

I have taken some liberty in compiling these notes to add a few comments I didn't include in the session because our time was limited.

Gathering

Eleven of us met on the afternoon of Sunday, 18th October, to explore why questions are so important in keeping our faith alive. We live at a time when the old certainties are crumbling and we are not sure what the future holds. Simple answers don't satisfy.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." What are we really hoping for? What convictions lie hidden from our sight?

John Robinson, who was the pastor to many of the pilgrims who left for America on the Mayflower in the early 17th century challenged them to never be satisfied, because "the Lord has more light and truth yet to break forth out of his Holy Word." It is a spiritual discipline to stay curious. What more light and truth awaits us? There is always more to learn.

Curiosity in childhood

Jesus said: "unless you become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3). If we are to respond to the challenges of life we need to rediscover the curiosity of a child.

Young children are full of questions. There is so much that, for them, is new. Their questions begin with "what?" and end in "why?" Yet by the end of primary school children are more likely to be making statements than asking questions. Gradually they pick up a pretty good idea of how the world works.

And so we settle for explanations that we have absorbed from family, school, and increasingly social media. Yet things happens that catches us by surprise. A casual comment by a friend. A thought triggered by a sermon. A news report that shocks us. Perhaps, even, a diagnosis that frightens us. Why me? Why now? Questions that we might suppress or could set us out on a journey of discovery.

We were meeting in the church, a place that for most of us has become very familiar. So we took a few minutes to wander around the church, paying attention to things we may not have noticed before - like a child. The invitation was to pick one thing and linger in front of it for a moment.

We are sensing, feeling and thinking beings. What were we seeing? How did it make us feel? What questions came to mind?

Growing Older

Just because we grow older we shouldn't lose our wonder and excitement at the world around us. At first reading the Apostle Paul seems to contradict Jesus when he wrote: "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." (1 Corinthians 13:11). But this is not an excuse to stop asking questions. Rather it is an acknowledgment that at each stage of life the questions change and our ways of exploring them become deeper. This is a sign of maturity. Sometimes, perhaps more often than we realise, the questions linger, tease us, even haunt us. In his book on Doubt, Os Guinness wrote: "There is no believing without some doubting, and believing is all the stronger for understanding and resolving doubt."

At this point in our session I invited us to turn to the person next to us to talk about this question: Are you feeling more or less confident about how the world works and how your faith supports you in this?

I could have asked "what kind of answer would satisfy you? And why? How important is evidence to support an answer? Will artificial intelligence kill the curious mind? Where does doubt fit in the Christian experience? Information alone cannot satisfy our desires. We are sensing, feeling and thinking beings. How does the answer land? Does it speak into the situation that raised the question for you? How do you feel about it? What does it ask of you? What is the difference between knowledge and wisdom?

Stories

Let me tell a short story of the Hodja Nasreddin, a 13th century philosopher and folk hero from Central Asia whose tall tales may make us laugh until we see ourselves in them.

One night, a neighbour came across the Hodja Nasreddin on his hands and knees in the street apparently searching for something in the pool of light cast by a streetlamp. "What are you doing?" she asked. "Looking for my house key," he said. Naturally, she too got down on her hands and knees to help. They searched together for 20 minutes but to no avail. "Are you sure it's here?" she asked. "Oh no," said Nasreddin. "I dropped it somewhere over there in the bushes; it's just that it's so much easier to look here in the light."

I don't think I am stretching it to see this as a foretaste of the following story. In his argument to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Donald Rumsfeld, at that time the US Secretary of Defence under George W Bush said:

"There are known knowns; there are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns; that is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns - there are things we do not know we do not know." We know that Saddam Hussein is president of Iraq and he's not a good guy and can't be trusted; we know we don't know how many weapons of mass destruction he has (but we assume many); and there are unknown unknowns - we don't know whether he has other

secret weapons he might use against us (but this is possible). So we need to get rid of him and eliminate the threat.

But, says Slavoj Žižek the Slovenian philosopher, there is a fourth possibility that Rumsfeld didn't mention - the unknown knows. The things we don't know we know, or at least ignore or take for granted - the knowledge which doesn't know itself, our own assumptions and motivations and where they come from. Perhaps, if he had, the world would be a very different place today.

And it is not just a problem for those in authority. It was a condition known back in ancient Greece. Socrates was known for the way he exposed how little we know about the contradictions in our own knowledge and beliefs.

Turning to Scripture

I grew up in a Christian family and learned many verses of Scripture by heart. One I still remember is Proverbs 3:5-6.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths".

I have quoted this verse in the form I memorised it in my youth, from the Authorised Version. It seems to me, on this occasion, that "lean not on your own understanding" is a better wording than the more recent NRSV translation: "and do not rely on your own insight".

These words from Proverbs speak directly to my unknown knowns. My ways of making sense of the world are so deeply affected by my own biases and prejudice that I cannot rely on them alone. It is a warning about rushing to a decision or a judgement too quickly. When I take time to acknowledge the Lord my perspective shifts and my actions will be different. I am not suggesting that this is easy and I often act on an impulse, only to regret it afterwards.

It also reminds me that the answer to a question is often a better question. Rainer Maria Rilke, the Austrian poet advised a young, aspiring poet: "be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves".

But this is where things get curiouiser and curiouiser. Poor Alice - having chased the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole, she finds herself in a place which is more and more strange and peculiar. "'Curiouiser and curiouiser!' cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English); 'now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was!'"

So we come to the question: Can the Bible help me get inside my own assumptions and motivations, and can it help me answer the deep questions of life - who am I?, what is the purpose to life?

The Bible isn't an encyclopedia.

It isn't a theology text book.

The Bible doesn't give us straight answers to these fundamental questions. It teases us, intrigues us. Yet, in its stories and its poetry it gives us glimpses into the mystery of life.

Two examples

First from the Old Testament. The book of Ecclesiastes offers this assessment of reality:

- everything is futile (vanity), there is nothing new under the sun (1:1)
- the eye is not satisfied with seeing or the ear filled with hearing (1:8)
- we can never figure out what is going on (8:17)

Why even bother with the hard questions? We'll never figure things out.

Then to the New Testament.

Philo was a Jewish philosopher in Alexandria, born maybe 10 years before Jesus (although there is no evidence that he was aware of Jesus). Steeped in Greek culture, Philo was seeking a way of relating his Jewish faith to Greek culture. The Jews believed in a God whose name could not be spoken and whose image was forbidden. How then are we to understand God? The Greeks had a similar problem. How to explain why there was something rather than nothing. They spoke of a divine wisdom that created and organised the world - they called it the Logos - which translates as the Word. Philo adopted the word, relating it to the Old Testament idea of wisdom that was with God before all things were made.

The writer of John's Gospel picks this up and (in my imagination) says 'thank you very much, I can take this word - Logos - and tell you, "the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us". We have seen the Logos - his name is Jesus. Let me tell you about him.' And so we have the Gospel.

WOW!

When we read this it leaves us "lost in wonder, love and praise" to borrow the last line of Charles Wesley's hymn "Love divine, all loves excelling". This is so amazing and wonderful that it would take the Christian community centuries to make sense of it all. Faith does not offer certainty as the world seeks certainty. But it gives us solid ground on which to stand.

The benefits of curiosity

So what are the benefits of curiosity?

Curiosity is cumulative - a lack of curiosity keeps us trapped in worn out ideas, isolated from others.

It invites us to open ourselves to other people - people whose stories we do not know, but who interest us in some way. Our lives are shaped in different ways as we see through other people's eyes and feel what others feel.

It stretches our minds and hearts and our skills of discernment are enhanced.

And we become more alive, interesting and caring.

Our future as individuals, as a church, and as society depends on what we pay attention to and the questions we ask.

I didn't promise answers to our questions today and I leave you with a question to ponder. What would our church be like if we were more curious? Would we be more aware of what makes each of us tick, could it deepen our relationships, and would this spill over into our relationships with neighbours, workmates, community?

Nurturing curiosity

I end with the following insight from Rachel Naomi Remen a highly regarded pioneer in integrative medicine who died in August. She wrote a lovely book of reflections based on the wisdom she learned from her grandfather who was a Jewish rabbi:

"Perhaps real wisdom lies in not seeking answers at all. Any answer we find will not be true for long. An answer is a place where we can fall asleep as life moves past us to its next question. After all these years I have begun to wonder if the secret of living well is not in having all the answers but in pursuing unanswerable questions in good company" (2000, 338).

Notice that last sentence - "pursuing unanswerable questions in good company". What constitutes good company? Surely not like minded people but those who have a different history and whose lives have shaped different ideas. In such company we can have good conversations in which we give and receive, listen not judge.

There is a kind of collective blindness in our world today. Matthew Syed, the author and broadcaster offers an insight into the disaster of September 11th 2001 that led to the invasion of Iraq, suggesting that it was a failure of intelligence.

He reports that the CIA receives 20,000 applicants for every job yet most of its staff, at least before 9/11, all looked very similar - white, male, Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans. They were hiring people who looked and thought like themselves. When Osama bin Laden declared war on the USA no one in the CIA saw him as a threat. He had a beard reaching down to his chest, he wore simple peasant cloths, he was filmed squatting around a campfire. How could he be a threat? If you are surrounded by people who look like you and think like you, how many opinions are you likely to get?

I suggest Christian curiosity is nurtured in good company, amongst those who are different, with different life experiences, who come to the questions from a different perspective, people whom we can trust because we share a common faith. That's not easy. It takes respect, patience and forgiveness to listen without judgment, to receive as well as give. But in such company the fruits of curiosity can flourish.

Dave Adams/October 2026

For further reading:

Rev'd Andrea Colbrook (27th September 2026) *The questions Jesus asked.*

Rob Garner (2013) *How to be wise: Growing in discernment and love.*

Barnabas Piper (2017) *The Curious Christian: How discovering wonder enriches every part of life.*

Os Guinness (1992), *I believe in Doubt* (<https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/i-believe-in-doubt>)

Os Guinness (1996) *God in the Dark: The assurance of faith beyond a shadow of doubt.*

Endnotes

At the beginning of these notes I mentioned John Robinson's advice to the Pilgrims about to set sail for America. A century later, in 1853, George Rawson wrote a hymn inspired by his words. Here is the first verse:

We limit not the truth of God
To our poor reach of mind,
By notions of our day and sect,
Crude, partial and confined.
Now let a new and better hope
Within our hearts be stirred:
The Lord hath yet more light and truth
To break forth from His Word.