

What's Wrong with Doubt?

There are a couple of things that bug me about today's gospel.

First one - Why does Thomas get labelled a doubter?

If you take a look at the first part of the reading, Jesus appears to the disciples who are gathered. Rather than the traditional, "Be Not Afraid" he says "Peace be with you." THEN he proceeds to SHOW the apostles the wounds on his "hands" and side. Those present had no reason to doubt. Before they could even ask, Jesus showed them his wounds.

We are told in the next section that Thomas was not with the apostles when Jesus appears. We are not given a reason. And it really doesn't matter. But remember, the apostles are all terrified. They saw their leader arrested and killed on a cross. And they scattered. Who can blame them? They regrouped and returned to the upper room, or wherever this place is - a place where they feel safe.

For years it has been written that Thomas is called Doubting Thomas because he doubted Jesus. I don't believe that. Not for one second do I believe that.

Thomas is not sceptical of Jesus. Remember when the apostles heard that Lazarus had died, they did not want to go back to Nazareth. It was Thomas who said "Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'" (John 11.16, NRSV) The apostles wanted to stay put and stay safe. Thomas was prepared to follow Jesus into Nazareth, even if it meant certain death. THAT is the strength of Thomas' trust in Jesus.

We heard again from Thomas in John 14. Jesus has told them that he is going to prepare a place for them.

“Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’ (John 11.5-7, NRSV)

Thomas understood, at a very deep level, who Jesus was and wanted to emulate what he saw. He was a true believer and was prepared to follow Jesus anywhere, even if he died in the process.

It is my belief that the statement Thomas makes “‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’” (John 20.25, NRSV) was not meant for Jesus, rather it was directed at the apostles.

Now, with any group there are the players. The class clown, the academic, the jock, the true believer etc. Something tells me that Thomas was not part of the popular club. He was the one who got the joke a fraction of a second after everyone else. He may have possessed the physical prowess of the other apostles, but he was a true believer.

The words he utters are not intended for Jesus, they are intended for the other apostles. Who's to say if the group had teased Thomas before? He may have been out gathering food or checking the lay of the land. It's not surprising that he responds the way he does...with doubt.

Jesus' response to Thomas, I believe, was not to embarrass him, but to show the other apostles. When you look at this personified in art, Thomas is almost always shown shoving his hand in the wound on Jesus's side, which is kind of gross. We are not told if Thomas did, in fact, touch Jesus. We are told he responded with “My Lord and My God.”

Remember when Jesus appeared to the apostles, he went straight up to them and showed them his hands and his side. When he appears to Thomas he does the same thing. He shows his hands and side, the same as he did to the apostles earlier in the week.

Second one - doubt is interpreted as something terrible. As though you're not allowed to doubt and still be faithful. There is a term for that, but it isn't doubt, it's blind faith. Personally, I think doubt is a very healthy and necessary thing.

Doubt is defined as:

1a : to call into question the truth of –

1b : to be uncertain or in doubt about “He doubts everyone's word.”

2a : to lack confidence in : distrust ... “find myself doubting him even when I know that he is honest” ...— H. L. Mencken.

2b : to consider unlikely “I doubt if I can go.” (www.merriam-webster.com)

Blind faith can be dangerous. Folks who are more evangelical will tell me “Jesus says it, I believe it. The end.” And they would never, ever doubt something that they read in the Bible. They almost always believe that the Bible was written by the finger of God. In fact, it wasn't.

Blind faith says you never question anything. It is defined as: “unquestioning belief in something, even when it's unreasonable or wrong.”

(www.merriam-webster.com)

Have you ever caught someone in a lie?

Why would you question what someone says to you? Doubt.

Have you ever been invited to invest in something that sounded too good to be true and after turning it down, discovered it was a false narrative? What kept you from blindly agreeing? Doubt.

Doubt can also be referred to as “the gut”.

If you find yourself feeling uneasy about something, and you're having the heart/head or emotion/logic conversation, ask yourself what your gut says. If it says no, don't do it. No matter how good an idea it seems. If something in you doubts, chances are, you shouldn't do it.

Did you know there is a Gospel of Thomas? In 1947, at Nag Hammadi, a series of scrolls were found, most of which comprise what we have learned to know as the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Scriptures. Or Old and New Testaments. Among the scrolls found was the Book of War, and what became known as the Gospel of Mary Magdalene and the Gospel of Thomas. The latter are not truly Gospels, because their theme isn't centralised around Jesus.

The Gospel of Thomas posits a theory that the Kingdom of God is already among us. Bart D. Ehrman argues that "The Gospel of Thomas proclaims that the Kingdom of God is already present for those who understand the secret message of Jesus."

Elaine Pagels points out the Gospel of Thomas promulgates the Kingdom of God not as a final destination but a state of self-discovery. Additionally, the Gospel of Thomas conveys that Jesus ridiculed those who thought of the Kingdom of God in literal terms, as if it were a specific place. Pagels goes on to argue that readers believe the "Kingdom" symbolises a state of transformed consciousness.

Would you rather have blind faith or ordinary doubt? In some ways it would be much easier if we simply believed it all. If we took the bible literally and when questioned, would repeat the mantra "Jesus said it, I believe it, end of story."

But part of being a follower of Jesus is the ability to think for oneself.

The greatest gift we were given was the gift of Jesus the Christ.

The second greatest gift we were given is free will.

I saw a t-shirt that read "Jesus came to save our souls, not steal our minds." Sound advice indeed!

If anyone should tell you that doubt is a weakness, remind them that blind faith is simply dangerous.

Now, to be fair, there is such a thing as the sacred mystery, which is not the same as blind faith. Blind faith asks us to check our minds and believe, only because we are told to do so. Sacred mystery is about something so powerful that it defies definition.

One definition I found says of sacred mystery, "Beliefs of the religion which are public knowledge but cannot be easily explained by normal rational or scientific means. A good example of this is the Eucharist or Holy Communion. And that is a subject which will be further examined at the end of May when we have a teaching Communion service.

All of this to say that Thomas was not doubting his faith, nor was he doubting his friend and leader Jesus. Rather, he was doubting the story that the apostles were telling him.

Doubt is a good and healthy thing. Use it often and wisely.

Giving thanks to God from whom all blessings flow.
Let the Church say Amen! Alleluia!!

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Sermon for Easter 2 - 24 April 2022
John 20.19-31