

## BETWEEN THE DREAMING AND THE COMING TRUE

### No Safer Place

Maybe its just me, but every now and then I seem to have a crisis of faith. I'm wondering if that's just me, or whether others, perhaps, if they're honest, might also, sometimes, find themselves in a crisis of faith. I'm wondering, if you're honest, if you, sometimes, maybe, have a crisis of faith? Sometimes, it feels to me like having faith, being a follower of Christ, is a bit like walking a tightrope. And perhaps, if, when, we have a crisis of faith, it feels as though we will fall from the rope.

Jean-François Gravelet was better known as Monsieur Charles Blondin. He first walked a rope slung between two chairs when he was just four years old. In 1858 Charles Blondin travelled to the Niagara Falls hoping to be the first person to walk a rope across the river. The smart money was on his failure – it was, simply, impossible. The length of the rope 1,300 feet long, strung over the river, with winds blowing and water spraying, all suggested he couldn't do it. But on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1858 a crowd of some 25,000 gathered to watch his attempted crossing.

Blondin was just about to attempt to cross the Niagara River on a hemp rope just 2" thick. Because of the distance across the river, the rope sagged in the middle to a height of just 190 foot above the gorge. Most of those watching thought Blondin was foolish or worse. But, just before 5pm on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1858, Blondin began to walk the rope.

About a third of the way across Blondin shocked the crowd by sitting down on the rope. He called for the Maid of the Mist, a tourist vessel, to anchor beneath him. He cast down a line and hauled up a bottle of wine, from which he had a drink. Once he passed the centre of the sagging rope, to the amazement of the crowd, he broke into a run! And, while the band played 'Home, Sweet Home' Blondin walked into Canada!

Monsieur Charles Blondin had done what no-one thought possible: he'd walked a tight rope across the Niagara River.

Perhaps, sometimes, we feel like our journey of faith is like walking a tight rope – and we're hoping we don't fall off.

Over his lifetime, Blondin crossed the Niagara Falls around 300 times. On different crossings he pushed a wheel barrow, sat on the rope, ate cake and drank champagne, and one time he cooked an omelette which he lowered to people below on the Maid of the Mist to eat.

He also carried his manager across on his back. Before they began the crossing he gave his manager the following instructions: 'Look up, Harry... you are no longer Colcord, you are Blondin. Until I clear this place, be part of me, mind, body and soul. If I sway, sway with me. Do not attempt to do any balancing yourself. If you do we will both go to our death.'

Sometimes, maybe, that's how we feel on our journey of faith. We just have to hold on, trust like mad, and hope someone else will keep us from falling. The journey of faith can seem like trying to walk a tightrope. Perhaps, sometimes, in a crisis of faith, we find ourselves in fear of falling.

I can remember when I became the Senior Minister of CBC and we had embarked on the redevelopment of the church. We needed to raise big money in order to be able to proceed with the project. We were having prayer meetings, church meetings, special meetings to think about how we could possibly go ahead with the redevelopment. And I felt the pressure. I would sometimes walk home from a meeting and find myself thinking: why did I ever say I'd take this job? I know very little about buildings or raising money – what on earth am I doing?

I visited a number of churches who had successfully redeveloped their building looking for the answer of how it was done. I discovered there was no answer other than: If you are convinced its right – go for it! I don't think I was convinced of anything other than the fact that I might be the minister under whom the redevelopment of CBC failed!

I had a bit of a crisis: where was God in all this and how did I know? Feels a bit like that now too, sometimes, if I'm really honest, as we consider what to do about Greenfields. Will I be considered foolish if we say yes to a merger, and we can't make it work? Or will I be thought of as lacking in faith if we don't have a go – because, let's be honest, we don't know what's possible. And the truth is, I don't know what to do. I haven't yet had a message directly from God making it absolutely clear what we should do – at least not one I've recognized.

And I feel like I am on a tight rope. And sometimes I feel a bit like Blondin, on his tightrope with a crowd watching and waiting to see if he'll fall. But I don't think I'm the only one who wrestles with faith.

At the age of 12 Mother Teresa felt the call of God on her life and she knew she had to be a missionary. She joined an Irish community of nuns and became a teacher. Having seen the poverty in Calcutta she began her own charity, to reach out to the poorest of the poor: Missionaries of Charity. The work of Missionaries of Charity over the next decades was extraordinary. By 1990 there were over 1 million co-workers in more than 40 countries working for the charity. Mother Teresa became revered and synonymous with helping those in poverty.

On her death in 1997, it transpired that for almost 50 years, Mother Teresa had felt a complete disconnection from God. It turns out she had written letters to friends expressing her doubts that God even existed. What had started with such a clear call, 'Come be my light' had changed to a long struggle with faith.

When he was just 17, Joseph had extraordinary dreams that, in time, turned out to be true. God, it seemed, had his hand upon this young man's life. But Joseph suffered terribly, first at the hands of his brothers who kidnapped him, dropped him in a well, and then sold him to merchants on their way to Egypt. In Egypt Joseph was promoted, accused of rape and thrown into prison where he languished for years. God it seemed, had forgotten him and Joseph was left wondering what God was doing, if he was doing anything at all.

Job, who was blameless and upright, sat in the ashes covered in sores having lost everything, everything: his home, his land, his wealth and all of his family apart from his wife. Job, apparently, had done nothing wrong. Job, apparently, followed God as best he knew how. Job, in his darkness had a crisis of faith, even pronouncing he wished he'd never been born. His friends only made his suffering worse. And God, it seems, was silent and absent.

Perhaps, even Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane had his own crisis of faith; 'Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.' (Mathew 26 v 39)

Perhaps, right now, you feel you are walking the tightrope of faith. Perhaps, as we see pictures and hear stories that are emerging from the Ukraine, we question faith. Perhaps, however much we want to avoid it, we find ourselves wondering about God: why would he let this invasion happen? Why would he

allow innocent men, women and children suffer the consequences of war? Perhaps we wonder why God doesn't somehow, step in and stop Vladimir Putin waging war because he feels Russia has been wronged.

Perhaps we question where God is and what he is doing and, perhaps, we fear ourselves falling from the tightrope of faith: that God is good and always at work for good. That God is even interested in what is going on in the world. That God is even interested in what is going on for me, for you.

## Psalm 125

*A song of ascents.*

<sup>1</sup> Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,  
which cannot be shaken but endures forever.

<sup>2</sup> As the mountains surround Jerusalem,  
so the LORD surrounds his people  
both now and forevermore.

<sup>3</sup> The sceptre of the wicked will not remain  
over the land allotted to the righteous,  
for then the righteous might use  
their hands to do evil.

<sup>4</sup> LORD, do good to those who are good,  
to those who are upright in heart.

<sup>5</sup> But those who turn to crooked ways  
the LORD will banish with the evildoers.  
Peace be on Israel.

There are many things we might learn from the words of this Psalm, but I'm going to focus on just one this morning.

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,  
which cannot be shaken but endures forever.

<sup>2</sup> As the mountains surround Jerusalem,  
so the LORD surrounds his people  
both now and forevermore.

It may be that what these words offer us is a different way of understanding faith other than its journey being like walking a tightrope. When we think of the journey of faith as being a bit like walking a tightrope we inevitably think of it as a precarious journey. The truth we know about the journey of faith – our

journey, your journey, my journey, is that it comes with many, many challenges. And it is perhaps a little too easy to find ourselves feeling like we are on the tightrope, high above the chasm, watched by the doubting crowd, waiting for us to fall. Maybe, in truth, some of us feel we have fallen.

Psalm 125 has a different, much better way of understanding the journey of faith. Far from walking a tightrope, it is that we sit in a fortress.

Psalm 125 v 1-2 use the geography of Jerusalem to tell the truth that there is no safer place to be, than in God. Jerusalem was set in a saucer of hills, it was, actually, the safest of cities because of the protection the surrounding hills provided. The hills around the city effectively acted as a protective fortress that surrounded Jerusalem. The geography of Jerusalem meant it was a safe place to be.

In the ancient world, city life was dangerous. In the ancient world, there were always roaming bands of people ready to attack and invade a city for its spoils, and those roaming bands would seek out and take advantage of any sign of weakness. It behoved any city to be diligent about its defences and why a city wall was so important. It's also one reason why Nehemiah was so distraught on hearing of the state of the walls of Jerusalem, and why he worked so hard to rebuild them.

But the natural geography of Jerusalem as a safe place served, in a very tangible way, to speak to the people of Israel about their security in God. The place of Jerusalem speaks of the deep and profound truth of our place in God. In God we are held secure: God has us in his hand, we are secure. On the journey of faith, we can place our story into God's bigger and better story.

The truth about Mother Teresa is that she placed her story in God's bigger and better story, and she was held in God's bigger and better story in her doubts. All through the years of not feeling connected to God, she lived her story in his story.

Joseph, in the forgotten years, lived his story in God's bigger and better story. God held Joseph through all the easy times and tough times. Job was held by God through the most challenging of circumstances, and when Job saw that his story was lived in God's far bigger and far better story, it was, for him, enough.

Jesus placed his story in his father's bigger and better story: "Not my will but yours."

‘As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, both now and forevermore.’ (Ps. 125:2)

On our journey of faith, we are not walking a tightrope, we are being held in God. The invitation of Psalm 125 is for us to place ourselves and our story, once again, into the bigger and better story of God. This is not to say that we will not experience the challenges of life that sometimes cause us to doubt – we will! But it is to say that as we place our story in God’s story, as we are held in the strength and security he brings, these challenges will never be able to overcome us.

When we choose to take the words of Psalm 125 to be true, we choose to remember that God surrounds us always. There’s another Psalm, that using different words, reminds us of the very same truth: that God is always with us wherever we go, that we are held in his hand when we place our story in his story.

- <sup>1</sup> You have searched me, LORD,  
and you know me.
- <sup>2</sup> You know when I sit and when I rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
- <sup>3</sup> You discern my going out and my lying down;  
you are familiar with all my ways.
- <sup>4</sup> Before a word is on my tongue  
you, LORD, know it completely.
- <sup>5</sup> You hem me in behind and before,  
and you lay your hand upon me.
- <sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
too lofty for me to attain.
- <sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?
- <sup>8</sup> If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
- <sup>9</sup> If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
- <sup>10</sup> even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.
- <sup>11</sup> If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,”
- <sup>12</sup> even the darkness will not be dark to you;

- the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.
- <sup>13</sup> For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- <sup>14</sup> I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.
- <sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place,  
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
- <sup>16</sup> Your eyes saw my unformed body;  
all the days ordained for me were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.
- <sup>17</sup> How precious to me are your thoughts, God!  
How vast is the sum of them!
- <sup>18</sup> Were I to count them,  
they would outnumber the grains of sand—  
when I awake, I am still with you.
- <sup>19</sup> If only you, God, would slay the wicked!  
Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!
- <sup>20</sup> They speak of you with evil intent;  
your adversaries misuse your name.
- <sup>21</sup> Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD,  
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?
- <sup>22</sup> I have nothing but hatred for them;  
I count them my enemies.
- <sup>23</sup> Search me, God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
- <sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139)

Perhaps, sometimes, we can be tempted to run from the safe place, because the journey of faith is hard. And maybe we would do well to return to the safe place, to hide ourselves in God. And we might say it this way:

*Lord you ask so much  
There was time when I offered you everything.  
In the rosy glow of commitment  
nothing was too much, nothing too good for you.  
I thought that once the decision was made,*

*once I put myself in your hands  
then I could float, buoyed up, soothed, comforted  
in the warmth of your love.*

*But I've gone a long way, Lord, since then.  
There have been good times, strong times  
when I've rejoiced in you.  
Sometimes, though, the water's cold  
and the swimming is hard.  
It takes all my strength and I get tired,  
weary, exhausted.  
I'd like a rest.*

*You ask so much.  
I'm tempted to run away, Lord,  
to go into a corner and hide,  
but I know you'll still be there.  
And afterwards, the sour taste of failure.*

*So, I turn and face you again, Lord.  
Braced for your look of disappointment,  
accusation, questioning.  
And I find instead  
love.  
Not soothing softness and comfort  
but strength and healing.  
And Life*

*Lord, forgive me for making the same mistakes again.  
And again.  
Help me to remember that when I turn to face you  
I shall see your arms,  
open,  
in love.  
Thank you.*

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