

Do you find it easy being a believer?

I don't.

I never have found it easy. It is more that I find my brief experiences of unbelief, or the contemplation of it, to be more difficult.

Perhaps it was always thus.

The gospel reading for today suggests that it was difficult to believe even in the days that the risen Jesus was on earth.

We might think that it must all have been wonderful, all must have been so good and hopeful - because Jesus was alive!

Consider this - what was the gospel reading for last week: Jesus appearing to the disciples, giving doubting Thomas grounds for belief.

And the week before that, the excitement of the empty tomb.

And then this week we have the fishing account. "After these events" we are told.

This reading suggests that even after Jesus had appeared to them, they had harboured doubts. Some had gone back to the comfort of what they knew best - to fishing. Jesus met them there, and made clear his forgiveness, especially to Peter, who had denied him.

But it must have been so difficult!

- those disciples were living through the days when the axis of history - of all creation - shifted, the time when the new world God had promised was emerging, the time when God's kingdom, was starting to come on earth, as in heaven.
- The disciples were having to re-evaluate everything. The nature of life, of God. They were going to have to leave everything and share this new message of salvation, a message which had caused their leader to be arrested and crucified.
- They had to re-evaluate Jesus. The mysterious man they might have thought they knew, was in fact God Almighty.

The psalm for today has a similar flavour to it. It seems to me to capture beautifully the complexity, the ups and downs of faith felt by those early Christians. Felt by us.

Verses 1-5 travel from exalting to weeping, weeping made bearable by the rejoicing that comes in the morning. This psalm is a superb statement of the fact that faith in God does not insulate us from the trials of life. Faith in God enables us to see beyond, to look over those trials, to have hope that these are transient.

If you would, please look with me at verses 6 and 7:

When I felt secure, I said,

"I will never be shaken."

Lord, when you favoured me,

you made my royal mountain stand firm;

but when you hid your face,

I was dismayed.

What a short journey from feeling secure to being dismayed.

What foolish confidence the psalmist displays "I will never be shaken". Within a few lines, that bravado is punctured. All it took was for God to hide his face, and the psalmist was dismayed.

This psalmist knows the ups and downs of life and of faith. This psalmist can speak authoritatively to us because of this experience. He has fought for his faith, he has encountered troubles, his armour is dusty from being in the world, and is dented from the blows his faith has received.

The whole experience of faith as a struggle, of having to rely on God's support in that struggle, is a deeply biblical experience.

That idea of "the whole armour of God" - belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet and sword - comes of course from Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

But that train of thought reminded me of one of my favourite Bible proverbs. In 1 Kings, Ahab king of Israel replied to a boastful threat from another king with these words:

"Let not him who straps on his armour boast himself as he who takes it off."

In other words "don't boast before the battle, while you are putting on your armour, it is still pristine and undamaged, before your encounter with your foe. Boast after the battle. You have survived, are probably tired, injured, your armour is dented, but that particular battle is over.

I have found that those Christians I listen to most closely, are those whose armour is dusty, and bent, and battle-scarred. Who are going through struggle. To survive such struggle as is thrown to us, I'd suggest a couple of indicators:

You are familiar with your faith you know your faith. You live within your faith. The Holy Spirit lives within you. You know the broad parameters of what we believe and how we act, you not only say them in the creeds and in the responses but also in your private prayer and Bible reading. You love God and you know when you depart from Him, when he hides his face.

This is not the book knowledge of a theologian, it is loving God with all your heart, soul and mind.

In a sense I could say you are familiar with your armour. You put on your armour you know how to put on your armour. You know the elements of your armour, you know how the pieces fit together. You wear all the pieces as they should be worn and you are able to move in your armour, able to live your life fairly normally while wearing your armour.

Your armour is genuine it is strong, the pieces fit and protect the vital parts of you you don't have pieces of armour that are defective or missing.

Secondly, you have been tested in your faith and have come through the testing. This is not the last time of testing, and you have not come through unscathed. But you have come through.

You have had moments of doubt. You have encountered without knowing what it is, that cloud of unknowing which separates us from God. You have come to realise what the Psalmist realised: when God favoured you, your mountain stood firm. But when it seemed that God turned away, when God "hid" his "face", you were instantly dismayed and you realise that all security comes only from God. Security that comes from other sources will not stand.

The armour that you put on is armour in which you feel a fit, it is armour in which you have received blows, your armour is dented it is dusty.

So, doubts and blows will come, that is normal for those with faith. They would kill our faith without the armour God provides us.

Are you wearing your armour? All of it? Do you know the parts, do they fit you? I'm not speaking here of knowing that something exists because you have heard of it. Are you wearing your armour? Is your armour still pristine, or is it dented and battle-scarred? It will be a long struggle, we will not remove our armour this side of heaven, so it is something in which we live and move. But when we do remove it, when battle is won, we will see our king face to face!