying because I worried that I had trapped God in my textbooks. Was it all just an academic exercise? Is God even real, is it all in my mind, would I ever have a living relationship with Jesus again? Why was God silent when I prayed?

Have you ever asked yourself these questions?

It is fascinating, and comforting though, to know that my questions and aching doubts are echoed in Scripture. Just read how many times the writer of Ecclesiastes declares that everything is meaningless.

### Doubt in Scripture

Lamentations 2:5

The Lord is like an enemy; he has swallowed up Israel.

Psalms 22:1-2

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from my cries of anguish?

My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  
by night, but I find no rest.

Or in the Book of Lamentations, this complaint is pretty standard:

The Lord is like an enemy;

he has swallowed up Israel. (Lam 2:5)

The Psalms aren't all cheery either:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from my cries of anguish?

<sup>2</sup> My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  
by night, but I find no rest.

(Ps 22:1-2)

## Doubt in Scripture

Habakkuk 1:1-2

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?

Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?

Job 3:23-26

Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden,  
whom God has hedged in?

For sighing has become my daily food; my groans  
pour out like water.

What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has  
happened to me.

I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only  
turmoil.

Our reading from Habakkuk also rails against God's absence and inaction

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not listen?

Or cry to you 'Violence!'  
and you will not save?

Job would rather be dead!

Why is life given to a man  
whose way is hidden,  
whom God has hedged in?

<sup>24</sup> For sighing has become my daily food;  
my groans pour out like water.

<sup>25</sup> What I feared has come upon me;  
what I dreaded has happened to me.

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Even in the Gospels people witnessed Jesus' miracles, his resurrection and still doubted.

Matthew's gospel records the great commission in chapter 28 but somehow we don't dwell on the comment immediately preceding it.

## Doubt in the Great Commission

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.*

And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Matthew 28:16-20

<sup>16</sup> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup> *When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.* <sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Jesus doubted, in the anguish of Gethsemene and on the cross, where he echoed Psalm 22, he questioned the path he had to take. I think if we try to explain away these instances then we risk undermining the true depth of mental as well as physical suffering that Jesus underwent for us.

## Henry Drummond

*"Doubt is can't believe; unbelief is won't believe.*

*Doubt is honesty; unbelief is obstinacy.*

*Doubt is looking for light; unbelief is content with darkness."*

Doubt is natural. In fact I would say that faith and doubt go hand in hand Henry Drummond quotes *"Doubt is can't believe; unbelief is won't believe. Doubt is honesty; unbelief is obstinacy. Doubt is looking for light; unbelief is content with darkness.*

## Timothy Keller

"A faith without some doubts is like a human body with no antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask the hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic.

A person's faith can collapse almost overnight if she failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection."

And pastor and theologian, Timothy Keller suggests that

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I now recognise that my doubts about God, coupled with the deconstruction of my childhood faith in my academic study were essential for developing and maturing in my Christian faith.

James Fowler, Professor of Theology and Human Development coined the idea of Stages of Faith. He suggested that this stage of doubting, of becoming aware of other perspectives and internally challenging your own preconceptions is a necessary formational process for faith development.

But that is all very well to say until you’re in the midst of the storm of doubt. It is disorientating, scary, frustrating and exhausting.

Perhaps this morning you are wrestling with your own doubts. Or someone you love has been trying to put into words the pain and fear that they are experiencing which has them doubting the goodness and faithfulness of God. I want to suggest some ways we can live with doubt.

What to do if we have big questions? What to do if we are struggling to see any light? What to do if we aren’t sure about God’s existence, love, purpose?

### Philip Yancey

“For me, doubt works in an inward-curving spiral, much like self-pity. I begin with a complaint against the church, or confusion about some doctrine, and end up in a ‘Slough of Despond.’ I see only the contradictions, the negatives, the darkness. At such times I need a Doubt Companion, a compassionate listener who does not judge but will walk beside me in strength.”

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"When wallowing in doubt, I face a choice. I can either assume a "victimization" attitude about this messed-up world, blaming God for its defects—or somehow, despite my doubts, actively contribute to the solution. I have found that nothing quiets doubts so well as an encounter with transformed lives, and the best way to see transformed lives is to get involved with a ministry that serves the truly needy."

### Ministry of transformation (Mother Teresa)

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## Mother Teresa



"Ten years after her death, Mother Teresa of Calcutta made the news again when a book recording her doubts was published, against her wishes. In it, she spoke of the "dryness," "darkness," "loneliness" and "torture" she had undergone. *"In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss—of God not wanting me—of God not being God—of God not really existing."*

Amazingly, apart from a few brief remissions she lived in this state of darkness for 60 years, the entire time she was serving the poor and dying."

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What to do if friends and people we share the pew with have doubts? Don't judge them, don't dismiss them, don't fear/shun them, invite them to voice their feelings and thoughts, share the table with them, give them space to lament, to wrestle, and be on hand to comfort and listen.

### Thomas: doubter or confessor?



Thomas doubted but his friends, the other disciples kept loving him and proclaiming what they knew to be true and accepting him and his doubts. He became confessing Thomas

## Jacob wrestled with God



Jacob's approach – to keep wrestling. To hold onto God

Our identity in Christ doesn't change because we have questions about God or our situation. The doubts we express are healthy and help us to go deeper. It's better to acknowledge and share our doubts.

## Peter's leap of faith



And so to the question that Jesus asked, that this series has asked us to consider. For so long I found Jesus' question to Peter puzzling: In the face of Peter's drowning he called out "Lord save me!" I've always read it like, if Peter had more faith then he would have been able to keep walking on the water towards Jesus, if only he hadn't doubted. But doubted what? He calls out to Jesus "Lord save me." He's not questioning Jesus' existence, or his capacity to intervene mightily in a life and death situation. So what's going on here?

I wonder whether in this small vignette Jesus actually means, why did you even have to call out to be saved, did you doubt me, did you really think for a moment I'd let you drown? You of little faith in my goodness and friendship and love, not necessarily you of little faith in my sovereignty over the waves and the forces of gravity and physics. Why did you doubt that when it all started going to custard that I wouldn't be there to help you up?