

First Sunday after Easter 2007
15 April 2007
Preacher: Julia Denny-Dimintriou

Readings:

Psalm 2 Rev 1: 9-19
 John 20: 19-31 Acts 5 27-32

Continue from where Nic left off last week on Easter Sunday when talked about Thomas, or as he is known, 'Doubting Thomas'. Nic suggested that there is a little bit of Thomas in each of us, so I want to pick up on that but first, look at process of how we come to faith.

Scripture often presents belief as process that takes place in stages. Sure many of us know that from our own experience. Good examples are Thomas, culminating in his encounter with the risen Christ read today; and Peter's journey to faith that has its climax in his confession recorded in Mark 8: 29.

First stage involves recognition that Jesus is an unusual person. Many today think of him in these terms – a great man, a heroic figure, a gifted teacher. Muslims recognize him as a prophet and Mahatma Gandhi a Hindu admired him.

Second stage involves beginning of a new vision and comes with an understanding of doctrine and ability to recite it correctly such as Peter's confession in answer to Jesus' question 'And you, who do you say I am?' Peter's answer was 'You are the Christ' or the Messiah, which is a doctrinally correct statement, but is not the whole story. There is more because the meaning of Jesus, who he is, is intimately bound up with his death on the cross. Which is where Thomas comes in and the nub of what I want to say today – it was through doubt that Thomas came to the deeper faith indicated by the statement: "My Lord and my God!" So did Peter, whose experience of doubt was tinged with the bitterness of denial. Interesting to note in passing that Thomas' statement of faith marks the climax of John's gospel because it sheds light on the main purpose of the gospel recorded in v 30-31: *'Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.'*

Pause

People are often critical of Thomas because he had to see for himself. The phrase 'a doubting Thomas' has a negative meaning. BUT Maybe Thomas was actually the most honest of the disciples. How often do we use the phrase "Seeing is believing"? Perhaps it helps us to feel superior to people like Thomas who have doubts, but are nevertheless seeking. We have not seen Jesus, nor the

wounds, nor heard his teachings directly. I want to suggest that perhaps we are afraid of admitting doubt. However, in fact, doubt is not just an element of faith but perhaps actually a prerequisite for faith, as we see today from Thomas. He and all the disciples were examples of faith, but also examples of doubt.

Hat

To prove that I am not talking through my hat, I want to quote some heavy-weights to back me up. First of all, James Fowler, research on faith development was a seminal book for me 'Stages of Faith'. He says that 'substantive doubt is a part of the life of faith' because we hold different images of God at different stages of life and only with the death of successive images can new and more adequate ones arise. Only as we move through stages of belief can we move into deeper relationship with God and **keep moving** throughout our lives. Then there is Thomas Merton, well-known Catholic monk, and spiritual writer. He said "You cannot be a man of faith unless you know how to doubt.'

Closer to home is Professor John Suggit, former Professor in now defunct dept Theology at RU and one foremost Anglican thinkers and theologians in this country. I am indebted to him for elements of my own spiritual formation and for inspiration for this sermon. He said that one of the greatest gifts to humans is the ability to doubt, which distinguishes us from robots and computers. He adapted Descartes' '*Cogito ergo sum*' 'I think therefore I am' to '*Dubito, ergo homo sum*' 'I doubt, therefore I am a human being'. He said it is our ability to doubt that helps us to see the provisional and incomplete nature of all human endeavour and to recognize that divine revelation itself is fraught with ambiguity.

One of principles of scientific progress is the process of examining and perhaps discarding the hypotheses on which opinions and conclusions are based. Isn't that similar to what happens in the process of coming to faith? Suggit certainly thinks it is – he says the same principle that operates in science should be at work in our faith. We may never think that we have found all the answers because Christianity does not pretend to provide the certainty of mathematical propositions. Religious beliefs represent truths to live by, not truths that can be added to the fund of human knowledge. Thomas was like a scientist because he was not too easily convinced by what others said. In that he is an example to us. Suggit says that if, before we believe, we want to be as certain of the truth of Christ as we are that $7 + 3 = 10$, then we wait in vain. Our expression of faith always goes hand in hand with a certain doubt, or it should, because there is more to faith than looking for evidence.

Pause

Guilt

In the light of this affirmation of the acceptability and – in fact – importance of doubt, it is interesting that we seem reluctant to express our doubts and

admissions of doubt are often prefaced by an apology and often coloured with guilt. Why do we feel guilty about having doubts? Perhaps part of **an** answer is that there seems to be a perception that doubting means you have little or no faith. That doubt is the opposite and the enemy of faith. This makes us reluctant to be branded ‘a bad guy’ or a ‘bad example’ along with ‘Thomas the Doubter’. According to Fowler and Suggit doubt is actually **not** the opposite of faith. For Fowler, the opposite is nihilism – total rejection of any current beliefs and of the possibility of finding any meaning in life. Suggit says the opposite of faith is disobedience to the demands of Christ, refusal to accept him as Lord.

Faith

So then what is faith in addition to being a gift and work of the HS? Obviously it is many things and different for different people, but in this context, Suggit says it is the deliberate acceptance of Jesus as true for us and a determination to live by the light of the gospel **in spite** of our doubts. He suggests that our faith needs to be ready to admit doubts and uncertainties so that we can be open to what the Lord is saying to us in various ways. So that we can move through the different images of God and stages of faith that characterise our walk with God. In Thomas’ encounter with Jesus there was a personal challenge for him, which Jesus holds out to us in a similar way. Thomas’ response could only be personal commitment, active denial or avoidance. The same options are open to us.

Pause

So where to?

So where does that leave us? In posing some questions in this regard, I want to focus on us as an Anglican community specifically, hope that you will forgive me if you are not an Anglican and find something useful all the same.

Firstly, to return to the 3-stage image of maturing belief – which, by the way is just one of many concepts of faith development – the most obvious question is ‘Where are you?’ I want to suggest respectfully, that it is possible to stay in the early stages of faith all our lives. In stage 1 or 2 of the biblical model I mentioned. Literature speaks of ‘cultural Christians’ or for us that would be ‘cultural Anglicans’ who are born, bred Anglicans who know the liturgy and the church calendar inside out but have only a nodding acquaintance with Jesus. One of the reasons for this that I want to draw attention to – and there are many – is that Anglicanism often tends to take a very adult, intellectual approach to faith. We can get away with equating faith with assent to a set of doctrines and adherence to a set of practices. I say ‘get away with’ because this is actually an evasion of the nitty-gritty of more developed faith which has to grapple with doubt and uncertainty. With the reality, as I said earlier, of the fact that the meaning of Jesus and who he is, is intimately bound up with the painful, ugly reality of his death on the cross.

I want to suggest that to move through the stages of faith development into facing our doubts and the demands of being Good Friday people, our faith has to move from our heads to our hearts. From assent to a set of doctrines to relationship with the Risen Jesus Christ whom Thomas encountered. And perhaps here too, is where Anglicans can come unstuck. We may be more comfortable operating with our heads than with our hearts so that faith understood as personal relationship with Jesus as our personal saviour may not come easily. As I said earlier, there is a personal challenge in Thomas' encounter with Jesus. A challenge that we all face too – the call to personal commitment lived out daily in the theatre of our lives. We have to decide to avoid, deny or commit to him and not just once for all but every day in a myriad ways and situations.

I also want to make a plea for us to give ourselves and each other permission not only to have doubts but also to express them without feeling guilty. Let's allow ourselves and each other to recognize that maybe, just maybe, they are not a hindrance to faith but an essential part of it. Nic and I have often joked about starting a group called Skeptics Anonymous to create a space where it is safe to say 'I struggle with this or that aspect of faith.' Perhaps we need to get on and actually start such a group – let me know what you think of that idea.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to draw attention to Jesus' response to Thomas' statement of faith: "*Because you have seen me, you have believed, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*" v 29. HEY, That's us! Us and all people through ages who have believed without having experience that Thomas did.

In that faith, let us move with what Suggit called 'confident uncertainty' and keep moving as we daily assent to **and** live out the statement of faith that has rung out through the ages since Thomas first made it: "My Lord and my God."

Amen