

Sunday 7 April 2024, 2nd Sunday after Easter – The Rôle of “Doubting Thomas” – Anne Padget

Anne Padget explores the relationship between doubt and faith.

Readings:

Acts 4: 32-35. John 20: 19-31.

Sermon: The Rôle of “Doubting Thomas” – Ann Padget

There is a movie called Loch Ness that, although I confess I have not seen, I have a strong memory of being released. It was the mid-90s and I was a teenager at the time, but what I remember is the trailer and one scene in particular that takes place between the main character – a scientist, played by Ted Danson, trying to prove the existence or otherwise of the Loch Ness monster – and the young daughter of the woman whose inn he is staying at, who claims to have already seen it and communicated with it. In this scene, Ted Danson is putting the young girl to bed and they are discussing this. She is trying to convince him that what she has seen is true. He replies, “I’m sorry. I just have to see it to believe it.” The young girl replies, “No. You have to believe it to see it.” It is very typical Hollywood fare and, I am sure, the kind of movie that we often like to watch to give us comfort and maybe to wish that we could live in a world where such sentiments could be so easily met.

The correlation between this illustration and our Gospel reading today has, I am sure, hardly escaped your notice. I didn’t exactly go for subtle. But what I find fascinating is how often a movie like this gets made, expressing this wish to be able to have faith in the face of evidence apparently showing otherwise. Film-makers know that something in the psyche of humanity has a strong desire to have faith in the unseen or unknown. And this has always been the case.

When considering our Gospel reading today, we see this also. The story of “Doubting Thomas” is very well known and often that phrase is used disparagingly because someone is not showing the appropriate faith or enthusiasm for an idea that others think they should. But I have always felt for Thomas in that respect. There is nothing to suggest that Thomas does not wish to have that faith. Only that he finds the notion of believing in the resurrection of a man he loved so deeply to be something cannot readily buy into. Knowing grief as we do, this is less likely to be about simple skepticism, and more influenced by the pain he must have been experiencing. Allowing himself to believe in something so extraordinary without having seen it only leaves him open to being hurt further if he were to discover that it isn’t true. Why should Thomas believe in the resurrection when he has seen no evidence of it? Is he held to a higher standard than his fellow disciples? If John, or Peter, or Bartholemew had been the one who was absent, do we think that they would have found the notion any easier to believe? I doubt it.

Of course, it is interesting that Thomas was absent at all. I often wonder where he was. Think about this day. Mary Magdelene has discovered the empty tomb and has had that wonderful, moving encounter with Jesus, and then immediately goes to the disciples to tell them. It is probable that Thomas was there at that time, as John’s Gospel only tells us that he wasn’t when Jesus came among them. So where did he go? Was he looking for Jesus? Did that remarkable tale from Mary result in feelings of anger or confusion so intense that he needed to be away from the presence of others? Whatever it was, it is fascinating to me that he was not there. This story serves a huge purpose in the whole basis of our faith. It is the first time that Jesus comes among his disciples after his crucifixion and death. So there must be a reason why it is told in the way it is. Would it be any less effective if all the disciples had been together? I think maybe it would. I think maybe this tells us about the role that Thomas plays – that of allowing us in.

What would there be for us in the story to relate to if Jesus appeared to eleven people who, whilst amazed and overwhelmed, were all then able to believe it? And they all had seen it. We, on the other hand, have not. We are the ones who are asked to believe without seeing. We are Thomas. And that is, I think, why the story is told in the way that it is. It invites us to ask, “What would I do?” “How would I respond?” “Would I believe the story that my friends told me, or would I need the evidence?” Now we are all sat in a church, or participating in this service via Zoom. Last week we were sprinkled again with baptismal water and declared several times with joy, “He is risen indeed. Alleluia!” It may be rare that we say the Nicene Creed in St. Mark’s, but every week we do declare our belief through an Affirmation. And we have not had the advantage of the eleven remaining disciples, or Mary, or those on the road to Emmaus, or anyone else in those incredible post-crucifixion stories. So I wonder, is Thomas there as a reminder, or even a reassuring example? I don’t know about you, but the notion of complete belief, of complete certainty in all that my religion tells me about God and Jesus Christ, is not one that I can buy into. And, given that I am standing in this particular pulpit, I imagine this is also the case for a vast majority of those of you sitting here, or watching on Zoom. I am not in the position where I can say that I know what I declare to believe in is actually true. I do have moments of doubt, of wondering, “what if I’m wrong?” I remember when Richard Holloway came here many years ago for a CRC conference and discussed his book, *Doubts and Loves*.¹ He preached on the Sunday and something he said has never left me. “Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Certainty is the opposite of faith. If we were certain of something, we would not need faith.”

We need to recognise that a key part of our faith is that we will have moments of doubt. Indeed, we may experience times when those moments of doubt far outweigh any moments of reassuring faith where we feel the all-embracing, unconditional love of an ever-present God. I think to feel that ceaselessly is a big ask. And I don’t think it is something asked of us by God. In reading the Bible it can be difficult to accept that at times. For example, Jesus’ words from today’s Gospel include the phrase “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” This can certainly be seen as a challenge for us to live up to. But I wonder if it can also simply be seen as an observation. Thomas is not admonished for his doubt. It is never stated that he was *not* blessed just because he said he needed proof. If that were the case, it would seem to be incredibly unfair, given that the other 10 disciples had a distinct advantage. Jesus appeared to them. He seems not to have expected *them* to believe just because Mary told them what she had seen. So maybe those words are not solely directed at Thomas, but to everyone in that room. And yes, maybe they are directed to us as well. But, I still think if we don’t meet that challenge, it doesn’t mean we are not blessed.

I am not sure how easy it is for me to say with a 100% certainty, “I believe in God”. I can say it at times, and I am very grateful that those times far outweigh any moments of deep insecurity. But the existence of God is not a mathematical equation where the workings prove the result.

What I do believe, somewhat paradoxically, is that whether or not we believe in God is largely irrelevant. In those moments of deep unknowing, of questioning, of doubt, of deep confusion or anger, God will hold us regardless. God will love us. And the existence of this truth is not dependent on our awareness of it. God is there. And when we are ready that presence will be known to us once again.

So it is important to remember that Thomas serves a key purpose. Far from being the doubting presence that shows us who we shouldn’t be, he is the doubting presence that reflects who we are. And that is ok. That is what it is to be human. God created a questioning people. And despite the statement that those who have not seen are blessed, it is not blind faith that is asked

¹ Richard Holloway, *Doubts and Loves. What is left of Christianity?* (London, Canongate Books, 2005).

of us. We have been given a mind with which to question. We have been given a soul with which to push our human boundaries. Jesus was a devout Jew, but he was not an unquestioning one. And in following him, we must rejoice in our humanity, including all its doubts, knowing that in those moments when our faith eludes us, we do not elude him. Indeed, Jesus does not need us to have faith in him for him to have faith in us.

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