

## Doubt, Faith & Assurance.



Have you ever known someone whose Christian faith seemed really strong, who seemed to have all the right answers, attended all the right meetings and spoke with such clarity and conviction about what they believed ~ until the day came when there was a near total collapse and loss of their faith?

There are many reasons why this can happen, but one significant factor is usually that the person concerned didn't pay enough attention to their doubts. They perhaps surrounded themselves with certainties and pious clichés but may have repressed conflict, questioning and any real discussion or critique of what they actually believed.

Belief systems that are overly rigid and lack any sense of doubt, paradox and 'not- knowing', are at risk of collapse when the tests and trials of faith come along, as they inevitably will. It's a bit like buildings constructed in earthquake zones; the ones with rigid foundations often tumble, whilst the ones with flexible/moveable foundations usually remain standing. In order to stand strong, faith must have some 'give' in it, while still building on and trusting in Jesus as our Rock, our firm foundation.

True Christian faith is rooted in paradox (holding together truths that seem to contradict each other but are in fact both/all true) whereas heretical systems of belief tend to reject paradox in favour of a false clarity and precision. True faith can only grow if it contains elements of paradox and creative doubt. Such doubt is not the enemy of faith but an essential element within it.

Faith in God does not bring the false peace of every question answered, every paradox resolved or every detail known.

One reason I am not a Jehovah's Witness is because they appear to have an answer for everything! If you ask them a question that they don't know the answer to, they will go away and consult a central 'hub' which has the answer to every question they have ever been asked anywhere!

But where there is only certainty, without creative doubt, belief systems are vulnerable and can become brittle, intolerant, heretical and even persecutory.

Paul illustrates the lack of total clarity in our present Christian faith when he talks about the polished copper or bronze mirrors of Corinth. Corinth was famous for these mirrors but the problem was they gave a rather confused reflective image when you looked into them! There were no silvered surfaces in those days!



Bronze mirrors.

Paul wrote that for now, in this life, ‘we are looking in a mirror that gives only a dim (blurred) reflection of reality as in a riddle or enigma, but then when perfection comes, we shall see in reality and face to face. Now I know in part (imperfectly) but then I shall know and understand fully and clearly, even in the same manner as I have been fully and clearly known and understood by God’ (1 Cor. 13:12).

We even see the tension between faith and doubt in the utterances of Jesus as he was being crucified. Compare his words, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” with his final words, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” One statement expresses a questioning doubt and despair, the other a committed, purposeful faith.

### **Hebrews chapter 11 ~ the high-water mark of faith?**

Hebrews 11 is a chapter in the Bible which captures well the ambivalence of faith. After a wonderful opening verse which confidently defines our faith as ‘the reality of things hoped for and the proof of things not seen’, the writer then proceeds to give a long list of people who performed heroic acts of faith ~ Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Gideon, Samson, David, Rahab etc.

But maybe the writer puts something of a ‘gloss’ on their exploits, for there were also times in the faith journeys of these people when they got drunk (Noah), lied (Abraham), laughed at God’s promises (Sarah), felt suicidal (Moses), had repeated doubts about what God had said (Gideon), had violent outbursts (Samson), committed adultery (David) and worked as a prostitute (Rahab).

This can be an encouragement to us when we fail or fall.

The chapter also teaches us that faith sometimes involves ‘being called but not knowing where to’ (Abraham & Sarah), ‘seeing’ God who is invisible (Moses) and the writer also wants us to recognise that **none of them** received what had been promised, they only saw the promises of God ‘from a distance’ (11:13 & 39). Only with us, when Jesus returns, will they be made perfect. Their faith, their knowledge, their experience, their exploits, were partial and preparatory.

But what about us as Christians under the New Covenant? Are things any different for us? Well, compared with those people mentioned in Hebrews 11, we have a ‘better hope’ (7:19), a ‘better covenant’ (7:22), a ‘better/superior’ mediator, ‘better promises’ (8:6), a ‘better sacrifice’ (9:23), we have a ‘better resurrection’ to look forward to (11:35) and are on our way to a ‘better country’ (11:16). God had a ‘better plan’ for us (11:40).

Therefore, we can praise God that things are definitely better for us than they were for them! We have a greater revelation of God’s plan and purpose; we have a fuller understanding of God’s word (‘the word of the prophets made more certain’ – 2 Peter 1:19); we have a greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit available to us. Nevertheless, I would suggest that our faith, our knowledge and our experiences, even as Christians under the New Covenant, are still partial and preparatory.

Indeed, by faith, the writer to the Hebrews says that we Christians are still waiting to receive our full salvation: “Christ will appear a second time, not to bear sin, **but to bring salvation** to those who are waiting for him” (9:28).

I think we often ask the wrong questions about the return of Christ. We want to know ‘When?’, ‘Where?’ and ‘How?’ But the most important question is ‘Why?’ Why is Jesus coming back? One reason is to bring salvation to those who are eagerly waiting for him.

We don’t, as yet, have the full salvation package. The New Testament is clear that we have been saved (2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5), we are in the process of being saved (1 Cor. 1:18), and we shall be saved (Rms. 5:9&10 & 13:11).

It seems to me, therefore, that as disciples of Jesus today, we are also called to walk in the way of unceasing questioning on the one hand and affirmative faith on the other. It is precisely because our faith is in a living relationship with Jesus that we may sometimes have doubts. If there was only certainty, with no doubt, there would be no mystery, no ‘not knowing’ and therefore no need for faith.

Some of you, at this point, may be wondering if I am making a bid to take over from Thomas as the patron saint of doubt?! That I am advocating doubt over faith. Not so! But I **am** saying that doubt is an integral part of faith. Unless we acknowledge and evaluate our doubts, our faith may not be as strong as we imagine and could be subject to collapse when the storm breaks.

You may also be saying, “What’s happened to the ‘knowing’, the strong ‘anchor of faith’, the ‘firm foundation’, the ‘blessed assurance’?” Well, I promise to get to those..... but not before we have looked, first of all, at some sources of doubt, then examined how Jesus dealt with the doubts of those around him, and then addressed some of the other things (life events) which can attack our faith.

### **Sources of Doubt:**

- 1. Self-doubt.** This kind of doubt can arise when our own hearts condemn us, when our problems loom large and God seems small, when we know in ourselves that we lack the resources to do what God is asking us to do.

God knows all about self-doubt in His servants! Moses said he was no good, he couldn’t speak; Gideon didn’t think he was in any way a ‘Mighty Warrior’; Jeremiah said he was too young to be of any use; Isaiah thought he was too sinful, and Jonah just wanted to run off in the opposite direction!

- 2. Doubts caused by what others say to us.** Other people can undermine our faith if we allow them to. I remember a long time ago when the Lord spoke to me about this through a verse in Proverbs. It is a verse, personalised, that I often remember:

“It is dangerous to be concerned with what others think of me, but if I trust the Lord, I am safe” (Prov. 29:25 GNB).

It’s not that I don’t welcome feedback from those I know, love and trust, but I’ve had to learn NOT to listen to certain voices and be affected by words which are negative, accusatory and create unreasonable doubt in my mind.

- 3. Doubts caused by God’s enemies.** The words of God’s enemies are designed to undermine our faith and trust in Him. Sennacherib, King of Assyria, is a prime Biblical example. He was sure that because he had been successful in all his other military campaigns and had overcome the gods of those other nations, he could also conquer Israel and, as a result, he went about laying siege to all Israel’s fortified cities.

He tried to undermine King Hezekiah's and the people's trust in the Lord God by asking, "How can your god deliver you from my hand when the gods of all the nations around you haven't been able to protect them from my hand? You will suffer the same fate as they did!"

But the people took courage from Hezekiah's words, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with them. With him is only the arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God to help us fight our battles." (2 Chron. 32:7&8)

The result was that a single angel destroyed the Assyrian army and Sennacherib was murdered by his sons.

**4. Doubts which arise from the Leaders of God's people.** We may expect God's enemies to attempt to undermine our faith but sometimes, surprisingly, it can be the Leaders of God's people. 12 leaders of Israel were sent by Moses to spy out the promised land, Canaan. But only two, Joshua and Caleb, thought they could go in and take possession of it. The other 10 thought it wasn't doable and spread a bad report among the people to undermine confidence (Numbers 13). Sadly, we can't assume that every Christian Leader is a person of active, confident faith, though we do, of course, give thanks for every leader who is.

**5. Doubts which come from Satan himself.** Ultimately, Satan is the one who wants to create doubt in our minds ~ 'Did God really say?' (Gen.3:1). And he will flatly contradict what God has said. God says, 'you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die' but Satan says, 'you will not surely die.' (Gen. 2:17 & 3:4)

If our faith is to be strong then we need to know how to resist the doubts that Satan will try and put in our minds.

This was something that Jesus had to settle right at the beginning of his ministry when, full of the Holy Spirit and led by the Spirit, he went into the desert where he was tempted by the devil for 40 days. The devil sought to undermine Jesus' faith that he really was the Son of God and to try and get him to misuse his power.

I believe that most Christians are unaware of the influence of Satan in their physical wellbeing, their thought processes and their actions. The season of Lent is a good time for us to reflect on this with the Lord.

**Summary:** It is important that we are able to identify the sources of doubt in our lives. Do they originate from self-doubt, from the influence of other people, or from Satan himself? Are they a mixture of all three?

Some years ago, when I was going through a time of doubt, I was sitting alone on a beach trying to work out whether the tide was still going out or whether it was coming in. I wrote this short, simple poem which captured for me something of the faith/doubt dilemma I was experiencing at that time. I called the poem, 'Tidal Perceptions'.



The tide is coming in – or is it?  
How difficult to see or to prove  
Just why, or when, or where, the waters move?

The tide is coming in – or is it still receding?  
Playing tricks on my mind,  
Altering believing.

Yes, it's going out,  
I see more clearly than before –  
The rocky, sandy shore.

I look again –  
Waters' rearranging; the scene changing.  
Ebb and flow, in and out,  
Faith and doubt.

### **Jesus and the Doubts of those around him.**

Jesus' faith was immense because he knew where he had come from (Origin), who he was (Identity), why he was here (Purpose), and where he was going (Destination).

As we've already seen, only at the end, when he was on the cross, was there an acknowledgement of doubt and despair as our sin separated him from his Father.

But those around Jesus generally displayed a 'lack of faith', 'small faith', 'no faith', and very occasionally, 'great faith', sometimes from unexpected people (Mt. 8:10; 15:28).

In the New Testament, the verb 'to doubt' sometimes means 'to be in suspense' ('meteorizo' - Lk. 12:29), 'to be uncertain which way to go' ('distazo' - Mt. 14:31; 28:17), 'to waver' ('diakrino' - James. 1:6), 'to be perplexed at' ('aporeo' - Jn. 13:22; Lk. 24:4).

These kinds of doubts, however, seem to me to be an integral part of all living relationships, especially when we are just beginning to get to know a person.

When I married my wife, I now realise that I didn't know her that well! Certainly not in the way I know her now after 44 years of marriage! Faith and trust in one another develop as the relationship develops and there may be times of doubt and testing along the way.

Difficulties arise only when doubts harden into 'unbelief'. The relationship can then begin to break down because of hardness of heart. Doubts must never be allowed to fester and turn into unbelief. Rather they must be addressed and brought out into the light.

Again, the writer to the Hebrews picks up on this:

"See to it, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" (3:12). And we know that almost all of those who left Egypt, failed to enter the promised land because of their unbelief (3:19).

It's true that Jesus was sometimes frustrated by his disciples' lack of faith and the unbelief of the nation of Israel, and even wondered whether he would find faith on earth when he returned, but nevertheless he persevered with them (and us) and many who initially doubted, came to faith in him.

**Other things, apart from Doubts, which may contribute to a 'Loss of faith'.**

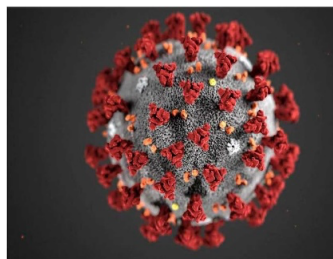
Recently I heard the wife of a retired Pastor talking about her loss of faith.

She and her husband had had three children but, sadly, one of their sons had committed suicide and their daughter had died of cancer in her 50's. These traumatic events had been sufficient to destroy the mother's faith.

A man told me recently that his faith had nearly been destroyed by the leadership of the Church he was part of. Others look at the violence and injustice of what goes on in the world and their faith crumbles.

Just today I was praying for Christians in the north of Cameroon where Boko Haram, the Muslim Islamist group, seem to be able to inflict terror with impunity. In East Africa vast swarms of locusts are currently devastating crops and livelihoods.

And then of course there is the current worldwide threat from the coronavirus.



Illustrative image of the coronavirus

However, all of these things, untimely deaths, hurtful words, violence, swarms of locusts, viruses etc. (and much more) have always existed in our dangerous world.

In 2014/15, according to Public Health England, 28,000 people died from flu in England. In 2009, it is now estimated that 203,000 people died worldwide from swine-flu. In 1918, 50 million died from Spanish flu. Between 1347-52, Black Death killed 100 million across Europe.

All of these things provide tests of our faith in a loving, omnipotent God.

Therefore, although none of us can predict how we may react to adverse traumatic circumstances in our own lives, all of us must have the opportunity to bring our doubts, fears, questions and pain to God and/or to key people around us.



One of the tragedies in much western contemporary Christianity is that we have lost the important Biblical tradition of lament. Even when we study the book of Lamentations (better called 'Tears') we usually only pick out the nice comforting bits ~ the honey in the sandwich.

But unless there is public acknowledgement of 'not knowing', 'not understanding' and of the pain that both we and God experience, then Christians are likely to be driven deeper into despair and guilt over what they are told is, or seems to them to be, their inferior faith.

Rather, like the Psalmists, like Job, like Jeremiah, like Habakkuk, like John the Baptist, like the two disciples on the Emmaus road, like the bodiless souls of the martyrs in heaven (Rev. 6:10), we must be able to cry out: 'How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?' (Ps. 13:1) 'Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?' 'Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?' (Ps. 10:1). Or even to say to God, as Jeremiah did, 'Why do you use me for target practice?' (Lam. chapter 3).

These cries and questions are every bit as authentic as 'Hallelujah', 'Praise the Lord', 'Shalom' and, paradoxically, it is usually those who express their doubts, pain and fears to God who come through to a place of truly worshipping God e.g. Job, David, Jeremiah, Habakkuk etc.

**But now, (at last!), we come through to the place of 'Knowing' and of 'Assurance' in our relationship with God.**

Luke wrote his gospel 'so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught' (1:4), but knowing Scripture is one thing, knowing God is another.

Knowing God does not come to us in a vacuum. We can only know God on His terms and according to who He is. In order to know God, I would like to look at 3 aspects of His nature: His Holiness, His Righteousness/Justice and His Love. God is Holy, God is Righteous/Just and God is Love.

### **1. Holiness:**

To know God as Holy is to know something of His Glory, His Power, His Purity, His Transcendence and His Terror and to ask, 'Who is able to stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?' (1 Sam. 6:20).

When Isaiah had a vision of God's Holiness, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty', the doorposts and thresholds of the temple were not the only thing to shake, Isaiah himself must have been terrified! (Is. 6:1-8)

No wonder that Isaiah's favourite description of God after his vision was that He is the 'Holy God', the 'Holy One of Israel'.

When the Quakers were first formed in England in 1652, they were given the nickname 'Quakers' because they shook under the awesome, holy presence of God. Today, they are more like a 'society of friends.' And even in many of our Churches nowadays, God is worshipped more as God All-matey rather than the Holy God Almighty.

Moses was someone else who knew God in His holiness; 'Who among the gods is like you O, Lord? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?' (Ex.15:11).

But the transcendent holiness of God does not preclude His immanence and intimacy with us. This paradox of transcendence and immanence is at the heart of knowing God and our relationship with Him.

The writer of Deuteronomy puts the 'nearness' of God like this, 'What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?' (Deut. 4:7).

And therefore, intimacy is possible, even with a Holy God, 'The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.' (Ex.33:11)

If we are to know God and have confidence in Him, we will need to know Him in His Holiness and be Holy as He is Holy ~ set apart for His service. Then we can know him intimately.

## **2. Righteousness/Justice:**

The second characteristic of God with which we will become increasingly acquainted as we get to know Him, is His Righteousness/Justice.

Righteousness and Justice go together in the Bible, in fact we read in Ps. 89:14, 'Righteousness ('tsedeq') and justice ('mishpat') are the foundation of your [God's] throne.'

Isaiah 30:18b says, 'For the Lord is a God of justice' and Amos' plea is to let justice/judgement roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.' (Amos 5:24)

But justice is something which has to be done; it doesn't exist in a vacuum; it has to be put into practice. We can only do justice because God is just and one of the ways we get to know Him is through our pursuit of justice. This is the teaching of the whole Bible.

God's righteousness and justice are particularly exercised on behalf of the poor, needy, and the oppressed, 'The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed'. (Ps. 103:6)

We are unlikely to know God closely and have the assurance we seek in our relationship with Him, unless we ourselves are seeking justice on behalf of the exploited and downtrodden.

Here in the UK there is the undermining and underfunding of the criminal justice system where, increasingly, only the rich are likely to get justice [If you doubt this, read "The Secret Barrister" – Picador Press, 2018]. Moreover, there are people buying up houses hand over fist whilst others are homeless (or staying with parents/relatives).

There are people on 'zero hours' contracts who are being exploited; there is online fraud and deception on a massive scale; instances of domestic abuse are on the rise; the young are being exploited by drug barons, use of Foodbanks (even in rural areas) is growing etc. etc.,

There are plenty of opportunities, nationally and globally, for us to exercise righteousness and justice on behalf of those who are vulnerable and in need, even more so in the context of the present pandemic.

Perhaps it's time to focus on the word of the Lord through Jeremiah to **Shallum (also called Jehoahaz)** who was King Josiah's son:

"Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labour.

He says, 'I will build myself a great palace with spacious upper rooms.' So he makes large windows in it, panels it with cedar and decorates it in red.

Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well.

**Is that not what it means to know me?' declares the Lord"** (Jer. 22:13-16).

Self-serving religious observance is not going to help us know God, re-iterates Isaiah:

[God says] “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loosen the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him?” (Is. 58: 6 & 7).

Only **then** will we be able to count on God’s presence, His protection, His provision, His joy and His guidance (Is. 58:8-14).

This ministry to the poor and needy is carried through beautifully into the ministry of Jesus as Jeremiah prophesied (Jer. 23:5&6):

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up from David’s line a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

And so, in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus announces his political, social and spiritual ‘Messianic manifesto’:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4:18 &19)

He then goes on to call and save unrighteous sinners who are transformed into ‘the righteous’. In Christ, we are now the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). On the other hand, the self-righteous don’t see themselves as sinners, so think they have no need of salvation and transformation.

It is clear from Jesus’ end times parable (or is it a straightforward pictorial prophecy?) in Matthew 25:31-46, that the ‘righteous’ are those who have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick and those in prison etc.

To be engaged in this kind of ministry, especially, but not exclusively, to our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world, is to be doing the Father’s will and flows from knowing Jesus. Surprisingly however, Jesus said that to have been performing miracles in his name does not necessarily mean that those individuals knew Jesus or that Jesus knew them (Mt.7:21-23).

### **3. The third aspect of God's nature that I would like to highlight, if we are to have the assurance of knowing Him, is His Love.**

I have deliberately highlighted God's love **after** His Holiness and His Righteousness/Justice simply because that is the Biblical emphasis. There is much more in the Bible about God's Holiness & Righteousness/Justice than there is about His love.

Today, I think we overdose on God's love at the expense of His Holiness and Righteousness/Justice. Nevertheless, 'God is love' so we must pay close attention to this definition of who He is.

God chose the people of Israel not because they were more numerous, more desirable or more worthy than others, but simply as an act of love (Deut.7:7&8); a love which was undeserved and unending (Jer. 31:3) but was often unrequited.

In spite of their frequent disobedience and unfaithfulness, we read that, 'In his love and mercy he [God] redeemed them' (Is. 63:9).

And God promised them, 'I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion' (Hosea 2:19).

Similarly, for us under the New Covenant, 'God demonstrates his own love for us in this: 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8), and 'because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ' (Eph. 2:4).

The apostle John (the 'beloved apostle' - possibly closer to Jesus from a human point of view than the other eleven), is the one who seems to speak most, in his gospel and his epistles, about God's love and its outworking in our lives.

It was because of love that God sent Jesus into the world (Jn. 3:16). There is no greater love than that which leads Jesus to lay down his life for his friends (Jn. 15:13). Love is the test of discipleship (Jn.13:34) and the new commandment (Jn. 15:12,17).

Jesus prays that the love which the Father has for him, will also be in us (Jn.17:26). We love because God first loved us (1 Jn.4:19).

John is also the one who frequently emphasises 'knowing' and 'assurance'. Being the only apostle to reach old age, it seems that the older he got the more assurance he had!

### **What then was the basis of John's certainty?**

1. Obedience to God's word and walking as Jesus did (1 John 2:3-6)
2. Sacrificial love for our brothers and sisters in Christ and those in need (1 Jn. 3:16-18 and 4:10-12)
3. The indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Jn. 4:1-3 & 13)
4. Our faith (1 Jn. 5:4)
5. Avoidance of idolatry (1 Jn. 5:21). Today in Britain, it is said that we live in a 'secular' society, but a 'secular' society is essentially an 'idolatrous' society, so John's last instruction to us in his first epistle, 'to keep ourselves from idols', is particularly relevant.

We see, therefore, that John is consistent with the rest of the Bible in reminding us that knowing God and having assurance requires obedience, sacrificial love and purification from unrighteousness (1 Jn. 1:9).

### **Summary.**

- I started out by suggesting that doubt is an integral part of a living faith and that's it is OK to be honest about our own doubts and to share them with others and with God in prayer.
- In fact, I would go so far as to say that it is through the process of troubled interrogation of God and bringing to Him our doubts and even our complaints, that revelation occurs. This, it seems to me, was true for all the people of real faith throughout the Bible.
- However, it is important that we recognise the source of our doubts i.e. self-doubt, doubt from those around us (enemies or even fellow believers) and/or Satanic doubt. We must also be aware of 'life events' which may cause us to lose faith.
- We can only know God on His terms and according to who He is. His Holiness, His Righteousness/Justice and His love are key aspects of His very nature.
- We will grow in our knowledge of Him as we become involved in practical, sacrificial acts of service, especially to those who are poor, vulnerable and oppressed.

- Jesus wants us to know, both once and for all and in a progressive, on-going way, that the Father is in him and he is in the Father (See Jn.10:38). Knowing God is about having a settled assurance together with a progressive experience of knowing Him.

And finally, in the light of the current worldwide crisis due to the coronavirus, I would like to share 4 things I suspect God may be calling us to: -

### 1. **A new sense of solitude.**

Kenneth Leech writes in *'True God – An exploration in spiritual theology'*, Sheldon Press, 1985: "The experience of solitude can help free us not only from our own falsehoods and facades, but also from our dependence on frameworks, on structures, on places. We come, slowly and often tearfully, to see the transient character of our possessions and securities, and to say, with Luther:

And though they take our life,  
Goods, honour, children, wife,  
Yet is their profit small.  
These things shall vanish all.  
The City of God remaineth.

So, stripped of the alleged but unsure securities, we are able to move towards the one secure foundation, the living God."

### 2. **A new sense of simplicity.**

Through the coronavirus, God may be wanting to move us back to a simpler way of living. This verse comes to mind: "This is all that I have learnt: God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated" (Eccles. 7:29 GNB).

Perhaps there are things that we need to detach from in order to 'put on Christ' and adopt a simpler lifestyle.

### **3. A new sense of struggle.**

A return to solitude and simplicity, however, will inevitably be accompanied by struggle. Kenneth Leech again:

“To rid oneself of complexity is to risk the terror of loneliness, of separation from those people and things which seem to hold us together, to risk disintegration and collapse. To go straight from a world of ceaseless activism into total, uninterrupted solitude can be frightening, and we need to be prepared for panic.

We are being called to die to safe, conventional, protective piety; to dependencies; to spiritual immaturity; to the cult of safety first. Much in our religious life is geared to safety, not to sanctity, for sanctity involves danger, involves launching out into the deep, facing the wilderness and the dark night.”

### **4. A new sense of solidarity.**

On this difficult journey, we will need to come together more. We will need to be held, warmly, firmly, and with the reassurance that we are still whole, still travelling, still safe. The days of a purely private spiritual quest are over.

Some may see this as a contradiction of No. 1 but actually they go together.

The person who finds him/herself alone with God will inevitably find that He then sends them out into the highways and byways, often meeting and mixing with people who have been marginalised by social, cultural and political forces.

Creative questioning, as we discuss these issues, is at the heart of discipleship and is vital to a living, growing, assured faith.

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