

Easter II – April 19th, 2020

John 20:19-end

Doubting Thomas

‘Do not doubt, but believe.’

This is possibly a candidate for the award for worst spiritual advice ever given.

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In America there’s a TV evangelist called Kenneth Copeland. He tells his followers that God can blow away Co-void 19, that they’ve got nothing to worry about and that even if they’ve lost their jobs they should keep on sending him their money. Don’t doubt, only believe.

Or, a bit closer to home, in Morning Prayer this week many of us have been following the story of the Exodus – of how God, having slaughtered the first born of the Egyptians, then proceeded to drown their army in the sea. The daily liturgy invites us not only to believe all this, but to exult in the fact. ‘I will sing to the Lord who has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.’

Well, if when faced with Kenneth Copeland or the Exodus story, your critical and doubting instincts *do not* kick in – there is something wrong with you. Do not doubt, only believe, in contexts like that, is perhaps the worst spiritual advice you could be given.

Unfortunately, Jesus said it, and therefore we are not allowed to leave matters there. Presumably there is some sense in which this is the very best advice – indeed, a divinely wise command. What might that sense be?

Perhaps we are being told not to doubt the *essentials* of the faith. Kenneth Copeland is not essential. The historical truth of every last story in the Bible is not essential. What I've said here in the last few weeks about the bread and the wine and sacraments – not essential. The Church's teaching on same-sex relations, on divorce, on baptism – all of it not essential. It might – perhaps - be important, but it's not *essential*. How do you know what's essential? Look at the Creed. That's our base-line: that's the belief that makes us Christian. And if it's not in the Creed, you can't make it essential.

This is not a bad rule of thumb. However, it doesn't really solve this problem of doubt. Because after all, look what *is* in the Creed. Not only God, but God made human. He was born of a virgin and rose from the dead. He will come again one day come again in glory, and in the meantime his Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Well, how you can you plonk all that down in front of someone and say, 'do not doubt: only believe'? These are all hugely challenging, difficult beliefs. For most people it would be bizarre never to doubt them. And indeed, often it is precisely through doubting, through asking questions and wrestling and worrying and debating that our relationship with God becomes real and alive: that our faith even if it is at one level bewildered is at another stronger and deeper. That's what the poet Tennyson realised: 'there lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.'

Honest doubt. That's an interesting phrase. It suggests there might be such a thing as *dishonest* doubt. If there is, maybe that's what Jesus is on about when he says, 'do not doubt, only believe.' So what might *dishonest* doubt be? Well, I think for instance of the very clever young student who once told me that they could never be a Christian because they had three Science A-Levels, and that science had disproved religion. Now this highly intelligent person reached this conclusion without bothering to read a single believer working in the sciences, of whom there are many, and many who have thought long and hard about the two paths relate. She didn't need to read them, because they couldn't teach her anything. She *knew* what the truth was. And that suited her very nicely, because if she *did* read them she would be forced to confront the fact that the debate remain alive. God might actually be real, even for clever scientific people, and she might be a creature, who owes her existence to a Creator, and is accountable for what she does with it. That was an intellectual conclusion at which she did not wish to risk arriving – and so she refused to even begin the journey. That, my friends, is dishonest doubt.

And it's not just atheists. Inside the church too, perhaps most especially and obviously in the field of sexual ethics, when we ask what the will of God is many of us know in advance precisely what we *want* the answers to be. Our questioning of traditional moral teachings – not always, but often - has less to do with the Bible and reason and truth than it does with our own personal preferences. That's not to say that the traditional teaching is always right – I don't think it is – but it is to say we should be a bit more sceptical about our scepticism.

Because doubt can suit us in other ways too. It is very gratifying, is it not, to think that intellectually and spiritually speaking, we're not part of the herd? We're not prepared to settle for the traditional answers, to trust authority, to accept what we don't fully understand. We are brave independent thinkers, spiritual questers. Nobody can tell me what to believe or how to behave. It's just me and God: I don't need this wider body. It's worth just noting in this connection that the Thomas story in John's Gospel only happens because on that first Easter evening he was off on his own, away from all the other apostles. Maybe there's just a hint there of a connection between some kinds of doubt and the rejection of community. Of the idea that, in both, at bottom, there's a kind of spiritual pride. Doubt which is not so much about truth as the cultivation of a romantic kind of self-image: dishonest doubt.

And all this goes some way to explaining why John 20:27, 'do not doubt, but believe' is not actually the worst advice ever. And indeed, at the risk of seeming a bit like a magician pulling a rabbit from the hat, let's look at that verse a little more closely. Do not doubt, says the English translation – but that's not quite the Greek. *Me ginou apistos* – do not be faithless. Do not be faithless, but faithful: that's what Jesus is saying. And faith, in the New Testament sense, is not primarily about what you believe – about the propositions to which your mind gives assent. That's part of it, an important part, but only part. Even the demons believe, says St. James, and a fat lot of good it does them. No, *faith* in the Bible is about commitment, devotion, allegiance. What Jesus is asking Thomas for is loyalty and love – in the first place and most obviously for Himself; in second place, perhaps, for the other apostles, for the church. On Easter Sunday, a new world began to rise. A new order, of life and love. The Kingdom of God, coming at last. Well, Thomas, will you belong? Will you swear allegiance? Whatever it was that caused you to waver, now you need to put it aside. Pledge yourself. Do not be faithless, but faithful. Do not doubt, only believe.

And that is the challenge aimed squarely at us. God does not especially mind if you struggle with aspects of the biblical stories. He doesn't really mind if you cannot get your head round what exactly it means that he died for your sins; if you are uncertain what kind of body the risen Jesus had or what on earth it could mean to say that He will one day come again in glory. Those questions matter, and you should wrestle with them, and part of wrestling will be a lot of scepticism and bewilderment, debate and disagreement. And all of that, God is fine with – even if you end up getting the answers wrong. He will not judge for you that. His real challenge to us though, the one thing that really matters and counts eternally, in and through all of our puzzling, is that we grow faithful. That we bear true allegiance to the Lord Jesus and the dawning resurrection. That we live like citizens of the new kingdom he has won. That we love the Lord our God, and obey his command, with all our heart and soul and strength and mind. Will you bear true allegiance? That's the question, to us as it was to Thomas. Let's answer with the same simplicity: 'My Lord and my God!' Amen.