

Last week we looked at the importance of faith. Doubt has been around for at least as long as faith and trust. And at least as long as the story of the stilling of the storm in Mark's gospel. At least as long as my professional experience as a priest. That's why I think by the time I'm finished, you will know what I mean when I say that the Lord doesn't put as much stock in our doubts and uncertainties as we sometimes do.

What I love about this story of the stilling of the storm is how lightly God seems to treat our doubts and uncertainties. In other words, doubt can serve to deepen our faith rather than destroy it. It certainly did with the disciples and it certainly has with me.

When I was first a curate, I had several conversations with my Vicar about preaching, his words of encouragement to me often went like this: "Preach your beliefs and not your doubts. Preach your conclusions and not your processes. Make sure you not only raise questions, but faithfully try to answer them." My Vicar often quoted the ultimate authority on preaching John Wesley, who once said to a young curate "Preach faith until you get it." At St Stephen's House my preaching tutor was big on preaching with authority. He once told me, "Leave the red pencil in the study. Don't be marking yourself while you're delivering your sermon. You'll cheat your people if you do that."

Now as I look back on all that advice, it was solid, good advice. But I wonder if it can give the wrong impression. This way of going about things may make clergy appear like we're more certain than we actually are. It could look like we have it all worked out, when in truth, we don't. It could look like we don't have a doubt in the world, when, in truth, we do. I'll tell you straight out that I am one priest who does not have it all worked out and I've been at it for more than 35 years now. In fact, I thought by this time in my life I'd pretty much have it all worked out. It was only recently when I ran across a comment by Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest writer and theologian, that I began to realise what an illusion that is. Shortly before his death, Nouwen said that he was less certain of what he believed at the end of his life than at the beginning. Doubt seems to come with the territory. We might as well accept it and make the most of it. Over my ministry, I've come to the conclusion that doubt serves some very good purposes. That's why I have come to think that God is not nearly as concerned about it as we are.

First of all, doubt keeps faith alive. It keeps us from getting set in our ways, most of all, in our religious ways. Paul Tillich theologian, put it this way: "Faith without doubt is stillborn." He would go so far as to say that if you are not doubting, you're not growing. Looking back on my ministry, I can see how this works. If I had thrown in the towel because of some of the difficulties I had with the Christian faith back when, I would have stopped short of reaching where I am now.

Another way of saying this is to say that doubt not only keeps our faith alive, it makes us go deeper. One of my recurring doubts about the goodness of God has to do with storms and natural disasters. I'm particularly disturbed by the harm they bring to innocent people. We have only to think about the boxing day tsunami, the pandemic, or the cyclones, fires and floods here in Australia. Not only does the rain fall on the just and unjust alike, but so do cyclones, tsunamis and viruses. Over the years I've kept trying to come to terms with this. I didn't give up on God. A few years ago, I got a new glimpse on how this might all work in God's plan. I was reading a book and the author said that we have to realise that nature is dynamic and is also free, just as human beings are free. Freedom is so important to God that it's possible for things like earthquakes and cyclones to happen. Without freedom the world doesn't make any sense at all. It all began to fall in place for me. Not completely, but a little. I'm still trying to work out in my mind how things like birth defects are a part of God's good creation. The point is this: My doubts led me to a deeper understanding than I would have ever had, had I stopped somewhere along the way.

There is one more way I can put this. Doubts keep us humble. I sometimes marvel at how some people, think they have it all worked out. They have the right answer and they know for sure that they have the right answer. They have no doubts about it whatsoever, whatever it is. At times I almost envy them. Then I realise that along with all that certainty seems to come a great deal of arrogance and intolerance. I wouldn't trade my doubts and uncertainty for that kind of certainty.

So doubts serve another good purpose. They keep us humble. Too much certainty seems to lead to misunderstanding and even hostility and hate. I am also acutely conscious that there is a rising tide of people in public life, academia and the media in particular who under various motivations are using the overall weakness of the moral authority of the Church tarnished by the revelations of child abuse, to attack not only the flawed institution but also the Christian faith, the message of Jesus and the contribution of Judaeo Christian civilisation to the world. Therefore it is more important than ever that we face the current age with honesty, confidence and humility as in the way of Jesus.

The story of Jesus stilling the storm is an interesting story. It's particularly interesting when looked at from the perspective of the relationship of doubt and faith. It is evening. Jesus and his disciples evidently are in a boat near the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus says to them, " 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was" (Mark 4:35-36 NRSV). For some reason, we are told that there were other boats around with them. This may be Mark's way of under-scoring that what is about to happen was in public view, out there for all the world to see and witness. A great storm rises up, which it can in that area without much notice, and Mark tells us that the waves beat upon the sides of the boat swamping it. All the while, Jesus was quietly asleep on a cushion on the dry end of the boat. The disciples are upset that Jesus doesn't seem to care. How can he be asleep on a cushion in the boat while they're being tossed to and fro? They raised the same question faithful people have asked over the ages: "God, don't you care what's happening to us?" The disciples were so concerned that they woke Jesus up from his sleep and said to him, "Teacher (that is, rabbi) do you not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38b NRSV). Interestingly, Jesus does not address their question in words. He chooses to ignore them. He has more important things at the moment to do than to deal with their fears. Instead, he rebukes the wind and calms the sea. "Peace! Be still!" (Mark 4:39 NRSV). Mark says, "The wind ceased, and there was a dead calm" (Mark 4:39 NRSV). Even Jesus' rebuke of the disciples, if you can call it that, is rather gentle in my estimation. It's more of a wonder and a puzzlement than anything else. With all that they have seen and heard in their time with Jesus it is understandable why he asks them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40 NRSV).

Notice Jesus does not say, "Why do you not believe? Or, why do you doubt?" But he asks, "Why are you afraid?" As I read this story, Jesus is telling us that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear. Fear is what eats away at our faith, not doubt. Doubts lead us to deeper faith. Fear is the real enemy of faith. Fear makes us throw in the towel. Doubt keeps our faith alive, pushes us to delve deeper, and keeps us humble.

It was indeed a humbling experience that night for the disciples. The result of this experience for the disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee was that they found it all not only puzzling but also humbling. "And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?' (Mark 4:41 NRSV). Jesus' questioning of their fear left them questioning who he was. He brought them down to earth, even though they were out in the middle of the sea, terrified for their very lives. If I've learned anything about the life of faith it's this: We can't be on a high all the time. Thank God for the good times and the mountaintop experiences! They are to be cherished but there are dry spots. There is such a thing as the dark valley of the shadow of doubt. At these times we need to rely on God's grace to see us through. Even the giants of the faith such as CS Lewis, Henri Nouwen and Martin Luther have gone through this.

One more thing: Let us not misdiagnose our doubts. That is the main way we take them too seriously. Often it's simply pain, tiredness, or distress talking. Take away the pain, take away the tiredness, take away the stress, and doubts fly out the window. One of my favourite lines from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is when Scrooge is trying to decide if the Ghost from Christmas Past is real or simply "a piece of undigested beef." Are our doubts real or not?

Doubt has been around a long time — at least as long as faith. There are all kinds of doubt: real ones and imaginary ones. There are inner conversations we have with ourselves when we wonder if our prayers are working. There are moral doubts when we wonder whether we're as good as we should be. With Saint Paul we say, "The good that I would do, I do not, and the evil that I would not do, I would do." (Romans 7:19) Sometimes we may even be tempted to solve things the Woody Allen way. Perhaps God is either incompetent, senile, or on a prolonged vacation. Or worse yet, perhaps he has not left anybody in charge. Oops!

Then it is that these words of Paul Tillich, come rushing into my mind: "There will be no period in your life, so long as it remains creative and has healing power, in which demons will not split your souls and produce doubts about your faith, your vocation, your whole being. If they fail to succeed, they may accomplish something else - self-assurance and pride with respect to your power to heal and cast out demons."(1) And we all know what the Bible says about pride. It's what goes before a fall. So what good is doubt? It keeps faith alive. It makes faith deeper. It keeps us humble. "So doubt bravely and even more bravely have faith!"

Always be sure to ask the right question, the one Jesus asked his disciples that evening in the boat on the Sea of Galilee: "Why are you afraid?" That's the real way to deal with our doubts. Work out where they're coming from. After all, these disciples were also highly experienced fishermen who at this moment for some reason were scared out of their wits by a storm that they should have been quite accustomed. Why? Only they would know for sure but for us it's simple. When we let God help us get rid of our fears, our doubts will take care of themselves. Amen.

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1) Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* London: SCM Press, 2002, p.65.