

Doubt is a strange thing! The uncertainty and lack of confidence that doubt can bring may cause some to become totally stationary; and others to run like the wind. How each of us experience doubt may be different, but doubt in our own abilities seems surprisingly common.

Yesterday we had a training day hear for Curates – 8 first Deacons in training. They were ordained in July last year and are preparing to become priests this coming summer. They are great mix of people from those in their late 20's to those in their early 60's. They are women and men; from a range of ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds. They come with a variety of skills and competencies; some have run and continue to run companies, classrooms, families and churches. Most completed their theological study while working fulltime and often raising a family as well. They are an impressive bunch of people. And with all their diversity, with all their skills and abilities, even with the courage they have expressed in giving up existing careers to seek ordination they all seem to have one thing in common. I have heard each of them express at different times in the last 8 months and expression of doubt. Did I really hear God call me to this vocation?

The transition to ordained life is a strange one. In some ways the change is not visible, but in other ways it is all consuming. Amidst all the excitement and hope of the new path these people have chosen to follow – each has doubted if they have done the right thing; and this has been expressed in different ways.

I suspect each of us, without trying to hard can think of a time when we achieved something we have worked at for a long time, or something we have desired; only to find that as soon as we have arrived, we doubt that we have made the correct decision. At best it is a safety net which helps us review the decisions we make; at worst it stop us from being the people God created us to be.

Today we have heard three stories which have at the heart of their telling is the experience human doubt. Doubt in human ability and doubt in our human senses.

In the reading from Isaiah we have the most amazing vision – a vision so amazing it is quoted time and again not only in the bible but in liturgy and literature. Here is sitting on the throne of heaven, being proclaimed to all who can see the vision as the 'holy, holy, holy'! And how does the one who has seen this vision initially respond – not with joy or excitement, not even with wonder – but rather with doubt. *And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (v5)*

Who am I, a person who is unclean, who lives with the unclean able to respond to this vision? Now culturally and contextually this could be good manners, but there is more here – and we get this in the explicit response which the angels and then God give. Look – let us transform any doubt you have about your ability as a visionary and as a prophet, we have cleaned your lips, we have prepared you. The

message is so clear that when God asks a second time who can speak – Isaiah says, ‘Send me’.

Isaiah’s vision is quite a response to an experience of doubt – if only we all had heavenly intervention when we feared a message we have to bring at work or in a family situation. Where do we seek comfort at times of doubt?

Paul too is responding to the doubt of the Corinthians. Even in this first generations of Christians there is doubt that the stories about Jesus cannot be true; and that expectations of living in a new paradigm which the apostles are teaching must be false in some way. Paul, in true Paul style, hits this one straight out of the park. Paul had no time for doubt, no patience for those who could not hold the line of belief. I think that is why so much of his writing appears explicit and harsh to us. Paul just wants the community of faith, to get on with being just that – follower of Christ. Doubt was a problem in the early church, and it continues to be a problem today. Doubt in the teachings of Jesus, and doubt in those like Paul who hold the structure of church in a dogmatic way.

We don’t really know why Paul was impatient with those who doubted; after all he did not believe in Jesus either and in fact persecuted others for not doubting. But maybe the strength of his conversion experience made him intolerant in the end of others who could not see the vision he could see.

The main issue of doubt for the Corinthians was the claim that the God of Israel raised Jesus from the dead. This message must have been a tough sell among the nations who had their own ancient gods with spectacular temples and golden statues. Corinth was no exception. Temples to other gods surrounded the centre of the town and towered over the marketplace. Religion was at the heart of everyday life. And yet a church formed around the scandalous claim of the bodily resurrection of a Jewish peasant from a backwater region of the Empire. Maybe the Corinthians found this easier to believe when Paul was with them, but as time went on – this became more and more difficult to hold on to¹.

So in the passage that we hear today, Paul addresses their doubt head on – with facts. The problem is, in conversations I have today, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is still a major issue for many who might otherwise believe the teachings of Jesus, and I am not sure that Paul’s list of proofs necessarily addresses this doubt. Though it does provide a litany of facts which I suspect if read and digested regularly might help!

And then we have our third story of call and faith – though it too stems from an experience of doubt which is challenges and leads the first disciples to find the courage of faith.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3959

The crowds listening to Jesus are so big that, he sits on a boat a little from the shore so that more people can see and hear him. As Jesus comes to the end of his teaching he encourages those on the boats to push out further and cast their nets. Those who have been fishing all night doubt Jesus, in fact more than doubt – they think it is a joke – how – we fished all night and caught nothing! Despite their doubt and uncertainty; or maybe in the hope that they would prove Jesus wrong – they row and out and cast their nets which become so full they are in danger of tearing. The doubt of those with Jesus evaporates and they decide then and there to become his disciples. Sometimes our response to doubt is to find an absolute – and that’s what the disciples found – a solution to their doubt. But Jesus challenges this – yes do follow he says, but you will see much more than this, in fact you will catch me – and this will dispel your doubt forever.

We all live with doubt at different times. Doubt in our ability or choices or even in our faith. What is it that challenges this doubt? What visions, or literature or reassurance do we seek to let go of our doubt?

When we doubt what we know about God, when we doubt what we hear in the bible, when the behaviour of the church causes us to doubt that this could be God’s institution – how do we respond?

There are two gifts or lessons I think we can take from the experiences of today’s passage. The first is that each of these stories, those who initially experienced doubt did not allow that to stop them from following. In some ways they used their doubt to give them strength or courage to do what they were called to do.

The second is the importance of not facing doubt alone, but rather being held by the community. Jesus calls not to a solitary faith, but a faith in community with others who give us courage, who help us name our doubts and explore them, and point us to where we might find courage to put out the nets again, or face those who are questioning us in the market place.

Some of us may come with doubts, others of us may be called to encourage those with doubts to have the courage to go on despite them. Either way we are all called to follow the path God calls us to.

*The path to your door
Is the path within,
Is made by animals,
Is lined by thorns, (of doubt)
Is stained with wine,
Is lit by the lamp of sorrowful dreams,
Is washed with joy,
Is swept by grief,
Is blessed by the lonely traffic of art,
Is known by heart,
Is known by prayer,*

*Is lost and found,
Is always strange,
The path to your door².*

² <https://www.leunig.com.au/works/poems>