

Build on the Rock

Session 1: CD Track [2]

BELIEVING AND DOUBTING

Hello, I'm Simon Stanley and I'll be guiding you through this course as our contributors Bishop Richard Chartres, the Reverend Joel Edwards and Dr Paula Gooder look at the whole issue of faith, doubt and the Christian claims for Jesus.

[3] *So, let's start by finding out whether our contributors have themselves always believed in God. First Joel Edwards, followed by Paula and then Bishop Richard.*

JE: I've always had a consciousness of God, and my very earliest memories of God would have been in my mother's arms in a church in Kingston, Jamaica, hearing very powerful and animated preaching – in fact being woken up by it.

PG: Yes, I have, but you go through peaks and troughs of belief, so there are times when your sense of faithfulness and belief are very, very strong and very, very deep. And there are times when they are shallower and less significant.

RC: From the very earliest period I had a real sense of simply a reality beyond, being a very small part of a vast and complex organism. I think, more directly, my brother was very severely mentally handicapped – and so the question has presented itself again and again: what is life about, if my brother is excluded from all the glittering prizes which for many people make life worth living? Career, family, marriage – and yet his life was not a tragedy. And by the time he died in his early twenties

he, in a sense, had led a very fulfilled life – full of joy. He drew affection out of people. He was much beloved.

[4] *So yes they have, but not always without hitches and caveats. And there are, of course, many and diverse opponents of faith. So what is it that keeps so many of us in the Church despite the challenges? I asked Paula.*

PG: Let me be entirely honest. I struggle sometimes to stay within the Church. I have no trouble at all staying a Christian. God's got this such firm grip on me – the love of Christ is so very powerful, that I have no option but to stay Christian. The Church, however, is more complicated. And there have been times when I have wondered whether I wanted to stay within the Church. But the truth is, that it is very, very difficult to be truly Christian on your own. You need to be a Christian in the Body of Christ. And being in the Body of Christ requires being in the Church and – frustrating as it can be, and difficult as it can be, actually it is our vocation to be pulled back into the heart of the Church. Even in those times when we would very seriously like to walk away. If I believe that the Church needs to be a certain manifestation of God's love in the world, then why would they listen to me, if I was no longer a member of the Church? I think we can all of us do much more value within the Church from inside, than from outside.

[5] *Well that's pretty straight talking. So what about Joel?*

JE: This community of imperfect believers, who are held together by these common, enduring belief systems and convictions, which makes us the same but very different – that body is

very powerful. And that body also is at her best when she is transmitting and translating that historic faith in acts of kindness and in transformative behaviour. There isn't another community like it. And so I am in the Church because I am still confident that God is still in it, and believes in it himself. And that's very exciting.

[6] *The Bishop finds the Church in his own neck of the woods, London, to be lively, but thinks the picture is varied elsewhere.*

RC: My experience here is of a Church that is massively credible locally, even though it's massively incredible nationally. And almost every parish I go to, the morale is very good about what's going on locally. But their knowledge of, and their convictions about, the rest of the Church, well, their confidence droops a very short distance away from their own patch. And part of the responsibility of a bishop is to try and gossip around the good news. It's bearing fruit here, I must say. It's extraordinarily encouraging how people are energised by the extraordinary variety of ways in which the Church is involved in a whole range of ways of serving society.

[7] *Atheism's become a force to be reckoned with, without doubt. I asked Paula whether she saw any force in the Atheist's objections to Christianity.*

PG: When you read books by Richard Dawkins and the, kind of, the strident Atheists, for me one of the very striking things is, I don't believe in the God that Richard Dawkins doesn't believe in either. You know, they set up this straw effigy of Christian faith, which they then can knock down really easily. For me, the reason why I am a Christian is my

overwhelming encounter with God. I find it quite difficult to engage with some of those apologetic arguments about Christianity, in which people try and disprove Christianity, because I want to say, well actually, you could prove it all you like, but that wouldn't be the reason I believed. The reason I believe is because God loves me. Not for any of the other reasons.

[8] *Joel identifies one thing about the Church that is a gift to its detractors.*

JE: The only thing which makes me cringe is an irrelevant Christianity; an irrelevant Church. I find it embarrassing. The only one thing worse than being persecuted is to be totally irrelevant.

[9] *Doubt is often thought of as some sort of failure. Yet 'There lives more faith in honest doubt, Believe me, than in half the creeds' wrote Tennyson. But is there any place for doubt in Christianity? Paula.*

PG: Actually, the Greek word 'doubt' simply means to hold two things in your mind at any one time. So it is literally the opposite of being certain. 'Certain' is holding one thing in your mind at the same time; 'doubting' is holding more than one thing in your mind at the same time. And personally, I find in my encounter with God, that actually it is the holding more than one thing in my mind at the same time that actually gets me closest to the heart of who God is. God is a great mystery. And I cannot be – I am certain of God's existence, I am certain of God's love, but I cannot think just one thing about the nature of God. God is a huge and enormous being, and cannot be boiled down into one thought. And therefore I would say doubting is a really good way of encountering God, because doubting