

**Church of the Ascension, Hilton****Julia Denny-Dimitriou****First Sunday after Easter 2008****Readings:**

Ex 15: 1-11

Psalm 16 5-11

1 Peter 1: 3-9

John 20: 19-31

The sense of humour of God or the rector at work or perhaps both – this time last year I was in exactly the same place, preaching about Thomas the Doubter. Want to take different approach this year.

All familiar with story of Thomas – from whom seems we get phrase ‘seeing is believing’. Will not believe testimony of disciples, wants to see nail holes put fingers in them, fist in sword wound, otherwise will not believe. Eight days later gets his wish.

Profound truth about human behaviour at work in this account. Been expressed in different ways by different people but central idea is that

‘We are more likely to act our way into new forms of thinking/believing than we are to think our way into new forms of acting.’

Thomas was not prepared to shift to a new way of believing and thinking about Jesus until he had acted in particular ways – until he had experienced the reality of the risen Christ for himself.

That is true of people in all kinds of life contexts. Issue that comes to mind first for me is issue of women priests. Many people, both men and women, were strongly opposed to ordination of women. Just could not make paradigm shift required. Until, either willingly or unwillingly, they experienced the ministry of a woman priest. We knew a man who wept and repented of his hard heartedness after several years of opposition to ordained women. He often said, “I had to experience a woman’s ministry to know that it was ok.”

This idea of action being required first before belief, or a shift in belief, is explored by Karen Armstrong. She quotes Anselm of Canterbury, 12C teacher of faith and Archbishop of Canterbury. His famous saying is often quoted: "I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand." However, according to Armstrong, what he actually said was, "I commit myself in order that I may understand." Committing oneself speaks to me of action; specifically, of choice followed by action.

In our post-modern society dominated by the cult of "Me myself and I" commitment is a dirty word, for many people, particularly in relation to matters of faith and belief.

Many people, particularly young people, are wary of being committed to anything but themselves and their own interests.

As Thomas' experience shows us today, and Anselm's words also suggest, the life of faith requires commitment, both in terms of taking the first step into what may look like the abyss of belief; and in terms of persevering on the journey through the inevitable hills and valleys, the smooth and the rough patches. This life of faith requires that we take risks. For many people there is little that feels more risky than committing themselves. This life of faith requires more than believing or saying that we believe, it requires that we act out our belief.

Here I want to come back to where I started, to the idea that

'We are more likely to act our way into new forms of thinking than we are to think our way into new forms of acting.'

Armstrong makes point that in most religions faith is not about belief, but about practice. Not about orthodoxy, right belief, but about orthopraxis, right practice.

She writes:

"Religion is not about accepting 20 impossible propositions before breakfast but about doing things that change you. Religion says 'if you behave in a certain way, you will be transformed'. The myths and traditions of religion are not true because they conform to some a particular reality, but because they are life-enhancing. They tell you how human nature functions, but you will not discover their truth unless you apply them to your own life and put them into practice."  
*The Spiral Staircase* pg 270

Like Thomas, there are those of us who are skeptical and have difficulty with elements of Scripture and doctrine. We cannot escape the reality that we have to commit ourselves and act despite our doubts and difficulties. I have talked before about James Fowler, research on faith development was an important book for me *Stages of Faith*. Stage 5 of his 6-stage theory is called 'conjunctive faith' and is characterised by an ability to recognize the matters of faith are often 'both and' rather than 'either/or'. This faith recognizes that the symbols, stories, doctrines and liturgies offered by its own faith tradition and others, are inevitably partial and incomplete, limited to a particular people's experience of God. Fowler says this faith can also be described as 'willed naiveté'.

Whether we are at stage 5 or not, I think something of this 'willed naiveté' is required of all of us. It is this which allows us to say 'I choose to commit myself, to believe, and to act despite the fact that the belief system to which I choose to commit is imperfect, sometimes, perhaps, even inadequate.'

Reflecting on the current context in which we live I was struck by the relevance of this concept of 'willed naiveté' to contemporary SA as well as to the life of faith. In her latest book, *The Biography of the Bible*, Armstrong writes,

"A period of wrenching social change is often characterised by anxiety. People feel lost and impotent... they cannot see the direction their society is taking but experience its subterranean transformation in incoherent, sporadic ways" (pg 158). She could be writing about our society, but she was actually referring to the upheaval of the early 16thC, which produced none other than Martin Luther.

I am sure I do not need to go into detail about current mood of our society. There is lots to complain about and many people considering whether to pack for Perth or answer the call of Canberra. I want to suggest that just our faith demands that we choose, commit ourselves and act despite the fact that the belief system is imperfect; so too living in contemporary SA requires daily exercise of willed naiveté. If we choose to stay or have no option but to stay, I want to suggest that it is beholden on us to do more than complain. Particularly if we say we believe. I must confess to becoming impatient and more than just a little unsympathetic to the 'whingeing and whining mode of being'.

I am certainly not denying that there are problems, 'issues' and challenges; but just as faith requires choice followed by action, the very challenges this country faces beg the question, 'What are we doing about it?'

Questions in this vein were raised at Vestry meeting about our parish giving. Well, what **are** we doing about HIV/Aids, Aids orphans, inadequate education and health services, global warming, the destruction of the environment, poverty, unemployment, social injustice and corruption. What are **you** doing about these things? How are you exercising God's call to you to show compassion? What are you doing to live out the truths of the faith so that you will be changed?

Thomas' action led to belief and ultimately to transformation. Question for us and everyone who believes without having experience what Thomas did "What will we choose to do that will transform our society and us?"

A thoroughly post-modern response to my question is to ask another thoroughly post-modern question "What's in it for me?" The answer that the Good News offers is that God always gives more than God demands. The paradoxical thing about exercising compassion is that the rewards we reap usually far outweigh the effort we make. Armstrong says compassion brings us directly into the presence of God because it dethrones ego from the centre of our lives and puts others there, breaking down the selfishness that holds us back from experiencing the sacred. She quotes Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel who said that when we put ourselves at the opposite end of ego, that is where God is.

In conclusion:

Like Thomas, we all have to decide, and keep deciding whether to avoid, deny or commit ourselves to believing in the Risen Lord Jesus, and then practise that commitment, not just once for all, but every day in a myriad ways and situations. May we all, like Thomas, move from saying 'Unless I see I will not believe' to being able not only to say, but also to live out Thomas' bold statement of faith that has rung out through the ages: "My Lord and my God."