

## **Faith and Doubt** - The Gospel reading for the day was John 20, 19-29

There's a story I heard many years ago about a Bishop who was taking a service in a country church because the Rector had been taken ill suddenly. As he began the service one of the churchwardens called out, "You'll have to speak up Bishop. The agnostics in this church are very difficult".

If I were to ask if there is anyone here who can truthfully say that they have never told a lie, I don't suppose any hands would go up. But if I were to ask if there is anyone with a real religious faith who can truthfully say that they have never had any doubts about the faith, I don't suppose there would be many more, either. Never having any doubts may not, in fact, be a sign of faith but of fear. Some people dare not think about their beliefs for fear of what they might discover. Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living and I would say, similarly, that the unexamined faith may not be a very deep one.

Now I don't want to appear negative and I certainly don't want to damage the faith of anyone who has a deep love for God and carries out his will faithfully, but has never had any doubt that God exists or about the Incarnation or the Resurrection. But I'm not one of them. Doubts may be evidence of a commitment to serve God with our whole mind as well as with our heart and soul and strength. Doubt is not comfortable, of course, and it often catches us unawares. In the very act of praying we may suddenly think how ridiculous our situation is. Here we are talking to – whom? Is there anybody there listening? Or doubt may grow more slowly, when some doctrine or belief which satisfies our feelings seems not to satisfy our minds. I don't think there is any harm in

questioning God or in complaining to him. There is a story of St. Theresa of Avila that I find encouraging in this respect. She was going on a long and difficult journey with some of her sisters. All sorts of things went wrong and eventually, in a deep patch of mud, a wheel came off the cart they were riding on. With her legs in mud up to the knees, she looked up and said, "Lord, if this is how you treat your friends, I'm not surprised you have so few of them!"

One of the things I'm looking forward to, if I get to heaven, is getting God in a corner and asking him some difficult questions, difficult that is for me, not, I suppose, for him – or her.

I think St. Thomas has been unfairly treated, calling him Doubting Thomas. I think I would have reacted very much like he did in that situation – I would want real evidence. If when we arrived at church this morning the people who had been at the 8.30 service were standing around outside, looking rather dazed and saying, "Jesus came and stood among us in church this morning. We saw him and he spoke to us", how would you react?

We may fear to admit our doubts because other people are shocked and would condemn us. Some years ago a university lecturer in theology caused a stir by saying that he had lost his faith. He was attacked in some sections of the press, as if he had committed a dreadful sin. But when sincere searchers for truth are assailed by doubt they don't deserve condemnation; they deserve understanding. Even the faith of Jesus seems to

have failed for a few moments at least on the cross, when he called out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

So, I believe, instead of condemning those who have difficulty in belief we should pray that God in his mercy will open up fresh paths for those who doubt, and, if necessary, for ourselves too. For it may well be that when we doubt, we are being challenged, not to surrender God, but to surrender an inadequate picture of God which we have in our own mind. Our human picture of God can never be the whole truth. So when we feel we are losing our faith it may be just the opposite. We may be being led to a faith that is deeper and more mature. A well-known Congregationalist preacher, Leslie Weatherhead, more than fifty years ago, wrote towards the end of his life, “The older I become the less I believe – but the more firmly I believe it”.

I suppose my text for this sermon is the call of the man who brought his epileptic son to Jesus to be healed, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief”. This call can be interpreted in two ways. He may be saying ‘I do believe, help me to believe more’ or he may be saying ‘I believe; help me even though I don’t believe enough’. Those two aren’t quite the same, but you may need to think about it more later to see the significance of the difference. He’s not dialing the Citizens Advice Bureau – he’s dialing 999.

So for those of us for whom this is a personal plea as well, what more can be said? Perhaps the story of St. Thomas’s experience can help us. Notice that certainty didn’t come to him through thinking about a set of beliefs, but through

personal experience of the presence of Jesus. He became sure, not of things about Jesus, but of Jesus himself. Secondly, notice that certainty came to him in the presence of a group of people who already believed. We don't know why he wasn't there a week before – perhaps he was one of those people who prefer to be alone when they are sad. By cutting himself off from the others, however, he cut himself off from the opportunity to meet Jesus again. I don't mean, of course, that you can't be aware of the presence of Jesus in silence and solitude – indeed they are part of full Christian experience – but at the same time I'm sure that one is nowhere more likely to find the presence of Christ than in the company of those who love him. He is recorded by St. Matthew (ch.18, v.20) as saying, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst”.

Thirdly, and this is perhaps the most important truth for us today, faith comes to people not because of the use of reason and argument, but because in one way or another, like St. Thomas, they come face to face with the living Christ. So personal contact, private fellowship and friendship with Christ in prayer is the only thing that can convince someone of the truth of the Christian faith and, in particular, of the Resurrection

What if Christ seems to have withdrawn his presence, though? What is one to do then? I can only suggest 'keeping on keeping on'. I believe God will not easily let us go. We should not easily let our faith go. For even though it may seem for some reason that we have temporarily lost God, we may still be able to remain faithful to the things of God like love,

holiness, beauty and truth. There is a moving passage in the Fourth Gospel, where Jesus turns to the Twelve, after many of his disciples had deserted him and asks, "Do you also want to go away?" Simon Peter replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Where shall we find anyone who can offer us what Christ offers us or where can we find light which in any way compares with the light that shines from the life of Jesus? There is a famous cartoon of Bruce Bairnfather's from the First World War which shows Old Bill, the experienced old soldier, sheltering in a shell hole with a younger man, who is obviously complaining about their uncomfortable situation, and Bill says, "If you knows of a better 'ole, go to it". So, if there is nowhere better to go, let us simply stay where we are. Let us wait patiently, praying with what is left of our faith, "Lord, I believe: help my unbelief".

I'm sure you've heard before, but let me remind you of the apocryphal story of the man who had a dream that he was in heaven and was looking down on a sandy shore where he could see two sets of footprints one of which was his own. He asked Jesus whose the other set was. "They are mine" said Jesus. "I accompanied you throughout your life." Further on one set of prints stopped and there was only one set, but deeper printed in the sand. "Why did you leave me when I had doubts and difficulties to bear Lord?" the man asked. "I didn't leave you", Jesus replied, "I was carrying you".

Now, a prayer with which to finish:

In times of doubts and questionings, when our belief is perplexed by new learning, new teaching, new thought, when

our faith is strained by creeds, by doctrines, by mysteries beyond our understanding, Lord, give us the faithfulness of learners and the courage of believers in you; give us boldness to examine and faith to trust all truth; patience and insight to master difficulties; and in times of change, to grasp new knowledge readily and to combine it loyally and honestly with the old; alike from stubborn rejection of new revelations and from hasty assurance that we are wiser than our fathers, help us and save us, we humbly pray, O Lord.