

Thomas, Faith and Reason

John 20:29 "Jesus said to (the doubting Thomas), 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'"

Poor, poor, Thomas, forever labeled 'the Doubter', because he did not believe the other disciples when they told him of their encounter with the Resurrected Jesus, so much so that in our culture today we call people who refuse to believe something without proof; "Doubting Thomases". Yet actually this isn't a very fair depiction for Thomas at all. As we saw in last week's sermon, Thomas was no more a doubter than the other disciples were. Indeed in every story of the Resurrection appearances that we have, the initial response of the disciples was to distrust and disbelieve. So I am not bothered by Thomas' initial disbelief or by his request for proof. I understand his desire to see the mark of the nails for himself. I respect his doubt.

So when Thomas encounters the Resurrected Jesus a week later, Jesus says to him, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." And Thomas does. What bothers me in the story is that Jesus then replies to Thomas, "Have you believed because you

have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Why is 'not seeing and still believing' held up by Jesus as greater, as more faithful, than asking for proof, than rationally wanting to see and touch things for ourselves? What it is about faith that makes it more precious in the eyes of God than reasoned empirical evidence?

Now first of all, this is not a question about having to choose between faith and reason. This is a question of why faith is more precious than reason. Treating Christian faith as different from empirical proof doesn't mean it's antithetical to evidence and reason. Christianity is a faith that claims to be rooted in history, rooted in human experience, not in some abstract philosophy. St. Paul wrote that if Jesus was not resurrected from the dead, the Christian faith is "futile" and the followers of Jesus are "of all people most to be pitied."

Christians would say, in fact, that reason is affirmed in Scripture – "Come now, and let us reason together," is the way the prophet Isaiah puts it – Faith properly understood is consistent with and deepens our understanding of reality. Isn't that part of our understanding with the Doctrine of the Incarnation? Faith often provides meaning to our human experience and human interaction, where reason sometimes fails us. Faith without reason risks descending into superstition; and reason without faith can easily lead to immoral materialism.

So faith itself, while not the opposite of reason, is still distinct from it, but why is it more precious in the eyes of God? If you think leaps of faith are only for children – consider that scientists, empiricists, rationalists, atheists even, ultimately place their trust in certain propositions that require faith to be believed. To say, for example, that truth is only intelligible through reason, is itself a statement of faith. The Logical Positivists of the early 20th century boldly declared that “all meaningful statements can be proven true or false either by definition (such as a circle is round, or $2 + 2 = 4$) or by empirical evidence, by scientific observation.” Yet that very statement itself requires faith to be meaningful, as that statement is neither analytically or empirically verifiable. Similarly, denying the existence of God is as much a leap of faith as asserting the existence of God. There is no conclusive evidence, either way. As one friend once told me that most of the things we deeply believe in – for example, the value of life, human equality, a sense of justice – are not in and of themselves empirically or analytically verifiable, they are matters of faith or belief.

As the French philosopher Pascal put it “The supreme function of reason is to show man that some things are beyond reason.” Something would not require faith, if the proof of it

was absolute. Faith requires the possibility of denial, or it is not faith.

Perhaps the key to understanding why faith is so prized within the Christian tradition is that it involves trust, trust that would not be needed if the existence of God was subject to a mathematical proof. What Jesus is seeking from his disciples in this Gospel reading is not their intellectual assent to his Resurrection, as much as a trusting relationship with the Resurrected Jesus.

Every meaningful relationship we have – parent to child, spouse to spouse, friend to friend – involves some degree of trust. And surely it is better to be the object of someone's trust, rather than be the last person standing after a series of logical deductions. That's true for us as individuals, and it can be true for God as well.

Faith demonstrates our human trust in God. Faith demonstrates that we accept God's love for us and for creation. Faith is more precious than proof, because it gives us a relationship with the Divine. And surely all truly valuable relationships are bound together by love, not by reason. Love is always an expression of faith. Empirical proofs, for instance, don't necessarily inspire belief. Toward the end of his Gospel, Matthew mentions that some disciples still doubted after they

looked right at the risen Jesus. ("When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.") They doubted the empirical evidence right in front of them. Empirical proofs don't necessarily inspire belief. Belief require some level of trust.

Some of those who witnessed the miracles of Jesus, not only didn't believe in him, but eventually sought to kill him. And Judas, one of Jesus' original disciples, betrayed him, with a kiss. So empirical experience isn't enough to compel religious belief and allegiance.

In fact, our most important forms of knowledge rarely come from logic or proof, but from a more personal interaction. For example, I know that my wife loves me. I know that based not upon some empirical observances, but upon our relationship. I know her heart, I know her character, and I trust her. My knowledge of her is less about rational certainty, and much more about a well-placed confidence in who she really is (a faith in her that is qualitatively different, and far more personal, and more holistic, than any intellectual certainty).

Faith is tied to love in a way that logical deduction and reason are not. We are changed by what we love, more than by what we believe. Faith can allow us to understand things in a different way than simple reason does. Reason is one way to perceive reality; faith – rooted not in partisan ideology, but

in grace and a sense of the sacred – is another way to understand and interpret the reality we experience.

It's notable that when Thomas makes his request, he's not condemned for wanting proof. Rather, Jesus gives Thomas what he asked for – in his case, empirical evidence – and in doing so makes it clear that Jesus is willing to meet us where we are. Some need proof, at least as a start; for others, faith alone is enough.

According to Christian tradition, Thomas would eventually go on to serve as a missionary in India, where he was martyred. I imagine his faithfulness had less to do with putting his hand in the side of Jesus, and more to do with what transpired within his heart in doing so. His intellectual doubts gave way to a deeper sense of trust. In my experience, at least, that journey isn't always an easy one. For many of us, shadows of doubt and skepticism coexist with our faith.

To emphasize faith is not to cast out doubt, any more than asking for evidence will cast out our faith. In fact, it is precisely because some people take doubt so seriously, that they are able to grow deeper in their faith, like Thomas.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe, Jesus said. In the end, we are those who have not seen and have come to believe. Unlike Thomas, we cannot demand the kind of proof for the Resurrection that he did. There is no

chance for us to put our fingers in the print of the nails or our hands in Jesus' side. We must believe without seeing.

But they are our witnesses. The disciples bear testimony to the reality of the Resurrection for us. And it is difficult to imagine that they made up the stories of His appearing or that they stole the body, because like Thomas, they were all themselves such reluctant witnesses and so slow to believe themselves. Yet they did all come to believe in the Resurrection, and to bear witness to its reality for us, and to risk their lives in the telling of that story. The reluctance of the disciples to believe and their doubts about Jesus' Resurrection seem to me all the more proof to us that Jesus really was raised from the tomb and lives again in some way or another. It is because of the disciples' reluctance to be convinced and the doubts of all of them, that we can now say with such confidence, Alleluia, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed, Alleluia. AMEN.