

Sermon on Sunday 3 July 2022

by Rev. Alan Stewart

(Readings: John 20. 24-29 & Ephesians 2. 19-22)

The sin of certainty

Regrets? I've had a few...

Including, aged 16, turning down a ticket to an early gig at the local Uni of a then unknown band, The Smiths.

That pales into insignificance, of course, compared with poor old Thomas.

While the other disciples' worlds were being blown apart by nothing short of resurrection - the shock of the bleedin' century - Thomas missed it. And then when, finally, they get to share their news, he refuses point blank to believe them. And who can blame him? - dead men don't rise.

For eight long days, Thomas is the odd disciple out... while the others rejoice and scratch their heads and tell their stories, Thomas sits alone in his refusal to accept the impossible. And, actually, that took courage.

Over the years, Thomas has spoken for many of us. He has become the patron saint for those of us who remain undecided, agnostic, doubtful.

In my experience, there are at least three territories of religious doubt. The first is doubting God's existence; for which I'm afraid we'll never have empirical proof. We can point to various arguments, but, in the end, it comes down to choosing to trust that God is. Second is doubting God's love or goodness, often brought on by a crisis or tragedy. Usually, in my experience, that kind of doubt sets in because we have oversimplified or unrealistic expectations of what God can and will do. And, thirdly, the one I

find myself living with most often; doubts that question what others have told us about God.

You'll have heard me say many times that doubt is not the enemy or indeed the opposite of faith. Healthy doubt is about having an open heart and an open mind; having the willingness to hold certain things lightly and in tension; the desire to embrace questions rather than avoid them and the ability to live without all the answers. Healthy doubt is a world away from skepticism. Healthy doubt prunes our lives to make them stronger; more rooted; it forces us to grow up.

Healthy doubt is part of faith because questions can lead us to God. A famous rabbi once said, 'We are closer to God when we are asking questions than when we think we have the answers'.

When Thomas and Jesus finally come face to face, all doubts dissolve - but notice that Jesus doesn't completely let him off the hook; there's a challenge in his 'Blessed are those who haven't seen me and yet still believe'. Thomas had, after all, spent three years in the company of this Jesus; he'd seen extraordinary things; heard Jesus promise resurrection.

Faith is best understood as trust. It's not about ticking off a whole set of belief statements.

We all crave certainty... in our relationships, in our politics, in our religion; that's why fundamentalism does so well. If, however, the search for certainty is what we build our relationship with God upon then, sooner or later, I guarantee we will hit something that undermines those beliefs. When that happens, there are three ways to respond: dig a deeper trench, jump ship or step out into the unknown. The Bible is full of people stepping out into the unknown; expressing their uncertainty and doubt.

In his book 'The sin of certainty (why God desires our trust rather than our correct beliefs)', Peter Enns says that the very foundations of Christianity, the Incarnation (the belief that the

divine took human skin and became one of us) and the Resurrection (Jesus' victory over death) are 'beyond what is knowable by most every standard we use to know everything else – experience, observation and testing. These mysteries,' he says, 'are known differently'; they are known only by trust.

When we are convinced of something to the point of refusing to question it, what room is there for faith? It is the elevation of 'correct beliefs' that has and continues to tear the church apart and that is, I think, sin.

In thinking about God, our language, our metaphors, our logic, our interpretation will always fall short. In the end, we are all agnostics – we only know in part; we glimpse but in a mirror darkly. I don't imagine that God cares whether we've got everything right; he's more interested (like Jesus with Thomas) in the question 'do we trust him?' Blessed are those who have not seen and yet trust.

The ex-stand-up comedian, now Pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber has written an extraordinary set of beatitudes which include these words:

'Blessed are the agnostics.

Blessed are they who doubt, those who aren't sure, who can still be surprised.'

Unlike certainty, faith is not a destination; it is, to use a hackneyed word, a journey. Doubt is only the enemy of faith if we equate faith with certainty. Doubt is spiritual relocation; God's way of saying, 'It's time to move on'. Peter Enns goes as far as to say, 'Doubt is sacred; God's instrument. Resist the fight or flight impulse; pass through it, patiently, honestly and courageously for however long it takes. Because transformation takes time'. This is not the easier path; the path of certainty is much easier and more attractive by far... but my experience is that it is the path to a deeper life. Doubt in time can help us build foundations that last.

I've wrestled much of my life and that wrestling has produced a deep conviction and foundation that boils down to this - God is Christ-like. God is with us; God is for us. God is love.

Just as the opposite of faith is not doubt; so the opposite of love isn't hate. The opposite of love actually is apathy. The only way to understand love is to feel it, engage with it, step into it.

And, just like love, God himself can only be 'experienced'. We can trade stories and form complex and convincing theologies, but in the end we have to experience him. How do we do that? When the writer Philip Toynbee was dying of cancer, he asked a visiting priest why he had chosen to become a priest...

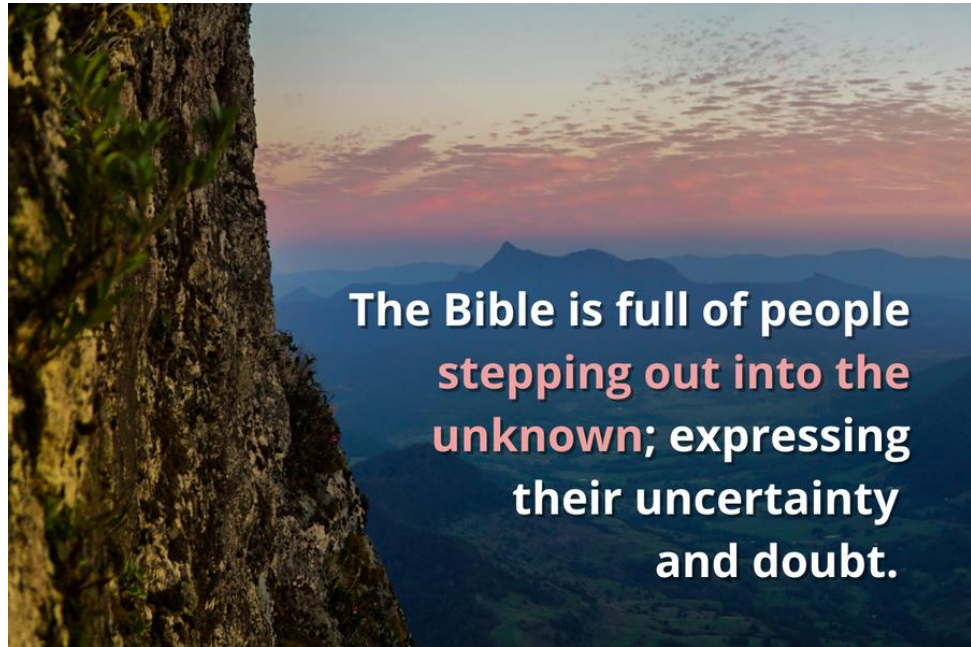
'He told me that he had tried several things first - engineering and psychiatric nursing among them - but this was the first pool he had stepped into in which he couldn't feel the bottom.' In Toynbee's words, 'A wonderful answer'.

Stepping into the pool takes faith which is something we all possess. We all have faith in something, so it involves redirecting that, letting go of our security, if necessary suspending our logic, becoming vulnerable and daring to trust that we are not stepping into nothingness but into a presence which is love.

As the writer Michael Mayne says, 'Faith, like hope, is an attitude of the heart, a changed orientation of the spirit. It is to trust that love is at the heart of that Mystery for whom the English name is God.'

Thomas was a twin, and within us all are these twins of doubt and faith; they are what drive us forward; both refuse to allow us to stand still. They are both gifts waiting to be opened. Jesus said, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'. There comes a time for us all when we have to step over our doubt and embrace something or, more importantly, someone with faith.... it is in that moment of risk that we meet the One

who stands among us this morning and again says, 'Peace be with you'.



Readings:

John 20. 24-29

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus^[a]), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Ephesians 2. 19-22

¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.