

Sermon at Brecon Cathedral
Sunday 12 April 2015 at 11.00am
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William Clifford, a 19th Century philosopher and professor of mathematics, was a classical supporter of the case for staying within the limits of evidence alone. He coined a well-known phrase in an essay entitled *The Ethics of Belief* in 1877: 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence'.

Thomas, the protagonist in today's Gospel reading, immortalises for many of us, the disciple we most love for his honesty, in other words, it was wrong for him to believe in the resurrection of Christ based on insufficient evidence. He risked expressing his doubt and questions. Doubt is the experience we often feel when it comes to spiritual matters like heaven, hell and death, God's love in the face of suffering, and the Biblical accounts of the resurrection, and making sense of the empty tomb.

Thomas was groping in the dark. He remained locked in a pre-Resurrection mind-set, and was not convinced by the accounts of his disciple friends who had locked themselves in a room because of fear. Thomas is the portrait of scepticism, the cynic, and the rational scientist. The harsh realities of life's disappointments, Christ's death, had their stronghold on him, and he was not going to budge from it without evidence. How many times have we been unable to grasp the fleeting whispers of eternity through the light and hope of resurrection because of the noise of our wanting rational evidence and scientific proof?

The very confusion around the resurrection, the historical questions of uncertainty, make resurrection faith so difficult for many people. The Biblical stories themselves are about fear, locking themselves away, unexpected outcomes, silences, and confusion about where Jesus is. The stories also illustrate how the early Christian communities didn't find the resurrection easy either. And so, we are in good company.

The emotional and intellectual quest that has doubt as the prime motivation for searching for God and meaning, is a gift that brings an honesty and integrity in our thirst and quest for faith in an elusive God. When Christians are certain, holding to creeds and doctrines more than searching for Truth and love, that we distort the Christian faith and lose credibility in the world.

We have much to be grateful to Thomas for. He calls us to see the essential quality needed to search for Truth, and when we do so, Jesus Christ will come to us also with the same gaze of love as he had for Thomas, accompanied with the words of comfort, 'peace be with you'. The search for Truth will sometimes appear more like a torment than a joy, because we are often left with imponderable questions. However, the encounter between Thomas and Jesus tells us that Thomas is not excluded or punished by Jesus for his critical questions, lack of trust in the Good News, and doubting the resurrection. It teaches us that grasping what the resurrection means, takes time for us, as it was for the Disciples.

The disciples appear to have acquired agoraphobia and social anxiety, a most disabling phobia many live with, a panic disorder when exposed to social situations, crowds or open spaces. The disciples had not yet realised that not only did they lock themselves in the room after the resurrection, but by doing so, they locked others out.

There is always the potential of locking others out if we are closed to dialogue and listening to those who hold different ideologies to us. For example, what is the Christian position on welfare benefit cuts, the crisis in the NHS and the forthcoming election, and the behaviour of politicians toward one another who do not share the ideologies of their opponents, or the Christian perspective on immigration, sexuality, and Islamophobia? There is a form of locking in through holding closed views on contemporary issues that impact on our communities. In conversations as Christians we should be able to remain open and receptive, with critical questioning, just as Thomas did, and be shaped by the insight and knowledge of the Scriptures, Christian Tradition, prayer and theology. I am always heartened when the Church risk unlocking doors to proclaim the new reality of resurrection Good News.

Locked doors, like locked views, become like the stone that sealed the tomb in which Christ laid on Good Friday. Yet Christ broke free and rose from the dead. If we are and Easter people and our song is alleluia, then we will continue to discover ways to grow and live together alongside those who hold different views and beliefs. Our faith must not be so dogmatic that it entombs us, lock us in, and keeps others out. At the Cathedral we pride ourselves on having an open door seven days a week, and thanks to the welcomers who will start volunteering soon to welcome the thousand of tourists and visitors. We pride ourselves on having an openness for parents seeking baptism. These

are important aspects of Christian hospitality that we do well, even though I believe there is room for improvement in the course time.

And so, it is not intellect and reason alone that settles beliefs and matters of faith. To borrow the remark from the French Pope in Maurice West's *The Clown of God* makes to his sceptical German friend, 'Karl, old friend,' he said 'there is never enough evidence.' Thomas Aquinas, a Christian philosopher of the 13th Century, who saw the value of both faith and reason, not as mutually exclusive: 'Each separate argument would not suffice of itself for showing perfectly Christ's resurrection, yet all taken together establish it completely' (St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a, 55.6.ad 2).

Because reason alone cannot answer our imponderable questions and nagging doubts, gathering weekly for worship becomes a necessary food to sustain us and help us draw closer to the God who loves us. Worship is one way we participate in the resurrection faith, where we 'possess it' and 'own it', where it can sometimes touch the corners of our hearts more profoundly than simply knowing through rational evidence. Knowing Christ begins here, in our life together around His holy Word and Altar, to hear and receive him the breaking of bread and outpouring of wine. Worship is the 'primary' place where we come to express our mysterious gift of faith in the risen Jesus Christ, no matter how much we doubt or question. Christ's response to us will always be 'peace be with you.'

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