

# Stages of faith in our journey to God

*A Meditation by Revd Dr Alison Morgan*

*And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb - Genesis 12.9*

'With God one does not arrive at a fixed position; rather, one walks along a way. One moves ahead or one is not with God. God knows the whole way; we only know the next step and the final goal. There is no stopping; every day, every hour it goes farther. Whoever sets his foot on this way finds that his life has become a journey on the road. It leads through green pastures and through the dark valley, but the Lord will always lead on the right pathway.' *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*



The Christian life has long been seen as a journey, and many of the great spiritual classics of the past were written to help those who would undertake it. Some identified distinct stages in our life of faith, from our first recognition of God to our final preparation to meet him face to face; and more recently the insights gained through the study of human development and psychology have been used to describe those stages in more detail. One thing is certain: to place our faith in God is not simply to embrace a particular set of beliefs which we then hold for the rest of our lives. Faith is like anything else – as we grow and learn and change, so does our faith; for it is part of who we are. Perhaps faith is like a painting – a painting which we create afresh at each stage of our life, a painting which moves from the bright simplicity of childhood, through the clarity of an adult landscape and eventually to the open-edged impressionism of maturity. The child's painting is as valid and truthful as that of the artist in old age – but different. The way in which we engage with reality changes as we ourselves change.

How then do we paint our faith as we move from one stage of life to another – and how good are we at accepting and encouraging the paintings of others who may be at different stages from us?

## 1. Encounter: connecting with something bigger than ourselves

Our faith journey begins when we first recognise God, when we first believe. That may be in childhood, or it may come much later in life; whenever it comes, it takes the form of an encounter with the reality of God, and a deep awareness of his love for us.

How did this happen for you, and what did it feel like? Was there a particular moment of recognition, as there was for the wise men who travelled so far to see the baby Jesus? Or does your faith go back to the first glimmerings of consciousness, to a family faith into which you were born? Or are you perhaps still searching for a reality which you sense and feel, but which as yet you cannot paint?

## Child Waking – E J Scovell

The child sleeps in the daytime,  
With his abandoned, with his jetsam look,  
On the bare mattress, across the cot's corner;  
Covers and toys thrown out, a routine labour.

Relaxed in sleep and light,  
Face upwards, never so clear a prey to eyes;  
Like a walled town surprised out of the air –  
All life called in, yet all laid bare

To the enemy above -  
He has taken cover in daylight, gone to ground  
In his own short length, his body strong in bleached  
Blue cotton and his arms outstretched.

Now he opens eyes but not  
To see at first; they reflect the light like snow,  
And I wait in doubt if he sleeps or wakes, till I see  
Slight pain of effort at the boundary

And hear how the trifling wound  
Of bewilderment fetches a caverned cry  
As he crosses out of sleep - at once to recover  
His place and poise, and smile as I lift him over.

But I recall the blue -  
White snowfield of his eyes empty of sight  
High between dream and day, and think how there  
The soul might rise visible as a flower.

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage" Matthew 2.1-2*



Baby Jesus in the manger

*Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,*

*'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'* Luke 2.25-32

## 2. Learning and discovering: the beginnings of discipleship

Once we have recognised God, we begin to learn who he is. At this stage we need to learn from others, to find answers, to build a foundation of certainty, to find our place in the community of faith. This is the stage at which the word 'recognition' begins to be replaced by the word 'discipleship': we have made a choice, and now we are learning what it means; we are learning to build a framework for life which has Jesus at the centre. Our faith provides us with certainty, with guidelines for living, and with a community to which we feel we belong.

*Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. He said to them, Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.* Luke 2.41-52



The young Jesus in the temple - Linda Rivers

Jesus himself emphasized the importance of this process, this change of direction, this embracing of new values. The Sermon on the Mount spells out the new parameters; the parable of the houses built on sand or on rock sums it all up. Now you have decided to follow Jesus, you will live differently:

*"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock."* Matthew 7.24-25

The first believers in Jerusalem took this process seriously:

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* Acts 2.42

What steps have you taken to ensure you are building your life on a biblical foundation?

### 3. Finding a role: embracing a life of ministry

Once we have built a framework of belief, it is time for us to work out what part we ourselves are called to play in the great story of faith. Stage three is the 'doing' stage, the stage in which we discover our own particular contribution and calling; the stage in which we are apprenticed to the Master and sent out to make a difference. For those who embraced faith at an earlier stage in their lives, this stage comes most naturally in young adulthood. Our painting now has both outline and detail; life is beginning to make sense.

*"The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do."* John 14.12

*Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal... After this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go...* Luke 9-10



Jesus teaches his followers - James Tissot (1836-1902)

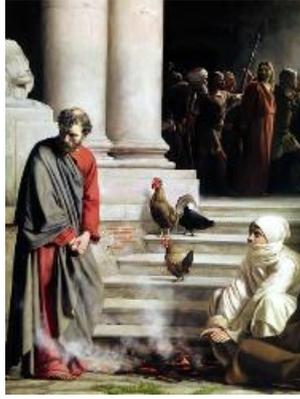
*The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry.* Ephesians 4.11-12

Think about your own life. Are you still a learner, or have you begun to minister to others - a spectator, or a member of the team? What does it, or would it, mean for you to be a member of the team? What part would you most like to play?

### 4. The journey inward: complexity and crisis

*Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times. And he broke down and wept."* Mark 14.72

So often in life, certainty is followed by uncertainty. Things don't always work out as we expected; hidden snags challenge the happy simplicity of our world view, failure stains the edges of the success we had so earnestly and confidently sought, and we become increasingly aware of our own weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The bright primary colours of success are replaced by the subdued hues of realism. The painting has to be redone. Oddly, one of my children glimpsed this, aged six, as she explained her painting: "I'm not doing mine in bright children's colours. I'm doing it in pale and mournful colours, like grown-ups." Many people quail as the bright colours of certainty dim, and an edgy confusion creeps into their predictable world. Avoiding the confusion is not an option: but there is nonetheless a choice to be made – to welcome and engage with it, or to push it back beneath the surface.



Peter denies Jesus - Carl Heinrich Bloch (1834-90)

What about you? Have you ever experienced a crisis which challenged your faith, or perhaps just a creeping sense that it's not all as simple as you thought? If so, how did you respond? What *do* you do when failure replaces success, when you fear that you yourself are not up to the task, when people or events or ideas challenge the very foundations on which your faith is built? And what about your church? How do you make space within your fellowship for those who find themselves asking awkward questions, who feel they need to move beyond the boundaries of the commonly accepted box? It's said that most 'successful' churches have nothing to offer people who finding themselves moving from stage three to stage four!

### **Answers by Elizabeth Jennings**

I keep my answers small and keep them near;  
Big questions bruised my mind but still I let  
Small answers be a bulwark to my fear.

The huge abstractions I keep from the light;  
Small things I handled and caressed and loved.  
I let the stars assume the whole of night.

But the big answers clamoured to be moved  
Into my life. Their great audacity  
Shouted to be acknowledged and believed.

Even when all small answers build up to  
Protection of my spirit, I still hear  
Big answers striving for their overthrow

And all the great conclusions coming near.

*We have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. Death is at work in us; but life in you. 1 Corinthians 4.5-7, 12.*

# The Wall: when everything falls apart

*At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* Mark 15.34

St John of the Cross was one of the great spiritual writers of the sixteenth century, still remembered today for his work *The Dark Night of the Soul*. John explains how in the early stages of faith God nurtures the soul just as a mother nurtures her child; he feeds and caresses it, teaches it to pray and to fast and to gain strength through spiritual exercises. But just as the child must eventually stand alone to face the reality of the world, so God draws believers into a place where they must face the reality of their own imperfections and stand naked before him. This is a time when what worked before works no longer, when obstacles and doubts arise on all sides; when we are tempted to give up. In modern writings it's referred to simply as 'the wall.'

*When they are going about these spiritual exercises with the greatest delight and pleasure, and when they believe that the sun of Divine favour is shining most brightly upon them, God turns all this light of theirs into darkness, and shuts against them the door and the source of the sweet spiritual water which they were tasting in God whensoever and for as long as they desired. And thus He leaves them so completely in the dark that they know not whither to go with their sensible imagination and meditation; for they cannot advance a step in meditation, as they were wont to do afore time, their inward senses being submerged in this night, and left with such dryness that they experience no pleasure and consolation in the spiritual things and good exercises wherein they were wont to find their delights and pleasures.*

O that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me;  
when his lamp shone over my head, and by his light I walked through darkness;  
when I was in my prime, when the friendship of God was upon my tent;  
when the Almighty was still with me, when my children were around me;  
when my steps were washed with milk, and the rock poured out for me streams of oil!  
When I went out to the gate of the city, when I took my seat in the square,  
the young men saw me and withdrew, and the aged rose up and stood;  
the nobles refrained from talking, and laid their hands on their mouths;  
the voices of princes were hushed, and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths.  
When the ear heard, it commended me, and when the eye saw, it approved;  
because I delivered the poor who cried, and the orphan who had no helper.

And now my soul is poured out within me; days of affliction have taken hold of me.  
The night racks my bones, and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest.  
With violence he seizes my garment; he grasps me by the collar of my tunic.  
He has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes.  
I cry to you and you do not answer me; I stand, and you merely look at me.  
You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me.  
You lift me up on the wind, you make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm. I know  
that you will bring me to death, and to the house appointed for all living. (*Book of Job, chapters 29-30*)



The dark night of the soul - Hartwig Koppdelaney

## As I Grew Older - Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

It was a long time ago.  
I have almost forgotten my dream.  
But it was there then,  
In front of me,  
Bright like a sun—  
My dream.  
And then the wall rose,  
Rose slowly,  
Slowly,  
Between me and my dream.  
Rose until it touched the sky—  
The wall.  
Shadow.  
I am black.  
I lie down in the shadow.  
No longer the light of my dream before me,  
Above me.  
Only the thick wall.  
Only the shadow.  
My hands!  
My dark hands!  
Break through the wall!  
Find my dream!  
Help me to shatter this darkness,  
To smash this night,  
To break this shadow  
Into a thousand lights of sun,  
Into a thousand whirling dreams  
Of sun!

And yet this experience of overwhelming desolation, says St John of the Cross, is the key to the next stage. It is a kind of purgation, an experience from which if honestly engaged with we will emerge stronger, more realistic about ourselves, more forgiving of others, and able to surrender ourselves to God with a new sense of freedom and joy:

*It is like to one that has come forth from a rigorous imprisonment; it goes about the things of God with much greater freedom and satisfaction of the soul, and with more abundant and inward delight than it did at the beginning before it entered the said night. For its imagination and faculties are no longer bound, as they were before, by meditation and anxiety of spirit, since it now very readily finds in its spirit the most serene and loving contemplation and spiritual sweetness.*

For Job, a prolonged and angry conversation with God leads to a deeper understanding of his purposes, to a complete surrender of his own will, and to a new place of freedom and blessing.

What about you? Have you known a time when everything in your relationship with God and in your ministry worked, and then a time when nothing did, and it seemed that God had forsaken you? Would you be willing to go through such an experience, in order to grow closer to God?

'One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time.'*Andre Gide*

## 5. The journey outward: surrendering to God

*Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. Luke 23.46.*

Those who emerge from this experience of failure and desolation move into a new stage in their faith. This stage is characterised by surrender of the will to God, by a willingness to live in obedience to him. We become less attached to things and to activities; we rush around less, and yet gain a deeper understanding of what it is we are called to do and who it is we are called to be. We are less worried about externals, about appearances and reputations: we have learned to sacrifice our desires to his. Perhaps our most fruitful ministry begins here...

*The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Luke 1.35, 38*

*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. Matthew 28.19-20*



Peter and John hasten to the empty tomb - Eugene Burnand (1850-1921)

## 6. Reflecting God to others: living a life of love

Few people reach the maturity of the sixth and final stage of faith. In this stage our lives are characterised by love – love of God, love of others. We become more compassionate towards other people, more reflective, more tolerant of ambiguity. We learn to live in a way which reflects God's presence in our lives; we experience a new freedom from stress. Some people suspect that we have lost the passion and commitment which once drove us; others begin to call us wise.

*Live by the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Galatians 5.16,22*

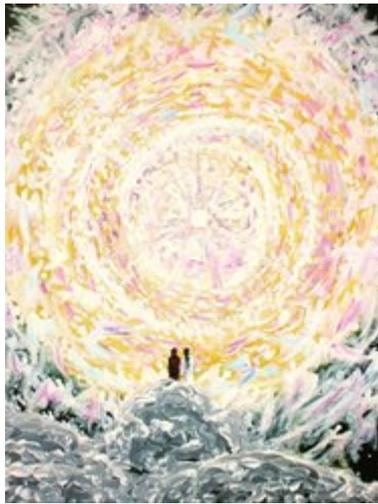
*It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith. 1 Philipians 20-26*

Whatever stage of life we are at, we can rejoice in what the Lord is doing in us and through us, and rest in the assurance that even when things are dark, that is so that they may become light. The key in all these stages of life and faith seems to be to welcome what is happening to us, to embrace the opportunities and be willing to

be changed by the difficulties, knowing and trusting that we are being transformed day by day into the likeness of Christ himself (*2 Corinthians 3.18*). Life with God is demanding, challenging, fulfilling – and real.

### **Monet Refuses the Operation - Liesel Mueller**

Doctor, you say there are no haloes  
around the streetlights in Paris  
and what I see is an aberration  
caused by old age, an affliction.  
I tell you it has taken me all my life  
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,  
to soften and blur and finally banish  
the edges you regret I don't see,  
to learn that the line I called the horizon  
does not exist and sky and water,  
so long apart, are the same state of being.  
Fifty-four years before I could see  
Rouen cathedral is built  
of parallel shafts of sun,  
and now you want to restore  
my youthful errors: fixed  
notions of top and bottom,  
the illusion of three-dimensional space,  
wisteria separate  
from the bridge it covers.  
What can I say to convince you  
the Houses of Parliament dissolve  
night after night to become  
the fluid dream of the Thames?  
I will not return to a universe  
of objects that don't know each other,  
as if islands were not the lost children  
of one great continent. The world  
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,  
becomes water, lilies on water,  
above and below water,  
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow  
and white and cerulean lamps,  
small fists passing sunlight  
so quickly to one another  
that it would take long, streaming hair  
inside my brush to catch it.  
To paint the speed of light!  
Our weighted shapes, these verticals,  
burn to mix with air  
and change our bones, skin, clothes  
to gases. Doctor,  
if only you could see  
how heaven pulls earth into its arms  
and how infinitely the heart expands  
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.



Dante's vision of Paradise - by Theophila (from Gustav Dore)

As we reflect on our own journey so far, it's worth remembering the words of Richard Foster: 'Life with God is an ongoing, ever-changing, relational adventure. It is not a matter of being driven through life, stopping every now and then to get out of the car and see the surroundings. God invites us to climb into the landscape of our journey, to breathe deeply with full lungs, to feel blood pulsing through muscles doing what they were made to do, to experience the wonder of having a body with which to see and hear and smell and taste and touch this astonishing world.'

Alison Morgan

[The Mathetes Trust](#)

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For further reading on the Stages of Faith:

- Bonaventure: *The Journey of the Mind to God* - [online article](#) by Alison Morgan
- St John of the Cross: *The Dark Night of the Soul*
- James Fowler: *Stages of Faith – the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, HarperRow 1981
- Janet Hagberg & Robert Guelich: *The Critical Journey – Stages in the Life of Faith*, Sheffield Publishing Co, 2nd ed 2004
- Richard Rohr: *Falling Upward – A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, Jossey-Bass 2011