Facing up to hard questions

When it comes to understanding God, there will be some things that we can comprehend, and some truths of which we can be completely confident that they are sure and certain. But equally, there will be some things that we simply don’t understand, and we should not be surprised or disconcerted by this. After all, Paul is quite clear that ‘we know in part’ (1 Corinthians 13:9): our knowledge is incomplete because our perception is limited – Paul says it as if we are peering into a poor reflection in a mirror (13:12).

So we should not be surprised if we have questions, and some of these questions will be hard to answer. The hardest questions probablywon’t be those fired at us by those who may want to probe our faith or to challenge it. The hardest questions will be those that we ask ourselves, particularly at times when it feels as though everything is falling apart, or when nothing makes sense, or when we are no longer sure about what we believe or why we believe it. And we should not feel guilty, inadequate or stupid for having questions about issues which other people simply take for granted.

The questions we ask ourselves can be hard because there is so much at stake. ‘What is the basis for my faith? If God is so good, powerful and loving, why has this happened? Can I really trust what the Bible says? Is there life after death?’ You may have other hard questions of your own… The important thing to realise that it is only by asking questions that we learn and grow towards a mature understanding. Are there things you used to accept without question that you no longer believe? When and how did you change your mind? How has that affected your faith? God hasn’t changed –the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever! But our understanding of who he is and how he works – these things can (and sometimes should) change. But he is faithful and he invites us to trust him with our questions, our doubts and indeed with our lives.

So, do you find it easy or difficult to trust in God? Why is that the case? If you have doubts, where do they come from? Despite these doubts, are there still good reasons for you to put your trust in him? I would want to reassure you that there are! Sometimes though we can lose sight of them. Is it worth making a list (even if only a short one) to remind yourself of why God can be trusted?

Lamentations is not perhaps a book that we turn to very often. Buried among the prophetic books, it is easily missed. It also makes for disturbing reading as the author agonises, sometimes in searing detail, over the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, and struggles to reconcile this catastrophe with his faith in God. Chapter 3 is the best-known chapter in the book; it’s also the chapter which is the least explicit in its description of the fall of Jerusalem. Did Jeremiah write this? Maybe. Although the chapter is not attributed to Jeremiah, there are parallels: ‘Like Jeremiah, he attributes the devastation to the Lord. Like Jeremiah, he calls on the people to seek the Lord in prayer. Like Jeremiah, he believes that future hope does exist. Like Jeremiah, he describes personal suffering alongside national woe’ (House, *Jeremiah*, WBC, 407). Reading the first 18 verses of the chapter, it is hard to tell whether this is Jeremiah recounting his own experience or whether this is the voice of Zion, representing the nation as a whole, speaking as an individual. Whichever is the case, the writer is clear that God is the one responsible for his plight: how many times in these verses does the writer say that this is what ‘he’, i.e. God, has done? And what is the writer’s conclusion 3:18)?

Despite sounding this note of despair, the writer does go on to talk about finding hope: what basis does he find for hope, even in the midst of disaster and destruction (3:19-33)? The writer does not pose any questions in v.1-33, but if you were to ask the author, ‘Why do you still believe in God when he has caused you so much pain and grief, how do you think he would reply? If someone were to ask you why you still believe in God, despite your doubts and difficulties, how would you respond?

‘In times of doubt and questions, when our belief is perplexed by new teaching, new thought, when our faith is strained by creeds, by doctrines, by mysteries beyond our understanding, give us the faithfulness of learners, and the courage of believers in thee; give us boldness to examine and faith to trust all truth, stability to hold fast our tradition with enlightened interpretation, to grasp new knowledge and combine it loyally and honestly with old; alike from stubborn rejection of new revelation and from hasty assurance that we are wiser than our fathers, save us and help us, O Lord.’ (Bishop Ridding, *The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer*)