

You know I have often thought, and probably mentioned, that the Easter readings are more about loss and lack of faith than they are about rejoicing. First the disciples didn't believe Jesus when he told them, more than once, that he would rise again; then they didn't believe the women who had gone to the tomb; then Thomas couldn't believe until he saw with his own eyes and now, this week, we have the story of the 'Road to Emmaus', which really should be entitled 'The Road away from Jerusalem' or 'The Road away from faith'. Two men, who had known Jesus, heard the 'rumours' as they called the statement of the witnesses and were still walking away in doubt and grief. It's no wonder that Jesus often commented on everyone's lack of faith.

Still it's probably a good job – after all we are no different – and I, at least, have always had a bit of sympathy with Thomas. Humanity still struggles with faith of any kind and, those of us who have a faith in God, often feel doubt, confusion and many a misgiving.

Thankfully we have a God who is fully aware of our failings, loves us anyway and does all he can to help us through those difficult times. Jesus does not abandon us but is always there to guide us and strengthen our faith. The events of this Gospel passage are not only proof of this but it also contains guidance as to how we can all deal with those times when our faith is challenged.

We start with the men themselves; as I said they are walking away from Jerusalem. Jerusalem - symbolic of the presence of God, the place where the Earth-shattering events occurred, the place where – even now – people were witnessing to Jesus' resurrection. They were physically, spiritually and emotionally turning their backs on what had happened.

Now as they walked along they were discussing everything that had happened with each other. This is actually a good place to START when we feel our faith lacking. When we feel doubt in our hearts it can make us feel isolated and alone. We don't want to share our fears in case – well why? In case we are ridiculed? In case we are chastised? Perhaps we find it difficult to put our doubts into words? The more we feel alone in our doubts, the more we are likely to pull back and away from the very things that can help us. So don't be alone in your uncertainties – talk with someone about them.

As I said this is a good place to START and sometimes it is enough just to sort your own thinking through; usually though we need more so let's see what happens next.

They are joined by Jesus himself, but, 'their eyes were kept from recognising him'. This is a reality for anyone who is struggling with their faith. Jesus is there, he will never abandon us, but the fog of our own doubt keeps us from feeling his presence with us. (This is one of the reasons why I love the passage 'Footprints' so much – if you've never read it I have attached it to the bottom of this sermon for you to look at. It is about the realities and struggles of this life and about a God that never lets us go)

In my mind here Jesus represents a few things – obviously himself, a steady presence who will walk with us through thick and thin. He is also 'The Word of God' incarnate, the scriptures physically present and, he is also, the learned elder – someone who understands and guides our understanding of what the bible means.

So to anyone struggling with their faith I say look to God himself. Pray about it – after all that is exactly what the two men did. They told Jesus all that had happened and voiced their doubts and fears. They didn't hold back and they didn't use any 'special' religious prayer words or phrases. Then they did something that we, all too often, forget to do – they waited for his response. Too often, when we pray, we talk AT God and then run off before he has a chance to help us out – worse – we then get angry at him for not 'answering' our prayers.

Jesus then helps them understand by going through the scriptures. He explains, teaches and patiently guides them to a better understanding of just what the bible meant, in relation to God's saving purpose, and how it related to all that Jesus himself did and suffered. It should go without saying that reading the bible helps when we are struggling to understand! But not just reading, studying carefully – thinking about it with brain fully engaged. This is where a trusted guide is needed – NOT THE TV! Speak to Angela or me, this is what we are here for. We will not ridicule you, we will not call you silly (well I might but Angela won't because she is nicer than I am) but we will do all we can to explain and help you through. It is not a bother, you are not being a nuisance and you can ask as many times as you like!

Finally though we all have to choose – do we let Jesus go, because he will never force his way in – or do we invite him to be with us and re-encounter him, recognising him once more as our Saviour and our friend. The choice is, and always shall be, ours to make. The men, after all, could have let Jesus continue on his way, it was only after they had invited him in that they recognised him once more.

Never think that you are alone in your doubts – help is always at hand; and never, ever think that God will abandon you. He will always walk with you even if you don't realise it at the time.

So here is – as promised – Footprints.

One night I had a dream. I dreamed I was walking along a beach with the LORD. Across the sky flashed scenes from my life. For each scene I noticed two sets of Footprints in the sand: one belonging to me, and the other to the LORD.

When the last scene of my life flashed before me, I looked back at the footprints in the sand. I noticed that many times along the path of my life there was only one set of footprints. I also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in my life. This really bothered me and I questioned the LORD about it:

"LORD, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why, when I needed you most, you would leave me."

The LORD replied: "My precious, precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."