

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 30 MARCH 2008

Rev. Dr John Bodycomb

Psalm 16; John 20: 24-29

"The Thomas Metaphor"

Last year I received a letter from a man in New South Wales who had read some of the addresses on St Aidan's web site. A retired teacher in his mid seventies, he had belonged many years to a church known for its conservative stance. But he had grown uncomfortable in it and was thinking about a move. This is part of his letter.

As you probably know, in our church there is one right way to read the Bible, to state christian truth, or to be 'saved'. There is little room for independent thinking; one is quickly labelled a subversive if he strays from the party line. I was a good, loyal party man in that sense. But when I retired, my children gave me a computer and bullied me into learning how to use it. I have discovered the internet, and found it a gold mine.

Material like St Aidan's sermons has given me permission to ask questions I thought were off limits, and I have been thinking thoughts I never would have allowed myself. Faith is becoming an adventure in a way I had not imagined. I enjoy the look on some old friends when I tell them how I'm changing my mind. Do you think this is unhealthy at my age?

There was a lot more in the letter, and I wrote back at length. Actually his first name is 'Tom', and I suggested he could do worse than embrace his biblical namesake as a patron saint. I refer to the renowned 'Doubting Thomas' of John, chapter 20. We are told that when other disciples report sightings of Jesus, Thomas is sceptical. He says, "Where's the evidence?" He asks a question others haven't dared ask. The story says Jesus honours the scepticism of Thomas and appears again, on his account. Thomas is 'blown away' as we say and makes a resounding declaration of fidelity to Jesus. Tradition has it that Thomas took Christianity to India; hence the 'Mar Thoma' churches.

I want to take this incident, and Thomas in particular, as metaphor for what the journey of faith is all about – and this is what I told my correspondent. I said the journey of faith meant three things: new questions, new discoveries and new leaps forward. That is what happened to Thomas, and I want to propose that we look at these three things as they apply to ourselves.

I

FIRST, NEW QUESTIONS. In my youth it was rare to ask big questions about faith and life, in Sunday school or in religious instruction. In some schools one didn't dare. Two members of my extended family recall asking serious questions in the school room and being whacked in front of the class for insolence. I recall asking a Sunday school teacher where Cain and Seth, the surviving sons of Adam and Eve, got their wives! We asked whether or not Adam and Eve were historical figures. We asked how Noah built a boat 500 feet long and 50 feet high, with a beam of 83 feet, not to mention how he cut and dressed the cypress single-handed. These questions were dismissed as frivolous. Nobody said, "That's legend, boy."

Things began to change forty or fifty years ago. That is when kids were not rebuked for asking questions; some teachers even encouraged it. Mind you, we were occasionally taken aback. In 1967 I

was study leader for the first ever combined conference of Year XII students from Protestant, Catholic and state high schools. In preparation, I visited Year XII girls at St Aloysius' College in Adelaide, run by Sisters of Mercy. When the class period ended, I was warned by one of the nuns. Pointing to a dark-haired 17 year-old who was headed our way, she said "Watch out, John. She has an IQ of 140 and she has you in her sights." Fixing me with dark eyes, this one said, "Tell me, father (I was wearing a dog collar): why shouldn't I sleep with my boy friend – and don't give me that tired old stuff the church trots out!" I said, "Where's the exit?"

Members of churches – Protestant and Catholic – are becoming aware that it's not just allowable to ask questions; it's vital. Time was when lay people took unquestioningly what was ladled out by three sources of authority. These were an authoritative institution, an authoritative book and an authoritative profession supposedly better educated in things Christian. Several things have upset this tidy little arrangement. Laity are better educated, many of them have done some theological education, and some well written, digestible and exciting books have appeared. Lay people ask questions they weren't asking fifty years ago.

II

SECOND, NEW DISCOVERIES. Remember: the Thomas metaphor says that honest questions are honoured – and can yield new discoveries. Let me tell you the three major contexts where this is happening. They are in so-called 'Jesus research', in conversations between godtalk and cosmology (how the universe works), and in inter-faith encounters.

Jesus research is directed at uncovering the real historical person behind the teaching and tradition of centuries. We have access these days to information simply not available fifty years ago, let alone one hundred or five hundred. The discovery in 1945 of the Nag Hammadi library (which includes the gospel of Thomas) and of the Dead Sea scrolls between 1947 and 1956 has thrown new light on the period when Jesus lived. Sophisticated study of the New Testament texts and the sociology of the times has highlighted other things we didn't know. It has led such luminaries as Princeton's James Charlesworth to say we know more today about the historical Jesus than we do about virtually any other first century Palestinian. Our minister has the advantage of access to all sorts of material not available to her minister when she was growing up – particularly about Jesus' own agenda.

The second context of new discoveries is what we call the **'interface' between godtalk (theology) and cosmology** – or how the universe works. The church has known since Copernicus that the biblical world view was inaccurate; it was Copernicus who showed us that earth was not the centre of the universe. But in the last century we have learned how old, how vast, how dynamic and how exciting is this universe. Questions never previously asked demand to be taken seriously. How does one speak of God in a universe where we are seven million miles away in space from where we were last week?

We have scientists interested in God, but not in church. Some years ago I had a conversation with Sir Mark Oliphant, the great Australian nuclear physicist. I said, "You know what I'm into. Do you think it's all a load of baloney?" (I used that word) He looked shocked and said, "Oh dear, no. When I lie in my bed at night and contemplate the mystery of the universe, I think there must be something we can call 'God' – but whatever that is, it is much larger than the way churches talk about it." The English physicist Paul Davies, resident some years in Australia and now unfortunately lost to us, expressed very similar sentiments to me. It was he who said in *God and the New Physics* "It may seem bizarre, but in my opinion science offers a surer path to God than religion." We also have giants who are both scientists and theologians. The Templeton Prize has been awarded this year to Michel Heller, cosmologist and Catholic priest, for his work on whether the universe needs a cause.

The third context of new discoveries is to be found in ‘**inter-faith encounters**. In Henry Fielding’s book *Tom Jones* you meet Parson Thwackum. He says, “When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England.” The Parson Thwackum type survives in some religions, but a growing number of people are coming to believe God may be more versatile than that – and are venturing, albeit cautiously, into dialogue with members of other faiths.

III

THIRD, THE NEW LEAP FORWARD. I said the Thomas metaphor means new questions, new discoveries and new leaps forward. There is today a new Christianity struggling to be born. It could be called the Church of St Thomas the Sceptic. Remember: precisely out of his scepticism Thomas made a giant leap to a new fidelity. I don’t think that ever stopped him asking questions; hence I can see a new church called the community of St Thomas.

The classical Christianity we have inherited speaks to fewer and fewer. The pop Christianity which is anti-intellectual and hyper-emotional will have a short life if it doesn’t grow up. Meanwhile there are men and women in search of a thinking person’s religion: a way of approaching the great issues of faith and life that doesn’t require them to put their brains in neutral. Oddly enough, many of them are middle-aged and older. Some have stayed with their churches, but uncomfortably. Many have just quietly dropped out. A small number have been re-starting a discontinued **pilgrimage** by joining ‘progressive christianity’, as it is called.

The word ‘pilgrim’ may be just the right one. It comes from Latin *peregrinus* which in turn comes from the two words *per* and *ager*, meaning ‘through’ and ‘field’. A pilgrim was one who wandered through the fields and over the countryside to distant lands – perhaps to the Holy Land or over the Alps to Rome. Of necessity, a pilgrim travelled light; not too much baggage. And he was constantly on the move; no settling down. He had no fixed address.

The mood is captured by St Paul in his letter to the Philippians. He says, “How changed are my ambitions!... I do not consider myself to have ‘arrived’, so to speak; nor do I consider myself already perfect. But I keep going on, grasping ever more firmly that purpose for which Christ has grasped me. I do not consider myself to have fully grasped it even now. But I do concentrate on this: I leave the past behind and with hands outstretched to whatever lies ahead I go straight for the goal – my reward the honour of being called by God in Christ.”