

# 2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

## Doubting faith

Presented by Margaret Hall

### Introduction

There's an episode of the nineties' television sitcom *Seinfeld* where George is complaining that nothing good ever happens to him. He says, "God wouldn't let it happen."

His friend Jerry says, "I thought you didn't believe in God."

"I do for the bad things," says George.

If we're honest we can all relate to that. When things are going well, we don't necessarily attribute that to God. We might even take credit ourselves for the fact they're going well. We might think it's only right they should go well - it's what we deserve.

But when things are going badly we can be quick to think we don't deserve it, and easily tempted to doubt God's love and power - to think that surely he'd put things right if he really cared. So our faith in God becomes a doubting faith, and the joy the Bible speaks of gets eaten away. We understand the man with the son who was very ill, who cried out to Jesus, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!"

### I

Over 70% of Australians say they believe God exists. But although we believe he's there, we can still doubt whether he cares, or more specifically, whether he cares what's happening to us.

The Bible relates how doubts about God were planted long ago in the minds of our first ancestors. The evil one suggested God had lied when he'd said they'd die if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "You won't die," said Satan. "It's just that God doesn't want you to know everything he knows." They chose to believe Satan and the rest, as they say, is history. Their disposition to doubt God became part-and-parcel of human nature.

Those of us who believe God's restored our relationship with him through Christ can still be tempted to doubt his power to be at work in our lives. The Holy Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts and minds to remind us, but our human nature is firmly in place as well, and doubt creeps in to destroy our new-found trust.

The truth is that contrary to Satan's insinuation, we can't know all God knows and there are many things we can't understand. But our inability to understand doesn't make God untrustworthy. If God's not doing what we want, that doesn't prove he doesn't care, just as our inability to see God doesn't prove that he's not there.

We once lived on a ridge overlooking the eastern border of Rwanda. About half a dozen times a year the conditions were just right for seeing where we normally couldn't see - right across Rwanda to a group of volcanoes on its western border. When the air was clear after rain and the sun lit up the western sky, there

they stood like sentinels - 150 kilometres away. The fact that for most of the time we couldn't see them didn't mean they weren't there.

The fact that we can't see God's power at work doesn't mean he's not at work. God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts and his ways past finding out. We might ask, "Why is this happening? Why doesn't God fix this problem? Why doesn't he meet that need?", but it's simply not in our power to know.

And that is where faith comes in. God calls on us to trust him that he is in charge and that he's working everything together for the good of those who love him.

A difficult time in our lives was when our children were hundreds of miles away from us in boarding school. We hated them being away, and found it very hard to trust that God could use that circumstance for his glory. Years later after we returned to Australia our son was asked to share with people at church how he'd become a Christian. He said that although he'd always known what Christians believe, it wasn't until he went to boarding school that he'd learned to rely on God for himself, and his parents' faith became his own faith. Being a teenage boy, he'd never shared that with us. But we were certainly happy to hear that God had used, for his glory and our son's good, a chapter in our lives that had been painful.

## II

On the one hand doubting God comes naturally because of the disposition to it which all humankind has inherited. On the other hand doubting God is an *unnatural* thing to do, because a trusting relationship with God is what we were originally made to enjoy. As Augustine of Hippo said, "O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

The prophet Amos rebuked God's ancient people for trusting in their own strength rather than in God's. He asked, "Do horses run on rocks?" Of course they don't. No horse would risk breaking a leg by running on rocks. Instinctively they'd shy away from venturing on to rocks at all. Amos asked again, "Do people plough the sea with oxen?" and of course the answer is no.

Amos' point is that when you think about God - who he is and what's he's done - it's as *unnatural* and *unthinkable* *not* to trust him, as it would be for a horse to run on rocks or a farmer to try to plough the sea with oxen. Throughout human history the invisible God has made himself known. He demonstrated his power and mercy when he delivered Abraham's descendants from slavery. Through the centuries that followed he spoke through his servants the prophets. Finally, to draw us back to himself, he appeared in the person of Jesus, full of grace and truth and power. He died in our place, then rose from the dead. Why should we not trust him?

People down the ages have struggled to keep trusting God. Abraham is considered the father of all who believe, but he went through times of doubt - doubting that God could protect him - doubting God's promise that he'd have many descendants. And with good reason. In his nineties he and his wife had no children and she was well past child-bearing age. Doubting God's ability to keep his promise, he followed his wife's suggestion that he solve the problem by having a child with her servant-girl, with unhappy consequences for all of them.

Much later his descendants were as numerous as the stars in the sky, to use the picturesque phrase of God's promise. But even though they'd seen what God did to deliver them from bondage in Egypt, they immediately fell back into doubting his good intentions. They doubted his power to keep them alive in the desert.

When he provided what they needed to survive, they doubted they'd ever gain a foothold in the land God had promised Abraham.

Much later on when their descendants were well-settled in that land, they continued to see-saw between trust and doubt, as we know from the songs they wrote. For example, the anguished question in Psalm 10:

*O Lord, why do you stand far off?  
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*

Then the songwriter answered his own question:

*But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief,  
That you may take it into your hands.  
O Lord, you will hear the desire of the humble.  
You will strengthen their hearts and incline your ear.*

We're hardly in a position to judge them for being so double-minded. We have all the evidence of what God has done for the world through Christ, but we can still doubt that he cares.

### III

The man most famous for honestly expressing his doubts was someone who spent three years in the company of Jesus. With his own eyes Thomas had seen Jesus miraculously healing the sick, even raising the dead to life. With his own ears he'd heard Jesus say he *would* rise from the dead. But when the other disciples told him they'd seen Jesus alive, Thomas refused to believe them, declaring that unless he actually saw the nail marks in Jesus' hands, and put his finger in them, unless he put his hand into the gaping hole in Jesus' side, he would not believe it. For a week there was a gulf between Thomas and the rest, until once again Jesus came through locked doors and stood among the disciples. This time Thomas was there. Jesus invited him to put his finger into the nail marks, to put his hand into his side. He said to Thomas, "Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas was Jewish-born-and-bred. All his life he'd believed in one God. But his immediate response to Jesus was to call *him* Lord and God. It was the only right response to make, as he faced the resurrected Jesus, and knew Jesus' claims must be true - he was the Christ, uniquely related to God the Father and equal with him.

It doesn't seem quite fair that just because of that one miserable week in Thomas' life, he's been known ever since as 'doubting Thomas'. In fact, when the women who'd gone early to the tomb told the other disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead, all of them had precisely the same difficulty. As Luke's account tells us, "they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense."

It wasn't that Thomas had stopped believing in Jesus. His crisis of faith was different from Judas Iscariot's. All the signs are that Judas had given up on Jesus. There's no sign Thomas had done that. He simply couldn't get his head around the idea of Jesus resurrected from the dead, the incontrovertible evidence that was as to who Jesus is, and what it means for the world.

The good thing about Thomas' honest expression of his doubts is that he provides great encouragement for everyone who struggles with doubt. Surely that's all of us at one time or another, since understanding who God is, what he's done and is doing, is a process that will never be complete in this life.

But in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Jesus knows all about our struggles". Just as he graciously met Thomas' need for evidence, so he graciously deals with us, meeting with us in his word, interceding for us

from where he sits at God's right hand, working in us through his parting gift to the world, the Holy Spirit. Even as Jesus responded to Thomas, he was thinking of all those who down through the centuries would believe in him, including us. He said to Thomas, "You've believed because you've seen me. Blessed are those who haven't seen and yet have believed."

## **Conclusion**

Like the ancient songwriter who asked why God was hiding himself, we have our times of doubt when we struggle to accept the truth of God's word - when we struggle to trust that he cares. But like the songwriter, our very despair can cause us to turn to God. Our questions can themselves become stepping-stones to a firmer faith as we open ourselves to the answers he's provided through Christ. In the words of a more modern song,

*I will trust you in the darkness;  
I will serve you in my pain.  
I will worship in the wilderness,  
And will follow to the end;  
For you are the suffering shepherd,  
And you know your sheep by name,  
So I will trust you in the darkness once again.*

*I'll believe your word of comfort  
When the light of life grows dim.  
I will heed your voice at midnight  
When the tempests rage within.  
I will cling to Christ my Saviour  
Who has borne my sorrow's sting,  
And I will trust you in the darkness once again.*