

Sermon for 7th April 2024 – Year B – Easter 2

Preached at St John Baillieston

John 20:19-end

Sermon

This story of so-called Doubting Thomas, in John's Gospel, has often been used in the Church to portray doubt or questioning as some kind of failing. Even since I have been in Glasgow, I have received emails from people who, despite a deep longing for God, won't come to a church service because they can't believe in all the words of the creed – as if the rest of us have never had any doubts!

This reaction is not at all their fault – the Church has often pointed to Jesus' comment that "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" as a way of avoiding awkward debate. The implication is that if you doubt, or if you question, you don't really belong, you're not a true Christian. Real Christians apparently have an unquestioning, innocent faith that doesn't allow for the merest glimmer of doubt.

This message makes people in the Church scared to be authentic. How can you talk about your honest doubts if you're afraid you'll be criticised or even ridiculed? So, people often don't like talking about God or Jesus or their faith or even why they come to church on Sundays, because they don't want anyone to know that they have doubts.

The reality is that for most people, doubt is not only a perfectly normal part of faith, it's an essential part of faith. I'd even go so far as to say that faith is not fully mature until it is seasoned throughout with doubt, like yeast in dough.

Did you know that when someone who feels called to be a priest goes to the selection conference where they're interviewed, one of the main questions they

are always asked is, “Tell me about a time when you have had doubts about your faith.”? The question is not “have you ever had doubts?” but rather, “tell me about the doubts you’ve had”, because it’s assumed you’ve had doubts. And it’s assumed you still have doubts.

Frankly, if you claim not to have doubts, the examiners won’t believe you. I actually said during my own interview in 2015 that since coming to faith for the second time in my mid-thirties, I hadn’t really had any doubts, and I assure you the interviewer’s eyebrows went straight up to the roof, and he immediately said to me, “so, tell me how you explain all the violence, death and destruction in the world, and all the natural disasters? If God is good, and all powerful, why are these things happening?” I eventually had to admit that yes, it is always possible that my faith is mistaken, that I can never be absolutely sure that what I believe is true, and yet something in me is so stirred up and emotionally moved by the possibility that it *might* be true, that I’ll risk making a fool of myself, even though I’ll never know the truth for sure until I die.

I think this is the real reason Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”. Not because doubt is a great failing, but because people who trust in God’s love and message of forgiveness, inclusion, and compassion *despite* all their doubts, become immovable in their faith. Their faith has become a house built on rock, rather than sand, and how wonderfully ironic that that rock is made of doubt.

Honestly, the real problem with Thomas is not that he doubts that Jesus is alive, but that his envy at not being present when Jesus first appears to the disciples causes him to reject the friends with whom he has shared life for so long. Until now, what has characterised the community of Jesus most of all was mutual love and trust. Thomas breaks that trust when he declares “Unless I see for myself, I will not believe”. He’s essentially telling all his friends that they are cruel liars, or deluded idiots, or both.

This suspicion of our companions in faith sadly tears at the heart of many church communities even today, especially when there's no obvious leader. Many of us will know what it feels like to have our motivations distrusted, to have people assume the worst of us, rather than the best. So many people have left churches and ministry because of this – there is almost nothing worse in a community that seeks to teach compassion and forgiveness than to be unfairly mistrusted or to have our good intentions maligned.

Thomas of course, is prevented from causing too great a rift because Jesus himself appears to him a week later and provides the first-hand evidence that he craves. Thomas immediately over-compensates and declares Jesus to be “my Lord and my God”, the most explicit declaration of Jesus' divinity in the whole of the Bible, which ironically became the most contentious assertion in church history and a new source of doubt for many.

But the Gospel of John desperately wants us to have a mature faith that grows strong in the rich soil of doubt. He explicitly states that the whole purpose of writing the gospel is so that we may come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that through believing we may have life in his name. But he offers no one path to faith that works for everyone, no single argument that always convinces, and no experience that always transforms us. Some people believed in Jesus because they saw his miracles. Some believed in him because they were convinced by his teaching. Some needed to see the empty tomb before they had any clue what he was about. For Mary Magdalene the key moment was hearing Jesus speak her name. For Thomas it was being invited to place his fingers in Jesus' wound.

For the rest of us, what we are given are all these stories, and our own often silent experience of God in prayer, and the compassion, forgiveness, and grace we can offer and receive from one another as we build our own community of love and trust. Rarely is anyone granted the perfect evidence that Thomas

received, but sometimes faith may emerge from a community that trusts one another enough to see the deep yearning for goodness and virtue within each other's hearts.

It seems to me that the stronger our doubt, the stronger the faith that can take root in it. So don't be afraid of doubt. Don't hide it away in shame, imagining it to be a terrible fault you must bear alone. All the disciples doubted. If they hadn't, if the gospels were full of stories of perfect innocent faith from start to finish, how many of us could ever believe them?