25th September 2022

Testing

"Courage is not simply *one* of the virtues
but the form of every virtue at the testing point."

C S Lewis, *as referenced by Cyril Connolly in 'The Unquiet Grave'*

Do we have the courage to test God? When I shared the story of Gideon and his army recently, I went back to another story in Gideon's life that has fascinated and disturbed me in equal measure over the years.

Gideon is getting on with threshing the wheat, when an "angel of the Lord" informs him that God has a job for him to do. What follows is an honest and fascinating debate between Gideon and God's intermediary about this call, and the overall purposes of God. Gideon is *nearly* won round, but he needs a sign, the definitive "Is this the right or wrong thing to do?" kind of sign. So he devises a test for God. He takes a wool fleece, leaves it out overnight, and tells God that, if in the morning there's dew on the fleece and not on the ground, he'll know this is God's doing. And sure enough, it turns out that way. But Gideon isn't finished testing God. A second time he puts the fleece out, and this time tells God that if there's dew everywhere but *not* on the fleece, he'll be doubly sure this is God's way. And in the morning, the fleece is bone-dry, and Gideon is convinced.

I've often laid out a metaphorical fleece to test God and nothing has happened. No sign, clarity, revelation or certainty. So what do I do? No fleece, perhaps, but through thoughtfulness and time, wisdom and experience, a purpose is discerned. God? Yes, it feels that way. Success? Usually. But then, that really doesn't matter, if the testing process has been undertaken with honesty, care and integrity, dew-covered fleece or not.

My friend, the late Farquhar McArthur, and I talked often about this. His image was not a fleece, but a corridor with lots of rooms. His testing of God was to use his own abilities to walk that corridor and try the doors. If one opened, he would know soon enough if it was a room to be entered. If one was stiff, he would know soon enough whether it could be opened further. If one looked inviting but wouldn't budge, then so be it. It was still worth a try as he passed on. Testing God? Yes, it was that for Farquhar, and is now for me. C S Lewis is right. That's courage enough at any testing point, like Gideon and God, learning from working together.

A prayer for today

To test you, Lord? "Go ahead," you say. "You'll soon know the way." Amen

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon Also available at https://swallowsnestnet.wordpress.com