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GOD LOST AND FOUND



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SPCK

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*For Wendy, who has faithfully accompanied
me through the hills and valleys, and who first
suggested this book*

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A word at the beginning

When the American rock band R.E.M. released their song ‘Losing my religion’ they found they had a cult classic on their hands. As they put it, “‘Losing my religion’ feels like some kind of archetype that was floating around in space that we managed to lasso.’ That might be absolutely right. There’s a common human experience of losing touch with God and finding that faith is ebbing away. It’s not deliberate. Few people set out to lose the reality of their faith, but somehow it happens.

When you scratch the surface of British churchgoing you’re likely to find that many people are afraid to admit they no longer have a vivid experience of God. What was once bright and shiny is now tarnished and dull. What gave life and purpose has been reduced to disappointment and play-acting. We like to keep the mask on because it’s so embarrassing to admit we no longer find any life in it. Nevertheless, some are bold enough to go public. They’ve tried; they’ve been round the course, but it just won’t happen any more, if it ever did. The broadcaster John Humphrys writes, ‘Along the way I have experienced the indoctrination of confirmation classes, the anticlimax of the eucharist, the futility of prayer, the contradiction between the promises made by an allegedly merciful, loving God and the reality of a suffering world. So I end up – so far, at any rate – as a doubter.’¹

I once talked to a senior churchman who said he had been amazed at how many Christian people, later in life and themselves well-known figures, had quietly confided in him that they had lost the fire of their faith. When I’m preaching or leading a service I often wonder what it would be like if I could read the thought-bubbles above everyone’s head. There would be

faith, doubt, struggle, disagreement, anger: 'What on earth is this all about?' 'I've never experienced that.' 'What planet is he on?' But that's life. That's what people think and feel. There are no monochrome church congregations where everyone is a fully paid-up, passionate believer, with no hint of heresy or doubt. And some people are lonely behind the mask of hymn-singing and fellowship. It all used to be so vivid, but the colour has drained away. The ladder to the stars has been removed.

This book is about that experience, but also about where we might pick up the scent again, starting somewhere else, maybe somewhere completely different. The reasons for losing contact with God are multi-layered and complex, and they deserve to be named and understood. This in itself can be a relief to many Christians who feel guilty at their failure to be on fire with faith. I shall look at the way our inner spiritual experience of God can dry up, at how the failures of the church can leave us disillusioned with all religion, at how personal tragedy can destroy belief, and at how the secular assumptions of so much of society can be like acid eating away at faith. However, once these reasons have been understood and accepted there is much that can be explored as we try to put a reconstructed faith on a surer footing. This book is therefore 'a game of two halves', seeking to be realistic and honest in both.

Nothing is achieved by denying or minimizing the reality of this experience of losing touch with God. Continuing the footballing image, no one who has to play the full 90 minutes is going to avoid having periods of exhaustion and loss of concentration. Anyone who tries to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength' (Mark 12.30) is likely to have times of spiritual cramp.

The problem, of course, is that it's not like losing interest in stamp collecting or fly-fishing. The worst you have then is a cupboard full of stamps or a pile of fishing gear. With the loss of God may go an entire way of life – a framework of

beliefs, values, practices and relationships that gave order, shape and meaning to our lives. It's even more difficult if you are a 'professional Christian', a priest, minister, or youth worker to whom many people look – perhaps a whole community. If you lose touch with God as a Christian leader, what do you do then? Most spiritual directors, at some time or other, have had the task of holding the broken pieces together. Imagine, for example, how innocent questions might expose a nagging doubt about vocation and faith in a situation such as is explored in Andrew O'Hagan's book *Be Near Me*. In this episode Father David has taken a group of wild youngsters to the island of Ailsa Craig:

Lisa stroked her shiny leg with a marigold and smacked her lips. She suddenly looked up at me as if she hadn't seen me before. 'Father,' she said, 'you have wasted your life, haven't you?'

'I don't think so,' I said. 'I believe in God. That has been my life.'

'It can't be,' she said. 'You could have been having a good time and you've wasted it.'

'That's not true, Lisa. Not from my point of view. We have different names for it, but I've lived according to my faith.'

'What is your name?'

'Sorry?'

'Your real name. What is it?'

'David Anderton.'

'So what's wrong with just being him?'

I stood up and spun a stone across the loch to make it jump.

'It must be quite boring,' she said, 'being Father somebody and having to go on like you're good all the time. Nobody else does. And then you end up here, in Bumblefuck, UK.'

‘I am him,’ I said, and I knew my voice was quiet. I was searching to say something permanent. ‘Faith and good works,’ I said. ‘It’s not *your* idea of a life, but it is mine.’

‘Whatever,’ she said. By that time the others had run over the verge and were panting beside us. ‘He believes in God,’ said Lisa, with a wide smile on her face.

‘That’s freaky,’ said Mark. ‘Him a priest as well.’ . . .

We laughed and made our way over the rock and saw a cormorant rise from the reeds in the middle of the loch and fly off.

‘He’s a good laugh,’ I heard Mark say behind me.

‘He’s wasted his life, though,’ said Lisa.²

Father David may or may not have suspected that he had wasted his life, but it’s not a good doubt to entertain, initially at any rate. It can cripple effective ministry, it can make familiar prayers die on the lips, it can reduce the heart to silence. Only later might a minister realize that the experience has led to a more honest and rewarding understanding of his or her vocation. What is true of a ‘professional Christian’ may also be true of others who apparently have less at stake, but in fact have just as much to lose existentially. Let’s remember that Jesus was a layman, and he lost contact with his heavenly Father, catastrophically, one dark Friday we strangely call ‘good’.

However, this shaking of the foundations need not be the end of the story. If the experience of loss can be named, understood and accepted there’s much that can be done to put in train a process that reconstructs faith on a more secure footing. The experience of being betwixt and between, of being dislocated and outside our normal patterns of life and belief, can be profoundly creative. Indeed, these liminal spaces are usually the best places from which to grow. To raise the stakes still more, it could be said that too much religion is concerned with helping people to live comfortably within normal patterns

of belief and practice. Cheap religion teaches people how to live successfully in a second-rate belief system and we end up wanting more and more of what doesn't really work. The explosive material of the gospel has been disarmed. The angels sigh.

So liminality can be good. Being displaced from our former certainties can open up possibilities and discoveries in the world of faith which are profoundly liberating and truth-telling. The journey starts again with new excitement. There are new pilgrims alongside us. The territory is strange but stimulating. And colour returns not just to our cheeks but also to the world around. Paradise regained. It's fascinating to learn in how many different ways the journey can get started and the blue touch paper can get lit. I knew an able woman who had been to church as a child but had put all that aside as she went through her teens, higher education, marriage and early family life. They moved house, and one Sunday morning she was hanging out the washing when she heard a single church bell not far away. The next day, as she drove her small son to school, she looked for the church to which that bell must have belonged. She found it, went next Sunday, and hasn't left it since. She's now ordained.

Our journey might deepen as a result of losing touch with God. It's a hard route to travel but it's a well-trodden path. This book is dedicated to those who have been there.

Thanks, as ever, go to Alison Barr, my editor who encourages and never fusses; to my wife Wendy who first said I should write this book and then went through it with a rigorous red pen; to Amanda, Christine and Debbie who kept the wider world at bay; to Veronica who read through the book and ironed out some of the more wayward infelicities; and to Whitby, our tortoiseshell cat, who in St Paul's words never lets me think more highly of myself than I ought to think.

My simple hope is that this book might help somebody who knows what it is to lose touch with the burning love of God

A word at the beginning

and to sit by the embers, wondering what has happened. You might need to take a break and just sit awhile, but eventually it's worth trying again. Stand up, stir the fire, and throw on a new log.

Part 1

WHY?



1

When the well runs dry

I sometimes ask a group I'm working with what season of the year they feel themselves to be in spiritually. Is it spring, with new growth budding in all sorts of places, tentative discoveries being made about God and a spiritual life that's well spiced with hope? Or is it high summer, with a spiritual life full of the presence and goodness of God in spite of the occasional storm of doubt? Or perhaps autumn is drawing on and some things that have been in flower are now dying away. There's still much green to enjoy and the grey weather has its own attraction, but nostalgia is in the air. Or maybe winter has well and truly arrived; the life of the spirit is pretty much dead and there are no signs of life. People tell us the potential is all there, just dormant and waiting to stir, but if we're honest we rather doubt this winter will ever end.

Most church life, most sermons and most popular Christian books assume a spring or summer spirituality. The truth, however, is that for many people of faith God has gone absent without leave, spiritual disciplines are wearying, prayer seems like talking to oneself, and to all intents and purposes they are living without God. And to make matters worse, they probably haven't told anyone about it and it's lonely.

In his last work the much-loved spiritual writer Henri Nouwen wrote:

Do I like to pray? Do I want to pray? Do I spend time praying? Frankly, the answer is no to all three questions. After sixty-three years of life and thirty-eight years of

Why?

priesthood, my prayer seems as dead as a rock . . . The words ‘darkness’ and ‘dryness’ seem best to describe my prayer today . . .¹

When this kind of experience swamps the spiritual batteries that for years have seemed so reliable, what’s going on?

Bleak House

One of the reasons for this barren experience may be that we are simply overwhelmed with weariness on this Christian journey. We’ve been on the road for a long time and have run into the sand. Changing the metaphor, the house of the Lord that seemed so full of light has become a bleak house, a place where we turn the handle of faith but it’s become habit without reality.

The old monks used to call it *accidie*, meaning spiritual restlessness, boredom and an inability to concentrate. It can, however, affect anyone, because the truth is, rather obviously, that the Christian life is not all champagne and fireworks. As the spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill observed: ‘A lot of the road to heaven has to be taken at 30mph.’ Similarly, marriage isn’t all romantic evenings and subtle seduction; it’s also looking after a sick child in the night and remembering to take out the dustbin. What starts out as sheer magic has to settle into something deeper where the root systems of both lives have become so entwined that they simply know this commitment is for life.

Nevertheless, the spiritual restlessness we may feel is often part of a mid-life experience where many things are up for re-examination, from career and relationships to personal values and purpose. It can be a time of disillusionment or a sense of failure, of being trapped, of guilt and anxiety, of disconnectedness. It often goes with loneliness and a ‘last chance’ mentality. Many Christians feel deep down that they shouldn’t be succumbing to any of this; didn’t Jesus come to bring life

in abundance? Isn't the risen Christ our constant companion? 'Why are you cast down, O my soul?' (Ps. 42.5).

For the person of faith who has got used to seeing this relationship with God as being of ultimate importance, the loss of that original passion can cause not only lethargy but guilt and shame. The reality of God has ebbed away without the leak being noticed. I have a friend who was deeply involved in his church from childhood. It was his extended family. However, a personal crisis occurred and quite quickly he found that the receding tide of faith was exposing substantial rocks of doubt underneath, and nothing thereafter could cover them up. No spiritual experience tasted real any more, everything tasted of ashes and he felt he was letting everyone down – his church family (because he was going through the motions), himself (because he was covering up), and God (if he existed).

This experience of running out of spiritual fuel and drifting helplessly on to the hard shoulder is one to take very seriously. We can't run on empty for long. It affects most people some of the time, and some of the people most of the time. It's hard to admit and it's harder still to stop the slide. Going to church is meaningless except for the friendships. We find ourselves 'outside' the experience rather than inside. We critically examine everything that is said or done in the service because we are unable any more to give ourselves to worship with integrity. And so the dark clouds which were 'no bigger than a man's hand' become storm clouds filling the sky and blocking out the sun. Why read the Bible when it's so contradictory and, at times, downright unpleasant? Why pray when prayer bounces off the ceiling? There are better things to do than sit in a chair talking to myself. Bleak House indeed.

Sometimes the experience of emptiness is associated with overwork. One priest wrote this:

They told me it was the best Christmas sermon they'd ever heard, but it certainly didn't feel like it at the time. I had

faith, doubt, struggle, disagreement, anger: 'What on earth is this all about?' 'I've never experienced that.' 'What planet is he on?' But that's life. That's what people think and feel. There are no monochrome church congregations where everyone is a fully paid-up, passionate believer, with no hint of heresy or doubt. And some people are lonely behind the mask of hymn-singing and fellowship. It all used to be so vivid, but the colour has drained away. The ladder to the stars has been removed.

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