

Easter 2, April 8th 2018:

Acts 2: 42-47 (RC), John 20:19-31

The Place of Scepticism and Doubt in Rigorous Faith

Introduction

Thomas; referred to by history as the “doubter” because of his scepticism about the resurrection event, has received a range of responses.

In a sense he is important precisely because he raises a question about the place, the legitimacy of doubt in Christian belief, the acceptability of critical, open-minded questioning in Christian belief. In my experience, this question of doubt marks off two broad Christian responses, two broad Christian attitudes: the first, Christians who hold the view that faith is a given, a product that needs to be preserved, repeated, recapitulated; passed on much unchanged from one generation to another. The sense of this group is that the story needs to be re-told in order for faith to continue. The second group includes those Christians who believe that faith is something that cannot simply be passed on as a static product, but must in the process of its presentation, be re-interpreted, re-explained, re-spun in the light of changing circumstances, changing knowledge and new questions. For the first group, faith is essentially *unchanging* and is to be repeated. For the second group, faith is *always changing* because everything around us changes: the way we live, the way we think, the questions we ask. Who is right?

Let's begin with the gospel reading itself and then turn to more recent thought, because the answers vary, the answers are not entirely consistent.

Text

In our reading from John's Gospel, Thomas is no hero; in fact he is a dubious type of guy. Let us remember the purpose of the author of John's Gospel: he writes his Gospel he says, “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that *through believing* you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31). In this light, John clearly sees that Thomas suffers from a major failing: unlike the others, *he has failed to believe without seeing*. Thomas is not just a doubter; in fact this is a rather soft term which does not appear in the Gospel. Instead, Thomas is really considered, at least in the early stages, an unbeliever, for in John's Gospel there are really only two classes of people: believers and the rest, the contrast is between faith and unfaith: The word of disapproval of Thomas is summed up in John's chastisement, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Under the stresses that John's community suffered at the time (around 90AD) - hostility, expulsion from the dominant Jewish synagogue, and social rejection - it is not surprising that doubt, that questions were not tolerated within the fledgling Christian church. After all what was necessary was cohesion, tight unity, total agreement. That is what communities under pressure must always do to survive, Christian communities included.

In short, the memory of Thomas served as an example to John's community of how *not* to believe.

Changing Context

But John's Gospel's harsh view of Thomas, is I think ill-considered, for there is something in Thomas which is rather wonderful: a mind of sceptical rigor and integrity that is mature and courageous. Indeed, it is a mind that suits, that sits well with the Western spirit.

Some years ago, the Christian psychologist and educationalist, John Westerhoff, spoke of faith in three ways:

Experienced Faith: the faith of early childhood where actions are imitated: for example, praying the Lord's Prayer – "this is what we do", explain the child's parents.

Then *there is Affiliative Faith*: the faith of childhood and adolescence, which is connected to the group and what the group does: "this is what we believe and this is what we do - this is our group church".

Finally, Westerhoff speaks of *Searching Faith*, which asks questions and states, "This is what I believe." This model of faith is one that will not blindly accept what others have said. It does not simply cave in to the group consensus. This model of faith adds serious 'head' to the 'heart'.

What is important to remember is that most of us are at all three stages in different ways and in different proportions and that *searching* faith is usually grounded in both *experienced* and *affiliative* faith. The difficulty is that the one who searches and asks questions, questions that others have not thought of or cannot comfortably respond to, is often misunderstood and marginalized from church communities. Many to the great loss of the church, give-up and walk away and in the process we lose the best minds and at times the greatest hearts. While I was at Boston University, the Pew Research Trust revealed that over the last 40 years, the average measured IQ of those who had become clergy, had declined significantly: concluding that talented people have gone elsewhere. To his credit, Thomas did not go elsewhere; He finally died as a martyr in South East India: his remains are located on a hill on the outskirts of Madras (Chennai)

William Barclay once wrote

There is more ultimate faith in the man who insists on being sure than the man who glibly repeats things which he has never thought out, and which he does not really believe. It is doubt like that which in the end arrives at certainty.... Thomas doubted in order to become sure; and when he did become sure, his surrender to certainty was complete. If a man fights his way through his doubts to the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord, he has attained to a certainty that the man who unthinkingly accepts can never reach.

By doubting we come to inquiry, by inquiry we come to truth.