

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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LIVING BY FAITH AND NOT BY SIGHT

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2 Kings 6:8-22

John 20:24-31

We always think of Thomas as the Doubter, don't we? The idea has passed into the language when we refer to someone as being a "Doubting Thomas". When we find it hard to have faith, the memory of Thomas gives us comfort and gives us hope. After all, Jesus met Thomas half-way and gave him the evidence he said he wanted.

Yes, he did, but he wasn't pleased with Thomas. He didn't commend him for his attitude. This part of the story of Thomas – because of course it is just one incident in a long life of service – is not supposed to be a template for Christian people, but is a sign of God's grace towards us even when we fall short.

We call Thomas a doubter, but I don't know that doubt is the best word for his attitude. Yes, he doubted the truth of the other disciples' story when they said that they had seen the risen Jesus, but that may well have been a symptom of something else. It is Thomas I think of when I hear people say – and I do, and so do you – that they can't believe in God because of this or that piece of suffering or injustice which they see in the world or in their own private worlds. Thomas is someone who wants God to act on his own terms. This is the underlying attitude and expectation which fuels his doubt of his friends. It is a difficult attitude to change. Thomas will not be convinced by anything but his own experience. Not even the concerted testimony of his ten companions would have any effect on him.

He is not alone in that. As human beings we have to live in the world and to do so we have to be able to trust that the world will adhere to certain ways of being. We have to believe that the sun will rise in the east every day, and that the night will fall. In fact, we do believe that, even when the clouds veil the sun from our eyes and we cannot see it. Experience has taught us that day follows night, that things dropped fall downwards, that everything gets older and that death is an end. Experience has taught us many things, things that are true, and these are the things we live by.

Experience also teaches us ideas of fairness and justice, in our own lives and which we can then extrapolate and write large for how we want to see things in the world. And by and large we are right. There should be equity, people who do no wrong should not be punished and so on. But these are ideas, not laws of nature. When things do not go according to our ideas, we get uneasy.

Thomas did not see how Jesus could have risen. In stating this, he was stating how he viewed the world. If he could not see a thing or how a thing could happen, then he would not countenance the thought. He was, in effect, setting himself up as the judge of the world, and in doing so was setting himself up as a judge of God. If he could not

think how a thing could happen he did not want God showing him otherwise. It is not those who doubt their faith who are the Thomases in the world but those who stand in judgement over God and say that because of this or that happening, because people are acting in this or that way, they will not believe in God.

To doubt is not a sin. All of us have doubts at times. But the point of faith is that we decide to adhere to it and work through our doubts while living out of faith anyway. Faith decides to believe that there is more to life than we or any one person, or even than the whole human race can comprehend. Within that framework to have a doubt or two is not a sin. The sin is to stand in judgement on God, to say that will not believe God can do this or that, or should allow this or that.

After all, we only permit ourselves to judge those over whom we somehow feel ourselves to be superior. Society places a judge over all other lawyers, parents are placed over their children, because of their superior experience of life, teachers likewise are superior to their students. In your inner heart, the people you judge and find wanting are those who you feel are in some way not as good as you; not as together, not as organised, not as intelligent, not as gifted, not as *something*, whatever it is, as you feel you are yourself. And when we stand in judgement on God and say because we do not understand his ways we will not believe, we are saying that God is not as good as we are ourselves, in some way.

As soon as I put it this way, you will see that this simply is ridiculous, it simply will not do. So often what we read in Scripture seems to be bringing home to us the hubris of the human condition. That is the point of the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent. Adam and Eve decided that they knew better than God, and acted accordingly – which is a summary of the whole human condition from the beginning of time. Hubris, pride, is indeed the most basic human fault, and we all have it. Imagine thinking we are better than God! We don't mean to imply that, we don't realise we are implying it, but when we think through the attitudes which lie behind actions or behind our words, that is what lurks there. God has let us down; we could do better without him. We can do better ourselves.

Thomas is not alone in trying to stand on his own two feet, on his own understanding of life. Of course he is not. But just because he is not alone doesn't make him right. To live as Thomas, to live demanding that God act as we think fit, as we expect, is to make your world so small, so empty of possibility. This is not just true for Thomas, but also for all of us when we seek to stand alone, having judged God and rejected him.

Jesus once said "Judge not, that you be not judged, for with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." He did not only refer to judgement before the throne of God. He may not have referred to that at all. He is talking about the way that we live life. If we live condemning others, we may be sure that they will turn and condemn us. We see that almost every day when you look at the news headlines. A politician or celebrity, someone in the public eye, no sooner makes some kind of moral pronouncement than the press, or in these days the ordinary people on Social Media, are testing to see if he or she leads a life which measures up to the words spoken.

And if we live allowing only our own experience to inform our view of the world, then our worlds will be small and curtailed. Our judgement will condemn us to living in very small worlds. The story of Elisha's servant is only one illustration of that. It is a brilliant story, one of my personal favourites – from a long list of personal favourite Bible stories.

The Arameans had surrounded the town of Dothan where the prophet Elisha lived, surrounded it with the express intent of seizing Elisha. Elisha's servant looked out and saw the town surrounded, and was filled with fear and despair. He could not see how they were to escape.

But Elisha asked God to let him see better. Elisha could see – or maybe he couldn't see but merely believed - that God was surrounding them, and surrounding their enemies. And then the servant looked and saw the horses and chariots of fire which would be their protection if they were needed. Actually they were not needed because in a neat reversal of the opening of the servant's eyes, Elisha asks God to temporarily blind his enemies and they are led to the presence of the King of Israel – where Elisha urges mercy be shown them.

The point was that there was so much more going on than the servant could see or even dreamed of. Just as on Easter Day there was so much more going on than Thomas could imagine or find credible.

If we stand in judgement on God and say that we cannot believe because he has allowed this or that, we forget that what we are condemning are most often human actions; we are forgetting that the wonder of God's love is that he will not force us to live in his way, because he wants us to do so as a loving response, not as mindless slaves. When we say that we think God should do this or that, we are forgetting that we do not see the whole picture, just the small part that affects us, or is shown to us.

Jesus became a human being just like us, and maybe it is because of that that we sometimes find it too easy to sit in judgement. Jesus brought God close and so we think that we are familiar with God. But who can be familiar with the One who was before the beginning of time? By his resurrection Jesus brings to us the possibility of being in a relationship with God, but that is not to say that we will fully know him. That is not to say that we can second-guess him. That is not to say that we will always understand how he works.

“Open his eyes that he may see” was Elisha's prayer for his panicking servant. It is a prayer we need to pray for ourselves, each time we are puzzled, each time that we do not understand how God can do or allow something, each time we meet pain or confusion in someone else. Open his eyes, her eyes, my eyes.

When we walk by faith, when we live believing in the love and goodness of God and choosing to believe in it, even when there are puzzles for us; choosing to believe in it because we know that we do not have all knowledge ourselves. When we do that, then the world opens up to us. We see more, we understand more, there is a possibility of joy which we can know no other way.

Jesus showed Thomas his hands and his side and told him to stop his doubting and believe. In his grace he permitted this to Thomas. But the people he commended were and are those who have not seen, but still believe, still allow what they believe to shape their lives, still hold firm to the goodness of God. May we be these people, commended by Jesus, living with eyes open, rejoicing to know we don't know it all, and trusting the God to whom we commend our lives. Amen.