

Losing Faith

Andy Frost

There is silence as the new Christian takes to the platform. Their story begins... a search for meaning, purpose and love... with twists and turns. Their life story seems desperate and the congregation sit in wrapt attention. The story continues... and then suddenly there is a turning point in the story. Something like "...and then I met these Christians." Or perhaps "...and so I started going on this Alpha course."

The story ends as the new Christian talks about this new life that they have begun. They finish and hand over the mic. The congregation applaud and we celebrate. Our faith is strengthened and we thank God for all that he does. I love these testimonies of people finding faith.

But there is also another kind of story. The story we rarely hear, especially from our church platforms, the stories of losing faith. Over the past few months, I have spent time meeting with people who used to call themselves Christians. I have had coffee in swanky cafes; hot chocolate in city centres; a strong cup of tea on a rickety boat on the River Thames; and a pint of ale in a country pub beer garden, listening to people who have lost faith.

It is very easy to celebrate what God is doing as people come to faith but we must also listen to the stories of people who are losing faith. We need to understand what has gone wrong so that we can help them rediscover faith.

As I have listened to these stories, they have been heartbreaking. They have led me to question, to wrestle, to grapple with how people lose faith. There are those that seem to gradually drift away from faith and those that make a definitive break from their Christian beliefs. There are those who have rebelled and others who have just really struggled to keep their faith. As I have listened there seem to be four specific areas of doubt. And I believe that when we listen to these issues as the Church, we can learn to be and do better as the Church.

Firstly, there are some who tell me that they have just not seen enough of God. Prayers seem to have gone unanswered. God never felt truly present. When other people heard God's voice, they only heard silence. When others shared testimony, they felt they had nothing to share.

Perhaps as Christians, we need to remember that we are all different. We experience God in different ways. Some of us will have these emotionally charged experiences with tears and running mascara. Others of us will have a moment of clarity as we look up at the stars and piece of Scripture comes to mind. We mustn't presume that everyone experiences God in the same way.

We forget that we don't only encounter God between 10.30 and 11.30am on a Sunday morning but in the reality of everyday. We can experience God as we are overwhelmed with compassion. We can experience God in the reading of Scripture on the bus. We can experience God in art and film and the seasons and laughter. Maybe we need to broaden our understanding of how we experience God.

Secondly, there are those people who have lost faith because of the Church. They have not been let down by Jesus but in some way they have been let down or hurt by the very people who claim to represent Him. Their stories are painful to listen to... stories of cover-ups, hypocrisy, gossip and the abuse of power.

Some churches have managed to make the live transforming Gospel of Jesus boring. Whilst other churches have failed to understand that the Gospel is a message of love and grace.

And when we hear this catalogue of charges, our initial response is to think "well that's not my church". But it is amazing how easily our church culture fails to reflect the beauty of Christ. Do we sometimes fail to look in the mirror to see whether we truly represent Jesus.

Thirdly, many of the stories of people losing faith touched upon issues of pain and suffering. Not necessarily doubt in the existence of God but doubt in the very nature of God. How can a loving, all powerful God allow so much hurt?

Their stories focused on depression, loneliness, sickness, cancer and death. Stories of a deep disappointment with God. A string of confusing questions... Why does God allow babies to die? Why doesn't God always answer prayers for healing? Why did my loved one have to suffer like that? Questions that send the mind racing.

When it comes to understanding the character of God, we all have the same contradictory evidence to work with. The beauty of waterfalls, the sound of children laughing and the smell of summer; alongside the horror of abuse, the groans of sickness and the smell of death.

Perhaps, as the Church we are sometimes guilty of painting an idealised picture of following Jesus. A decision to follow Christ and then everything will be rosy. We forget that Jesus promised persecution. We forget that picking up our cross is not all merry delight. We forget that although the victory is won, we still live in the mess of this reality.

It is at these times we need to remember that God suffers as we suffer. We need to remember that life is not always easy, that there will be challenges and hard times. But we must also remember that when things go wrong, that people we don't merely want neat theological arguments but the very presence of God.

Fourthly, many of the stories highlighted intellectual doubts. The big questions. Surely all faiths lead to God? Why does God commission Israel to wipe out other nations? What does God have against homosexuals?

And our response is to say that this is what the Bible says and the Bible is the Word of God.

The problem is that this doesn't always cut it. We need to explain why we give the Bible such importance. We need to demonstrate why it is trustworthy, how it was written and how we interpret it. Too often we preach from the Bible without ever explaining why we have this deep seated confidence in Scripture. We need to be able to defend our faith intellectually.

We often only hear the stories of people coming to faith. But perhaps we should start listening to people who lose faith. Having spent time listening and reflecting, I believe that we can help others keep their faith ... that we can become a Church that reflects more of the risen Jesus.

Andy Frost is a surf-obsessed, movie loving, bible reading, globe trotting Londoner. He is the Director of Share Jesus International and is passionate about seeing how the Church can re-connect with society and culture. Losing Faith is the new book by Andy Frost that is based upon nine interviews with people who have lost their Christian faith. It contains reflections and practical advice on how we help people find faith again. Rediscovering Faith is a national tour exploring in more depth the issues of faith and doubt. www.sharejesusinternational.com

