

Doubt and Faith

John 20, 19-31

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to You, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Now I want to start this morning with a test for all of you – a test of your faith. Now don't worry, I'm not going to publicly expose the depth of your faith in Christ or the Resurrection or get you standing up making embarrassing public declarations – this is a good Anglican church after all – we don't want too much of that sort of emotion here!

No – what I want to start with is to test your faith in me. You happily sit there and listen to me rabbit on from this pulpit once a month or so, and I thought it would be interesting to see whether you actually have faith in what I say or whether you take it all with a large pinch of salt. So what I thought I would do is to see how well you know me by telling you 4 things about myself, one of which

is not true and I want to see if you can detect the untruth.

OK so here we go the 4 things are as follows:

I've met the queen
I've been struck by lightning in a plane
I've played rugby at Twickenham
I took a phone call from 10 Downing Street whilst standing doing what comes naturally in a gents toilet

OK – so let's see – remember, one of those is not true so hands up if you think it's not true that I've met the Queen. OK how about number 2, it's not true that I've been struck by lightning in a plane. Number 3, it's not true that I've played rugby at Twickenham and finally, number 4, it's not true that I took a phone call from 10 Downing Street whilst standing in the loo?

Well that's interesting. Well, I have met the queen – so that one is true. I have also been struck by lightning in a plane – not as frightening as you might think – it was a jumbo jet taking off from Tokyo and is apparently a reasonably regular

occurrence. So how about number 4, the 10 Downing Street phone call? Sounds unlikely but it is actually true.

I was in the midst of a particularly difficult industrial dispute which was threatening the security of the North Sea oil flow and I was taking calls every few minutes from various people so when my phone rang in my pocket in the gents I instinctively answered and a voice said, "This is 10 Downing Street, can you hold for the Secretary of State"!

So that leaves number 3, much as I would like to claim that I had played rugby at Twickenham, I can only claim to have got close. I was on the bench for the 1977 UAU Final between Newcastle University and Loughborough University which, I am sad to say Newcastle lost. How different it might have been if the coach had been perceptive enough to call me onto the field!

So now you know that I have lied from this pulpit – so what does that do to your faith in me? Will

you now doubt everything I say and has that doubt undermined your faith? That's what I want to spend some time talking about this morning – the issues of doubt and faith because, of course, we had the famous reading from John's gospel today of poor St Thomas and his doubts about the resurrection.

There is of course the hoary old story about doubt which tells of 3 accountants who doubted their 3 engineer friends. They were all travelling by train to a conference. The accountants bought three tickets but the engineers only bought one. "How on earth are the three of you going to travel on one ticket?" asked one of the accountants. "Watch and you'll see" said an engineer.

They all boarded the train. The accountants took their seats but the engineers all crammed into the toilet and locked the door behind them. When the ticket inspector arrived, he knocked on the toilet door and said "Ticket please". The door opened a

crack and a hand appeared with the ticket which was duly stamped and returned and the inspector departed, allowing the three engineers to return to their seats.

The accountants all agreed that this was a very clever idea so on the way back, they only bought one ticket between them but were astonished when the engineers didn't buy a ticket at all. "How are you going to travel without a ticket?" they asked. "Watch and you'll see" replied the engineers.

As soon as they boarded the train the accountants duly crammed into the toilet while the engineers did the same in an adjacent toilet. As the train pulled away, one of the engineers left the toilet and walked over to the toilet where the accountants were hiding. He knocked on the door and said "Ticket please". The moral of the story is never doubt the deviousness of your engineers!

Now coming back to our famous doubter, I always feel that Thomas gets a very bad press and, maybe because I am his

namesake, I think he needs a bit of reputational rehabilitation. He is always known as doubting Thomas and that suggests that doubt is a bad thing and I'm not so sure that it is.

You know the story well, Jesus had appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room, given them the gift of the Holy Spirit and they were amazed. But, for whatever reason, Thomas wasn't with them and by the time that he returned Jesus had gone.

The excited disciples told Thomas what had happened and he didn't believe them. He says, "Unless I see the marks 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".

A week later, in the same room, this time with Thomas there, Jesus returns and he says to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe". Thomas responds, "My Lord and My God" and Jesus says to him,

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

So Thomas is remembered for this one moment of doubt but was he any worse than any other human there who could not believe the enormity of the resurrection. When Mary first meets Jesus at the tomb, she mistakes him for the gardener. When she runs to tell the disciples that she has seen the risen Lord, in Mark 16.11 it says “When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it”. Mark goes on to tell about the two believers who see the risen Lord on the road and he says, “These returned and reported it to the rest but they did not believe them either”.

So Peter, James and the rest have no call to berate poor old Thomas for being merely human in his doubts as they were equally doubtful of the resurrection until Jesus had actually appeared directly to them.

Whilst we're about the task of rescuing poor Thomas's image, it's worth remembering his two other significant mentions in scripture, both of which demonstrate the depth rather than the shallowness of his Faith. The first is in John 11, the death of Lazarus. Jesus has been told that his friend Lazarus is gravely ill and after a couple of days he announces to the disciples that he needed to go to Mary and Martha's house in Bethany.

The disciples are up in arms about it as Bethany is only a mile or so from Jerusalem and that spells trouble. "But Rabbi", they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you and you are going back there?" There follows a heated discussion with the disciples trying to dissuade Jesus until finally it is our friend Thomas who speaks up in faith and says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him"

Now to make that statement, against the tide of opinion of his fellows takes some courage and some faith in Christ and I can't see that

being diminished in any way by his later, very human, response to the news of Christ's resurrection. Maybe the title 'Courageous Thomas' may be more appropriate than 'Doubting Thomas'

The next time we hear from Thomas is in John 14, when Jesus is explaining to the disciples in fairly cryptic terms, that he must go to prepare a place for them in heaven. It's that very famous passage where Jesus refers to the fact that his Father's house has many rooms. Now bearing in mind that the disciples are, on the whole, simple folk, you can see why this speech from Jesus may have caused some confusion and consternation. What Jesus says to them is the following.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also be

where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Now at this point, the chances are that the disciples are looking at one another in some confusion and thinking, “I’m not sure I do know the place where he’s going”. But no-one wants to look stupid by owning up to their ignorance – no-one that is apart from Thomas – who’s intervention leads to one of the statements from Jesus that define our faith.

Thomas, in a good human response blurts out, “Lord we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” and Jesus responds, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”. Now it took remarkable, self assured honesty for Thomas to acknowledge that for him, Jesus wasn’t making any sense. So maybe we should call him ‘Honest Thomas’ instead of ‘Doubting Thomas’.

Finally we have this most famous appearance of

Thomas in John 20 and his doubts about the resurrection but, as we've seen, Thomas was no more or less in doubt about the events of Easter morning than were the rest of the disciples – he just had the misfortune to be the last one to know and was on his own. The rest of the disciples didn't believe Mary when she told them Jesus was alive and they didn't believe the two travellers on the road.

They only believed when Jesus stood among them in the upper room and showed them his hands and the wound in his side. So poor old Thomas gets vilified for expressing his doubts when they were identical to the doubts of his fellow disciples. This leads us to an interesting question. Why is it that the Christian community has developed such a negative attitude towards doubt?

Doubt is often seen as the opposite of faith and the story of Thomas is often used to reinforce that position. But all of this is, for me a false position. The opposite of faith is

not doubt, the opposite of faith is unbelief. I actually think that doubt has a positive and constructive role to play in the exercise of faith.

We are, by nature, inquisitive creatures. As children we learn by exploring and questioning the world around us and why should it be any different in our faith life. Doubt forces us to ask ourselves the difficult questions but how often do we have the courage of Thomas in raising those questions publicly?

If we did, we might find people around us to give us answers and we might then find that those answers help us to strengthen our faith, the process by which our doubts can help us to grow and deepen our faith. If doubt were such a bad thing, why is the bible filled with doubting human beings?

Start at the beginning in Genesis – both Abraham and Sarah doubted God when he said they would have a son. Moses doubted when the Lord told him to

return to Egypt. The Israelites doubted all through the book of Exodus. Gideon doubted when he was told that he would be a judge and leader and, as we heard a few weeks ago at Advent, Zechariah doubted big time when told he would be the father of John the Baptist in old age.

God knows what we are like. He knows that we are human and filled with doubt and that by acknowledging that doubt we can grow in faith. Thomas expressed his doubts openly in front of Christ. He had his doubts removed and became one of the most steadfast and committed disciples. For the 20 years after Christ's assumption, he was a great missionary – taking the Christian faith to Kerala in India in 52AD before his martyrdom there. A seed that he planted so well that Christianity still flourishes in Kerala and Goa to this day.

Our congregations are filled with people who have doubts and that's a good thing. Faith cannot flourish if doubt is not addressed so we should welcome it, we

should discuss it and
we should thank God
and good old St
Thomas for it.

Tom Crotty