

Doubt and Faith

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Second Sunday of Easter—27 April 2014

Acts 2.1.4a, 22-32; Psalm 114; 1 Peter 1.1-12; John 20.19-31

I want to talk to you this morning about doubt and faith, in light of our Gospel story of doubting Thomas and our other readings.

It's a mistake to think that doubt is always wrong, and that sceptics and atheists are necessarily the enemies of faith. I've always thought that an honest sceptic or even a noble-minded atheist is closer to God than a half-hearted Christian. Not to mention the fact that a lot of religious nonsense in today's world ought to be doubted; it does God no favours to be uncritical about so many things that present themselves as sacred imperatives, from Western militarism to Islamic Jihad, from creation science to honour killings.

The psalms represent a great outpouring of doubt, especially in bad times where God appears to be silent. The psalms have helped many of us over the years to give voice to our spiritual unease, when our way forward in life seems uncertain, when we're in the gun, when God's promises seem to be as unreal as anything the man in the Santa suit used to tell us at David Jones when we were children. We know that it's at such times when people can lose hold of faith, perhaps letting go of their churchgoing and settling for life without a compass—making do with today's sacred substitutes of work, family, home, financial security, entertainment, and lifestyle. But the psalms don't stop with doubt. The psalmist comes to his senses and begins to remember God's faithfulness in the past, and so the tide turns for the psalmist—remembering God's past reliability brings courage in the present, until circumstances change and God comes back into focus. Today's psalm is no exception, and indeed many of us can testify to this return of faith in our own lives or in the lives of people we know.

The logic of our faith depending on God's past faithfulness is present in our two New Testament readings today, too, which focus on the testimony of Peter—from Acts, and from 1 Peter. The Acts reading has that odd portion about Israel's great hero King David testifying to Christ, and if that seems a bit far-fetched the point remains: that the recollection of God's past faithfulness opens the possibility of God's faithfulness in our own time. And in addition to this, Peter mentions the fact that he and the other apostles are witnesses to Jesus being alive again from God, not a dead founder but a living reality accessible to people still—past faithfulness, and present experience together.

In our other reading, from the first letter of Peter, the writer appeals to a situation very like that of believers today—this is after all a very late New Testament letter, written in Peter's name long after the first generation of Christian witnesses were dead and gone. Like its first hearers, you and I are Christians who have not seen Jesus, and yet Christians still love him; we don't see him now, and yet Christian believing, Christian joy, Christian salvation, are still a going concern among us. The author of 1 Peter is *particularly* alert to the fact of suffering and persecution among Christians, who are called to account for their faith in many places now as then—not to mention the disappointments, the agonies of spirit, the personal tragedies and the painful deaths that Christians still have to face, like everyone else. 1 Peter knows that all this is a trial to faith. Indeed, we modern Westerners see that the fact of suffering and evil is one of the main reasons today's people give for not believing in God. So Peter tries to put this suffering in perspective. He talks about the testing of faith that brings strength, honour and dignity before God and others. He goes on to describe our faith—as people who've never seen Jesus, and yet who bear suffering and even persecution in his name—as faith of particular worth and dignity. Our faith, hanging on in prayer and faithfulness despite widespread doubt, is something the prophets

looked forward too, something into which angels long to look, as the author of 1 Peter beautifully puts it. He's inviting us to see our suffering, our lack of certainty, our absence of weighable, measurable evidence, from a different angle. This is solidarity with Christ, a share in his burdens, in his sense of abandonment, but also a foretaste of his glory—all of which is to be envied.

And last we come to Thomas himself, in our Gospel today. His doubts are quite appropriate. Jesus has been horribly killed, and out of their trauma and frustrated expectations he suspects that the disciples have conjured up Jesus' ghost, in one more cult of a dead founder. Thomas doesn't want self-deceiving wish fulfilment, however. He'll have the real thing or nothing. I notice that he's referred to here as the twin, and I wonder if we're meant to think of him as our twin, as someone like us, a dweller in the real world that we know, a kind of everyman figure, or man in the street, who needs to be convinced that something is worthwhile, who isn't anybody's fool. I notice too that Jesus isn't harsh with Thomas, but goes to the heart of his hunger for a real encounter, for something genuine and concrete, and for something that doesn't airbrush away the harsh facts of life. Jesus shows him his wounds, which are not denied by the resurrection but taken up and healed and transformed. I notice finally that Jesus does this work of Thomas's conversion in the midst of his fellow disciples, in the upper room on the first day of the week, which is where you and I still meet, at the twin tables of word and sacrament, as part of a community gathered around Jesus and filled with his Spirit, to continue his mission of knowing and overcoming evil and sin, just as we see in the Gospel today. And in that context, by pastoral and personal means rather than by clever philosophical argument—that is, by touching the depth of our personal hurts and uncertainties—Jesus comes to us in a way that was real enough to convince Thomas, and which remains real enough to touch and convert hearts and minds today.

So it's important if we struggle with doubts to put ourselves in the place where Jesus actually reveals himself, with our hearts open, with expectation. Thomas received an answer to his doubts because he was serious. Whereas elsewhere in the Gospels, those smart-alecs and poseurs who question Jesus to show how clever they are or out of mere curiosity typically get no answer at all. So doubt is fine if it's the right sort of doubt.

But of course there's a kind of doubt that can never be resolved. The world's full of people who refuse to believe no matter what. Like the influential eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume, denying the possibility of miracles, nothing could ever count as evidence—the conviction that things like this can't happen is always going to be too strong. This sort of bulletproof scepticism reminds me of American tea party conservatives, who still think that president Obama was born not in the United States but in Kenya and hence legally shouldn't be President. Even the publication of his Hawaiian birth certificate wasn't enough for them. Nothing would be, because they hate him, and they hate the fact that an uppity negro is in the White House, presuming to run the country when by right it should be them doing it—keeping things the way they ought to be, like the Ku Klux Klan before them. This is a vicious and dishonest scepticism, which reaps only bitterness, contempt and hollow conviction, and there are religious sceptics like that, too. Believing would cramp their style.

Yet as long as we don't take our doubts more seriously than anything else in our life, as long as we remain open to faith and pray earnestly that Jesus will make himself known to us, and continue to present ourselves where his people gather to meet him in word and sacrament, then God will not leave us comfortless. As evidence I offer the collective witness of the Church's past, the testimony of many Christians today to the truth of what I say, and the presence of Jesus himself in word and sacrament, in Christian fellowship and in pastoral ministry, inviting us genuinely to meet him and truly to know him. Thus God honours our honest doubting, and leads us beyond it.