

# 1 : Facing up to our doubts

## Starter

*'The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, but wiser people are full of doubts.'* (James P. Hogan)

Consider the world we live in, at local or global level, and any of your own doubts about what is said or done within it.

Taking one as an example, can solutions be found in individual action as well as at government level?



Duccio di Buoninsegna, *The Calling of the Apostles Peter and Andrew*, c1310

## a) The nature of doubt

(Read 2 Peter 3:3-9, Ephesians 4:11-15, Matthew 17:14-20)

The origin of our doubts can be various, perhaps occasionally questioning God's words, his concern for us as individuals, or his ability to answer prayer in difficult situations. Peter adds another reason, and that is all that the world throws at us, often through the 'scoffers', those who make us think belief in God is ridiculous.

Peter makes it plain that this was always going to happen, and indeed, Jesus had previously hinted that seeds of doubt would be sown, telling the disciples, 'Watch out that no one deceives you...' (Matt 24:4). Peter assures his readers that just as God has intervened in the past, he will do so again and in his own time.

Paul knows well that the journey of faith is not always smooth, and is keen that his readers are well-equipped to deal with

opposition and doubt, reminding them that Jesus Christ laid down the foundations of leadership for the church with apostles, evangelists, prophets, pastors and teachers, ensuring they were strong enough to build up 'the body of Christ' and unite believers in faith, fellowship and strength.

Matthew's story brings us Jesus' frustration with a world that has seen the evidence of who he is but has not embraced him as the Messiah, possibly because of the influence of religious leaders.

Why his disciples could not heal the boy is unclear, but after experiencing firsthand his distressing seizures, they may have found their faith was simply not strong enough.

# Discussion...

Q) Have you any suggestions based on your own experience for where doubts may begin for Christians?

Q) Do we ignore this world's 'scoffers' or try to address the issues they raise?

Q) Thinking of the disciples, to what extent does experience play in building up confidence and lessening uncertainty when asked to pray for the sick?

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## b) A fragile relationship

(Read Exodus 14:10-16, Jeremiah 8:18-22, Mark 4:35-41)

For uncertainty and doubt, we can always look to the Israelites and their relationship with God. Having escaped from exile, followed Moses with God's daily presence as a pillar of cloud and fire, they turn around and see the Egyptians pursuing them turns faith into panic and fear. They blame Moses, and by implication God, for putting them in this situation.

But all shall be well, as God has a plan, and soon Moses will show the Egyptians that there is but one true and powerful God.

Jeremiah has been prophesying, and it has not been easy. He is heartbroken over what is happening to his people, who still expect God to be there when bad things happen despite their worshipping of idols. They can't understand what the problem is. The picture they're given is one of farming, and there have been no harvests this year, no fruitfulness, so they're left with nothing, no hope.

Jeremiah's words to them are harsh, but he is hurting inside, his grief showing in the knowledge that there is a remedy for the people, but they have not chosen it and their sickness remains.



József Molnár Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt 1861

Reading Mark's account of Jesus and the disciples in a boat at night as a violent storm breaks, we may well sympathise with the disciples as waves break over the side of the boat as Jesus lies there asleep. Their understanding is increasing, but their picture of Jesus is not yet complete. Interestingly, miracles of this kind remain a problem for many Christians today.

Mark tells us that this incident provoked a heated discussion which, in retrospect, may have strengthened their faith.

# Discussion...

Q) When situations become desperate, what is your first reaction, to sort it, or pray?

Q) How easy is it in everyday life to get so caught up in our busyness that we lose sight of God's presence along our journey of faith?

Q) How do you view Jesus' calming of the storm?



## c) Fears of people and situations

(Read 1 Sam 17:8-11, Genesis 12:10-20, Matthew 14:25-31)

In many a movie, novel, or perhaps in our own lives, come moments when 'All was going so well until...' and we find such a moment in the story of Saul.

Goliath's challenge was known as 'representative warfare', deciding the fate of a country without a massive loss of life. But for Israel, this would have meant enslavement. Fear paralyzes Saul and his army as there is no one brave or strong enough to stand up against the giant, until a few days later a brave and confident David appears on the scene.

A famine prompted Abram to move his family to Egypt. It was a decision not taken lightly because Abram was worried his wife Sarai might find herself in Pharaoh's harem. Why he should pass her off as his sister has been a cause of contention for many years, as Pharaoh did indeed take her as his wife, whereupon God shows his displeasure and Pharaoh's household are struck down by disease.

Abram finds himself chastised by Pharaoh for his deception and the family move out of Egypt.

Matthew brings us another story of the disciples, a boat, and a lack of confidence. It was dark when they saw Jesus



toon Liske, David and Goliath, 1925

seemingly walking toward them on the water. At Jesus' command, Peter stepped out on the water, but it's unclear how far he got. His faith was enough to begin the journey, but as the wind became stronger doubt got the better of him. Fortunately, Jesus hears Peter's cry and reaches out his hand to catch him before he drowns.

SAMPLE

## Discussion...

Q) What is your experience of the phrase 'All was going well until...?'

Q) There's no hint that Saul's first thought was to turn to God, but the outcome suggests God was very much in the solution to the problem. If God is calling individuals to roles in church or community, are we aware of a time of preparation, of things being put into place?

Q) Abram finds himself in a difficult situation, both with the immediate threat of famine, and concern about his wife. His decision appears to make the situation worse, but does this story speak into dilemmas we all find ourselves in?

SAMPLE

Q) How close to your own experience is that story of Peter, and what can it teach us?

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## Thoughts for prayer...

Through the coming days remember in your prayer those for whom every day begins with doubt and uncertainty about the basics of life - housing, employment, children to feed, bills to pay and so on - giving thanks for organisations offering help where needed.

How can our faith in a God of love help us to help others in our local community?

*Transform our struggles  
into victories  
Transform our doubting  
into certainty  
Transform our stumbles  
into confidence  
Transform our sorrow  
into worshipping  
Gracious God, we pray.  
Amen.*

A closing blessing:

*May the peace of God  
calm our fears  
through storms of night.  
May the love of God  
warm our hearts  
and bring us light.  
May the word of God  
give us strength  
when the body's weak.  
May the grace of God  
flow from us  
to the world we meet.*