

‘Rector, I’m not sure what I believe anymore.’ Many is the time that I have heard that comment in the privacy of someone’s home. People will have come to that position for a number of reasons. It could be trauma or bereavement, or serious illness in themselves or in someone they love. Or perhaps news of some terrible natural disaster leaving many innocents suffering or dead. Or it may be just simply the spark has gone out of living, out of faith.

That remark, and many like it, come to mind as I read our Gospel reading for today with the story of the hapless Thomas, wanting to believe and yet afraid to believe. ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands .... I will not believe.’ And of course, he has been stuck with the title ‘Doubting Thomas’ ever since. I must admit a certain affinity to poor Thomas, an affinity I would suspect many of us share in our darker moments of faith as we make our own struggle between doubt and faith.

Then as I think about this a little bit more, I realise that Thomas is not unique. If we go to Matthew’s account of the Great Commission, as the risen Jesus sends the disciples out as he prepares to return to the Father, Matthew tells us that as the disciples gathered, ‘When they saw him they worshipped him, but some doubted.’ *Matt 28:17*.

Earlier in Jesus’ ministry, Mark tells us, after his account of the Transfiguration, of a man bringing his son to Jesus for healing. When Jesus asks for faith, the father cries out, ‘Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.’ (*Mark 9.24*). What these three accounts of Thomas, of the disciples on the mountain, of the father of the sick child have in common, as the central figures struggle

between doubt and faith, is they all want it to be true – that Jesus has risen, that the boy will be healed. They are all presented as operating on the edge of normal human experience.

When we are in those darker moments, when our world is collapsing arounds us, as faith seems to be swamped by anxieties about ourselves or our loved ones, of the sense of injustice of the innocent suffering – then spiritually and emotionally we find ourselves operating on the edge of normal human experience, wanting to believe in a God of justice, of love, of care, of compassion – yet at times not knowing what we believe anymore.

So what was it that spoke to Thomas, to the disciples who were on the mountain with the risen Lord, the father of the child, that spoke to their doubt and their pain, that brought them along the path of faith? Whatever else it was, it was not reasoned argument; not that there is no place for reasoned argument. There was another ingredient in the mix; that crucial ingredient was relationship – the support of the other disciples, the personal interaction through which, in which God is experienced as loving and caring. Thomas still had a place in the group. Matthew tells us that even those disciples on the mountain who had their doubts still worshipped, were still sent out by the risen Christ. I recall a lady in Ahoghill, who fought a long battle with cancer, telling me that even in those times when she could not pray herself, it was good to know that others were praying for her.

I suppose what I am coming to here is a reminder that we don’t have, we can’t have the full picture. But there is more to it than that, we don’t actually need the full picture. As Paul reminded the Corinthians:

For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. .... For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. *1 Cor 13.9,10,12*

There is something essentially provisional about faith. I often find myself reflecting on the words of Prof Vokes who taught me New Testament in College. As we attempted to tie him down on something, he would often smile and say: ‘Gentlemen, we just don’t know, do we? Sometimes the most honest thing I can say is ‘I don’t know.’ Prof Vokes taught us a fundamental lesson; there must be a humility at the heart of my faith. When I admit I don’t know, I am open to new possibilities. When I think I have it all sorted, my mind is closed. That is the danger of fundamentalism, we lose sight of the fact that we can ‘know only in part’. When we think we see most clearly, that is often when we are most blind. When I am thinking about the provisional nature of my faith, my own uncertainties, my own doubts, even darkness at times, I often find myself reflecting on one of my most favourite passages of scripture from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians:

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. *Phil 3:12-14*

I find myself coming back to the importance of relationship and that realisation ‘Christ Jesus has made me his own’; made me his own through his death and

resurrection and the call that he has placed on my life. Within that relationship I am never alone. Within a relationship of love I can argue, I can complain, I can be angry – but I am not alone and I know, deep down, that I am loved and I love in return. The medieval mystic who wrote the ‘Cloud of Unknowing’ wrote of our relationship with God; ‘By love he can be caught and held; by thinking never.’

The Gospels tell us of the Risen Jesus coming to a group of men and women who did not know what they believed anymore, for all their hopes and dreams seemed shattered. They each experienced something that they could only express in terms of experiencing Jesus risen and alive in their presence; Thomas in all his doubts and uncertainties; the disciples on the mountain top – each operating on the edge, as they struggled between doubt and faith.

He comes to us, in all our strengths and our weaknesses, in all our doubts and our certainties, honouring his promise to be with us to the very end of time. May we know his presence, and in his presence find his peace.