

Judges 6:33-40

Dear God, can I just make sure...? I know you came and spoke to me, made promises to me and burnt up my offering with a holy fire. I know you helped me destroy the altar to Baal and the Ashera pole and kept me safe from a baying mob. But now my enemies have turned up, can I just make sure you really meant what you said? And can you doubly, doubly confirm what you said? Pretty please, don't be mad with me!

"Now all the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples joined forces and crossed over the Jordan and camped in the Valley of Jezreel." How many of them are there? A quick bit of maths from later in the story suggest about 135,000 men. This is a colossal raiding force. And standing opposed to it is young Gideon, a man who as far as we know has never fought before. But he calls up the men of Israel to fight with him.

Are you sure, Lord? I wonder if you've asked that same question. It's quite common in the Bible to see people asking for a sign from God. It's a pretty human response to want clarification especially when faced with an extraordinary situation. Even if we haven't asked God that question, we've almost certainly asked someone else for clarification. "Can I just check I heard you right?" "Are you sure that's what you want me to do?"

Of course, we remember Gideon for the way he asked, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised— look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said." Lo and behold, next morning the ground is dry and the fleece wet. But taking no chances in case this is just the result of strange local weather conditions, Gideon asks again but the other way round – dear God, tomorrow can the fleece be dry and the ground wet? He knows he's chancing his arm because he asks that God not be angry. But much like the beginning of the story, there is no hint of an impatient God and no word of rebuke. Instead, there is just a dry fleece and a wet ground.

This lack of a heavenly rebuke is sign enough that Gideon is not in the wrong for asking. Now, we can mark the words that we find in the bible about living by faith and not sight and wonder whether we shouldn't just be people who faithfully dive into the mission of God, trusting him implicitly. But I don't think the life of faith is ever quite that simple. We know that when God asks us to do something we should do it but, much like Gideon, we all need reassurance at times that we haven't got it all horribly wrong.

The truth is that we all need guidance in life and I think you can distill this passage and incident down to that. Gideon is faced with something way bigger than him and he's asking the question, "have I got it right?" The difference, I would suggest, between us and Gideon is that we are surrounded by the means for good guidance. We have the Bible readily available to us, we are part of a Christian community with years of accumulated wisdom and we have the sure knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ. What did Gideon have? A burnt stone. He seemed to be the only faithful Israelite in his area and as he received these extraordinary commands from God there was no one to

whom he could turn and consult. It is no surprise that he starts to doubt himself. His double asking for a sign is a pragmatic move in a fast paced and mind-blowing situation. "God, I know that you've spoken to me, can I make sure I've got this right?"

Which brings this back to us. What is it we do in moments of uncertainty? When we're not sure, what is our reaction? Now, you can lay out a fleece if you want but I doubt that you'll get a reliable answer that way. The fleece was a one-off moment, or I should say a two-off moment. More seriously, I think the danger for us is that we attempt to go it alone in life and sometimes that can leave us with uncertainty paralyses us. We weren't created to be individuals with a solo-island mentality. We are created to be a part of a community that together has a collective wisdom and understanding. In those big decisions, in those moments of doubt, we have the full knowledge of a cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Whilst most of us won't have spoken directly face-to-face with God, we do know that we can read his word readily and turn to him in prayer. As I was writing that, it did strike me that the two fleece moments are simply enacted prayer, prayer visually laid out before us.

The message from this passage to all of us is that we follow a God who wants us to communicate with him, who wants us to check with him that what we are doing is right. Like Gideon, he has given us all a task – one designed to bring him glory and us fulfilment in life. They aren't tasks you want to get wrong. So lay out your fleeces, or far better talk to God and one another and never be afraid to ask, "have I got this right?"