

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 11 APRIL 2010

Mr Robert Sanderson

John 20: 19-29

“Faith and Doubt”

This morning we are going to talk about faith and doubt. This is a topic that causes much heartache among many people and I hope what I say may bring a breath of fresh air into their lives.

First, a word from film director Woody Allen, that astute observer of modern life and manners:

“I am plagued with doubts. What if everything is an illusion and nothing exists? In that case I overpaid for the carpet.
If only God would give me some clear sign: like making a large deposit in my name in a Swiss Bank.”

I must say that Thomas is probably my favourite disciple. Are we allowed to have favourites? Well, as we heard from our reading, Jesus had a favourite – but this is mentioned only in John's gospel. There is no consensus among scholars who this disciple was, but one of the major contenders is John!

So, why am I drawn to Thomas? Well, when he was told about something which didn't make sense, he questioned it. That sounds pretty natural to me. After all, this has been the foundation of science and learning for hundreds of years. Every school student is, or should be, imbued with a healthy skepticism. Their education depends on it. How else will they learn to negotiate today's world with its vast array of media? Do you believe what a politician promises? Do you believe the benefits of products espoused by the advertisers? And what about the Internet? It's a pretty scary place unless you have a method of assessing the veracity and reliability of pages. Yes, skepticism is important.

The original meaning of the Greek word *skeptikos* was “an inquirer”, someone who was unsatisfied and yet still searching for truth. No scientific discoveries (or, for that matter, academic research) would have been made without a questioning mind.

Thomas is often called “doubting Thomas” although nowhere in the story is this word used. This has led to his being given a very “bad press”. But it wasn't like that at all. Remember the story. Thomas was absent from the room where Jesus appeared to the other disciples. When he was later told of this, he replied, “I'll believe that when I can put my hands in his wounds!” Now, less than a week before this he had watched Jesus die a terrible death. How many of us would have said the same thing or something similar?

I'll guarantee that inside most Christians there will be a Thomas. The problem is that somewhere along the line we were taught that there is something wrong with doubt.

Some people think that questioning is alright but they won't face up to the fact that they have doubts — it somehow seems different. They shrink from their thoughts because they think that by doing so might lead down the path to questioning God. And rather than do that they fall for the age-old cop-out that it is their fault — that there is something wrong with them.

Let me give you an example of such denial. In the mid-seventies, an Anglican priest who was a famous evangelical preacher was visiting Australia on a mission. Some friends of mine were entertaining him at dinner. I was invited along and we had a very enjoyable time. At one stage before the dessert, our English guest was holding forth on the way people were leaving the church in droves. He was bemoaning the fact that they were turning to the new spirituality movements. The dessert arrived and he paused to look at the ensuing delights. I took this opportunity to say, "They are also turning in great numbers to Buddhism." He lifted his head and continued talking as if there had been no interruption. We all commenced to eat. This time I thought I would enlarge on my thought. I said, "What interests me is this. What have they found in Buddhism that they have not found in Christianity." He stopped chewing, raised his head and looked at me in pompous disbelief. My query was so totally outside his understanding. How could a Christian ask such a thing? So, having silenced me, he said nothing and went on with his sweet.

I sometimes wonder what a good idea it would be if those clerics who profess absolute certainty have their beliefs quizzed by a small child with their incessant mantra of "Why?" "Why?" "Why?" "Why?" "Why?"

At times, churches have suggested that doubt is sinful — the work of the devil. Luther was so racked with guilt at his thoughts that he could not control his bowels. He wrote about this awful affliction frequently. So much so, in fact, that reading them you get the impression that the Reformation was conceived in the privy.

William Cowper, the writer of the hymn "God moves in a mysterious way", was so racked with guilt about his doubts that he was convinced he had offended God and was doomed to eternal damnation. I doubt the eternal damnation bit but his life on earth sure was hell.

There have been many occasions when this attitude of the church to doubt has so frightened people that they do just what they've been told to do. They turn to the orthodox beliefs of the church. They lock themselves into ancient dogma and recite creeds as though they were an entry into heaven.

Our whole Western culture is based on the view that ideas and our understanding of the world around us change with time. Science has inbuilt mechanisms to continually modify what we once thought was true when further evidence comes along.

We always get problems in any field of endeavour when "truth" is specified by fiat without reference to anything else. Because then questions are forbidden and new answers and new doubts are locked out.

When it comes to "God-talk", I want to suggest that running away from doubt is running away from God. Have you ever thought that the doubt might just be the prompting of God? When you wrestle with doubt you are wrestling with new life. Truth has its labour pains. Just ask any scientist or academic. But we all know that in our everyday lives as well. In every other aspect of life, doubts need to be confronted and examined if we are to grow. If we bury or suppress religious doubt, we run the risk of burying God with it.

Consider four year old children. They are filled with enthusiasm at this wonderful world and they explore it freely. If every time they are slapped down for performing an unwanted action in their explorations, they will learn not to explore. But if their experiences are shared with an adult who explains the consequences of their actions, they will continue to grow in understanding of their world. Whenever you hear a child say, "Let me do it!", be thankful and rejoice. It is a sign of the

plastic brain exercising the recent neural pathways it has just laid down. (“New learning” in common parlance.)

Let us return to the story of Thomas. John has Thomas returning to the room with the other disciples where he confronts Jesus. And in a moment of great intimacy, Jesus invites him to touch his wounds. Thomas does not find it necessary to do this because he now believes. Jesus has accepted Thomas’s doubt and gives him the answer he was seeking. Thomas now trusts the evidence that it is Jesus who had greeted him with the word “peace”. What better way could there be for him to inspire faith.

Faith and doubt are different things. But they have been often seen as mutually exclusive. You have *either* faith *or* doubt. In a prayer of St. Francis we read: “where there is sorrow, bring joy; where there is doubt, faith”. The suggestion that you can’t have both is wrong. Faith is all about trusting an experience (a matter of the heart). Believing is about subscribing to a set of given propositions. You can therefore doubt the propositions and still trust the experience. You can doubt the descriptions of “God” for example and yet still trust the experience of something you cannot explain.

We can have faith AND doubt at the same time.

So here is the good news! There is nothing wrong with doubt. Don’t think your doubts are unique to you. You can be sure that many people share your doubts. The problem is we don’t talk about them. Have the courage to express them. A doubt shared is a doubt confirmed and that is truly liberating. See your doubts as ways of strengthening your faith and you will find a new joy and a new hope.

Let us finish by examining these faith experiences.

At this Easter time our thoughts turn to resurrection which is all about renewal and new life. We experience these moments every day but we need to give them much more attention than we normally do.

How about, at the end of each day, you go over in your mind those occasions —

when you have felt the surge of life within you;
when you have been there in someone’s need;
when you have been invigorated by family or friends;
when the natural wonder of this beautiful world has struck a chord;
when a piece of music or work of art or whatever else has touched your soul...

In these experiences you will find the wind of God.

Sleep peacefully!