

Faith and Doubt in a Modern World

(Please note that this article is also available as an audio file, if you wish to hear it read, instead of reading it yourself.)

Introduction

The Gospel reading I'm using today is John 20:19-31, "Jesus appears to His disciples". You can pause this now if you want to read the passage before listening to the rest of this address.

There's an old joke about religion, which describes faith as, "believing things that aren't true." Now whilst this might be mildly amusing, it also highlights a real problem for Christians today. Because, in a general sense, people of faith in our modern culture; people who for example, believe in the resurrection of Jesus, that He is alive right now reigning at the right hand of God - are seen by many people, as believing in things that simply aren't true. And that isn't a joke.

In our post-modern society, there seems to be an underlying, almost unspoken principle that faith is somehow opposed to fact and runs contrary to science and reason.

Faith in such things as God, heaven, hell, life after death, angels, the devil etc. – believing in all these things is seen by many people to fly in the face of modern scientific knowledge. Belief in such as these is often mocked as lacking any intellectual integrity, and being little more than fairy tales. And for this reason, religious faith is largely discredited today. Even the very notion that we should worship God at all, is seen as a somewhat quaint and primitive idea.

The point I'm making is, that religious faith is seen as completely irrelevant today, even a hindrance in a modern world; an anachronism, and the church is regarded as doing little more than peddling myths and nonsense.

I wonder what those who see the church and the Christian faith in this light, would make of our Gospel reading this morning. Perhaps they'd regard Thomas as the only sane disciple among them; bringing a badly needed breath of fresh air into the situation. They would probably regard Thomas' reaction to the claim that Jesus had risen from the dead as perfectly acceptable, a perfectly reasonable and normal response.

Reasonable Thomas?

But should we regard Thomas' reaction as normal; his request to see Jesus with his own eyes – as reasonable?

Well, I think that his reaction was very human, even understandable, but - and this is the crucial point - it was not acceptable to Jesus; it was not the reaction Jesus either wanted or expected from a true disciple. The Apostles were supposed to be believers, not doubters. Thomas' insistence that he wouldn't believe unless he saw Jesus hands and feet with his own eyes, was tantamount to asking for a sign – of putting God to the test. And it's the pagan, the sceptic, the unbeliever who demands a sign, not a disciple. Notice that Jesus doesn't praise Thomas for showing a healthy, critical scepticism. On the contrary, He rebukes Thomas, saying to Him (v27), "stop doubting, and start believing." Jesus wants to see faith in His followers, not scepticism, doubt and unbelief.

A Step of Faith

Yes, there's a time and a place for doubt, and we all have questions, of course, and there's nothing wrong with questions. But there comes a point when it's our duty as followers and disciples of Jesus, to put away our scepticism and doubts and to believe, and this is what Thomas should have done when the other Apostles told Him of Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus rightly rebuked Thomas for his doubts because he really should have known better, especially after all he'd been through with Jesus, all he had seen and heard over the three years of Jesus ministry. He was without excuse for his unbelief.

'Hanging Out' with Jesus

So applying this to our own situation today, there is an important lesson to learn from this incident, and that is: it's possible to 'hang around' as it were with Jesus for quite some time, attend church; participate in worship, say prayers, read the Bible, listen to sermons and teaching, yet still not fully understand who Jesus is or embrace Him as LORD. But our faith will not be a saving faith unless we fully enter into a believing relationship with Jesus, and recognise and acknowledge that He is Our Risen Lord, Our Saviour and Our God.

It seems that for Thomas the penny hadn't dropped about who Jesus really is, that's why He didn't believe. Because if he truly did believe that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah, then he wouldn't have doubted that Jesus has the power to defeat death and rise again from the dead – just as He said He would.

Any Sceptics Present?

There may be some of you this morning who are still unsure about this whole “resurrection from the dead”; or who still haven’t really accepted in their hearts, Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour. You may still have some lingering doubts, or some unanswered questions perhaps.

Well, as I said earlier, questions are OK, but it’s still possible, and sometimes necessary, to take a step of faith even whilst questions remain. And true faith starts with a personal encounter with the Risen Christ, which is what happens to Thomas in this incident from John’s Gospel. Because, as soon as Jesus appears, all Thomas’ doubts were just blown away. Although Jesus rebuked Thomas, He was also gracious to him and granted him his wish to touch His hands and His side. Although by this time, Thomas didn’t need to and just falls to his knees and says, “my Lord and my God.”

And surely, following the celebration of Easter last Sunday, this should also be our response this morning. To kneel before Jesus and proclaim in our hearts that He is Our Lord and Our God. That is absolutely the response that Jesus deserves; and it’s certainly the response that He wants from us. So remember Jesus’ words to Thomas: “Stop doubting, and start believing.”

Amen.