

[00:10](#)

Hello and welcome to this episode of the St. Andrews Enfield podcast with me, Steve Griffiths. I've been thinking lately about doubt and certainty in the Christian faith and how we cope during times of doubt and also what certainty looks like with God. Because it seems to me that so much of the Christian life is spent, um, navigating the space between doubt and certainty. Um, I've never completely doubted God and I've never been completely certain, uh, my own spirituality seems to sit somewhere in the middle of these two extremes and I tend to move closer towards one end of the spectrum, and then the other, depending on the circumstances of life. And when it comes to the Christian faith, we would all like certainties, wouldn't we? Uh, that's especially true when we're going through difficult times in life; uh, when we're having a relationship that may be failing or when we are facing ill health or when we lose someone we love or our job becomes uncertain.

[01:15](#)

Um, certainty in faith would be wonderful. And if you're anything like me, then you might look around you in church, we look around at the other people who go to our church, and we might feel inwardly very jealous or a little bit inadequate. We might be thinking, "I bet I'm just about the only one here today whose faith isn't sorted, uh, the only one who is riven with doubts, the only one who feels despairing." Uh, we might look around us and think that everyone else is sorted except for ourselves. And I have to tell you, it's no different for me as a vicar. Believe me, I look around me at other Christians and I think to myself, "if only I could be a Christian like that, uh, if only I could have as much faith or wisdom or gentleness or spirit as that person." The truth is that we are all in the same boat, really.

[02:09](#)

I doubt there's anyone on earth who thinks that they're completely sorted in the faith. So do I have an answer to this problem today? No, I don't. But what I can say is that this struggle, this lack of certainty is the common experience of every Saint throughout history. It's the common experience of every major character in scripture and even our Lord Jesus Christ himself on the cross experienced this when he said, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Hard as it may be for us to comprehend, the place of struggle is the normative Christian experience. And what we must try to do is somehow find our peace in that place rather than constantly battling to escape it. Now to think about that in this podcast, I want to reflect on the passage in Exodus chapter 33 verses 12 through to the end. It's a really fascinating story from the life of Moses. So let's delve into that passage and let's see what it has to tell us about how we can cling onto God in the difficult times.

[03:36](#)

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[03:37](#)

this story, Moses is at the beginning of his ministry. He'd received the call of God on his life to go to Egypt and set the people free. But he was still absolutely riven with doubt and he was really struggling with his calling. In verse 12, it says this, uh, "Moses said to the Lord, 'See, you said to me, bring up this people, but you've not let me know whom you will send with me'". Moses was in a place that many of us find ourselves in. He was facing a future that looked incredibly

difficult and he didn't feel like he had enough facts to face that future with confidence. Moses was frightened for the future and he was asking God to fill in the gaps for him so that he could face that future, uh, with less fear and with more confidence. And then Moses embarks on the same sort of bargaining that we all do at one time or another.

[04:39](#)

In verse 13, he says, "Now, if I have found favor in your sight so that I may know you well..." I don't know about you, but there have been times in my life, of real darkness in my life, when I have bargained with God in this way. "Lord, if you heal this person I love, I promise I'll be a better Christian." "Lord, if you get me this job, I promise you, then I will pray for an hour every day". "Lord, if you promise that no one will find out what I've done, I promise that I'll be faithful to every day until I die". A bargaining with God when we are facing difficulties in life is perfectly natural. It's what we do and sometimes we might even go a step further and sort of try to spiritually blackmail God by calling his character into question. "Ah God, I thought you were a healer.

[05:30](#)

How can you possibly let that person die?" "Oh God, I thought you loved everyone. How can you let my relative suffer so much?" Calling God's character into question in a desperate attempt to get him to do what you want him to do. Well, we're not alone when we do this because Moses did exactly the same thing. Verse 13 again, he says, "Consider too that this nation is yours." Here he is questioning God and trying to sort of shame him into seeing things Moses' way. So bargaining with God in times of difficulty, questioning God's character in times of difficulty. Perhaps we feel guilty when we behave like that, but you know, I'm not sure that we really need to feel guilty. It's a perfectly natural way to behave. And if even Moses did that, then perhaps it's understandable that we, uh, as weak as we are, we'll fall into the same pattern of behavior.

[06:32](#)

And what is God's response when Moses behaves like that? Does he get angry? Does he tell Moses to grow up? Does he accuse Moses of being weak in faith or too childish? Now he doesn't. God meets that type of questioning with compassion and kindness. In verse 14, it says this, "God said, 'My presence will go with you and I will give you rest'". Moses' words of fear and doubt and vulnerability are met by God's words of kindness and compassion and love. And there's a deep intimacy in this from God because in verse 17, he says, "I know you by name." Now, names are important things. My name is Steve. If you call me Stephen, uh, I immediately think that I'm in trouble. Our daughter is called Rebekah, but me and Jo, my wife are the only people that call her that; we are her parents. But all her other friends know her as Bex.

[07:43](#)

But I couldn't even begin to think about calling her Bex. To me, she will always be Rebekah. Names are important. They make a statement of who we are and they define our relationships. So when God says to Moses, "I know you by name", he's making a profoundly deep statement about knowing Moses every need, every fear, every doubt, every vulnerability. And he's also making a statement about the relationship that he has with Moses. He knows Moses, he knows him intimately. And despite the circumstances of Moses life, Moses can

rest easy in that. And the same is true for us. Of course, when we struggle, when we face dark times, we come to God and we want to know answers. We want certainties, but that is not the first thing that God offers to us. Instead, he offers us something far more profound, something far deeper, something much more long lasting. As with Moses, he says to us, "My presence will go with you and I will give you rest. I know you by name". It may not feel like it right now, but God is with you. God promises you rest and God knows your deepest need and he's with you all the way. The experience of Moses is the same experience open to us.

[09:36](#)

So that's all very well. But it may sound a little trite, I guess. I'm sure that many of you listening to this podcast are, um, going through difficult times. I'm sure that some of you are inhabiting dark places and it may seem a little bit shallow of me just to say, "Don't worry God's with you. He'll give you rest. He understand." Uh, quite rightly, you would get pretty frustrated at me if that was all I had to offer. You might know it's true, but you want more. And why not? Moses wanted more as well. He wasn't quite satisfied with God's answer here. So in verse 18, he pushes God further and he says, "Show me your glory, I pray". Now we can relate to Moses even more, can't we? I've done it. Perhaps you've done it too: "God, if you won't change my situation just yet, just give me a sign that you're there.

[10:30](#)

Anything will do. Send an angel to visit me or a purple cloud across the sky or put a rainbow above my house. Something. Anything just a sign so that I know I'm not going mad down here". Have you ever done that? I know I have many, many times. Well, isn't that what Moses is doing here in verse 18? He says, "Show me your glory, I pray". He wants a sign. He wants something tangible to prove God's promises are true. Surely he thinks that's not too much to ask, but God's response is even more enigmatic. In verse 20 God says, "But you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live". What is that? God's great get-out clause? He makes promises to us that he'll be with us, but he won't let us actually see him or physically experience him. How frustrating is that?

[11:25](#)

How annoying is that? So we just have to go on trusting God's word, but sometimes we're less left wondering if we are making it all up as if this Christianity business is just a pie in the sky, wishful thinking, a story to get us through the tough times in life. Well, if we were to leave the story here, that may well be the case. But that actually isn't the end of the story because whilst God doesn't make it implicit here, there's something that he says which gives us a chink of light in our darkness. Okay, it doesn't wipe our problems out. It doesn't take all our problems away, but maybe it gives us just enough to hold on to for a little longer and gives us just enough to keep trusting in God that the future really does contain hope. So what am I talking about?

[12:19](#)

Well, there's one phrase used twice in verse 22 that leads us to a better place of understanding. God says this: "While my glory passes by, I will put you in the cleft of the rock and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by". Now twice in this verse, God uses the idea of him passing by Moses and then even

more clearly in verse 26 he says, "Then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back". Now it seems to me that God is teaching us a really important spiritual principle here. It's a really important spiritual principle for when we're struggling in life and it's this: that more often than not, we can't see God when he's here, but we will recognize him when he has passed by. We cannot see the face of God, but we can see his back and it seems to me that the truth is when we are in a dark time in our lives, we may not be able to see God, but we can only ever know him by his past deeds, by his past acts.

[13:38](#)

We can know God's faithfulness to us in the present day as we learn to look back on our lives and think through how he has always been faithful to us in the past. We can be sure that God will not leave us alone. Now as we learn to look back on our lives and think through how he has never deserted us before, when we were in times of difficulty, we may not be able to see or feel God today, but we remember his love and his faithfulness from when he passed by before. We may not be able to grasp and experience God's presence with us today, but we remember his compassion and his kindness as we see his back in our past. Now for me, that is an intensely important spiritual principle, that when we are in times of darkness, struggling with faith or health or grief or loss or fear, we may want to have God's glory revealed to us in the here and now and we may become frustrated when glory is not revealed.

[14:53](#)

And if that's the case with you today, I say to you, look back, consider your life. Consider your past and realize afresh, that your personal history is one in which God has never left you alone. He has never deserted you. He has never been unfaithful to you. And if that is true of your past, it can give you hope in your present troubles because God never changes. As he was to you then, so shall he be to you now and in the future. God says to each of us, "My presence will go with you and I will give you rest. I know you by name." And whilst your present experience may not mean that you can feel that, your history is proof of the fact that God's promise is true. And so you can trust his word for today and tomorrow during your present struggles. God will put you in a cleft in the rock and will cover you with his hand

[16:06](#)

and his glory is closer than you may think, even if you can't hear it or see it or feel it. And this is not wishful thinking. This is not pie in the sky. This is truth that has been testified to throughout your history, throughout all history. And someday soon when you have passed through your current struggles, you will be able to testify again with real joy in your heart about the God who has passed by this day and in a way that you may not currently be able to comprehend this God will have given you the strength to endure. God says, "My presence will go with you and I will give you rest." Even if you can't feel that today, it is truth and it will be enough for you today and tomorrow and every day until the storm passes.

[17:18](#)

So I hope that you have found this a useful podcast. As always, please do let me know your thoughts or any comments. Drop me an email uh, steve.griffiths@london.anglican.org. And um, whenever you're going through

today, whatever struggles you may be facing, my prayer is that you will have enough certainty in the promises of God to cling on and to move forward. God is with you today. He will never abandon you. So rest in God's presence today, even if you can only sense that to a small degree. So may God's peace be with you. Bye.