

John 20:19-31

‘Doubting Thomas.’

In all the years I’ve preached on this story, I’ve encountered people with a variety of reactions to Thomas. There are those whose faith is so serene that they find it hard to comprehend someone with doubts. To them, faith is as natural as breathing.

There are others who quite understand him having questions, because although they believe, they too have plenty of questions for God.

Finally, there are those who think Thomas isn’t militant enough, and who would say it’s all a sham. They defer to outright unbelief.

To explore this today, I am not so much going to expound the passage as use it as an example of this theme about faith, doubt, and unbelief.

And that is going to require me to explore the subject in four phases.

Firstly, there is a difference between doubt and unbelief.

To help us see the difference between doubt and unbelief, consider the story in Mark chapter 9 when Jesus and his three closest disciples come down from the Mount of Transfiguration and encounter a father with a demonised son, whom the other disciples have not been able to heal.

Do you remember the exchange between Jesus and the distraught father?

²¹Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?”

“From childhood,” he answered. ²²“It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

²³“If you can’?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

²⁴Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief. He has both belief and unbelief. This is doubt. A famous Christian thinker called Os Guinness wrote a book on doubt, and he defined doubt as ‘Faith in two minds.’

If we are doubting, we are struggling. We are being pulled both ways. We may want to believe but are finding it hard. It's not that we refuse to believe.

Now while being in two minds is not a great place to be – the apostle James says that the one who doubts ‘is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind’ (James 1:6) and ‘unstable’ (James 1:7). But Jesus wants to bring stability and faith, so if we find it easier to believe, let us offer kindness and gentleness to those who doubt and give space for Jesus to bring them through to faith.

Secondly, some doubt or disbelieve because they positively believe something else.

This is a simple point to remember. If somebody says they don’t believe something, it’s because they actually believe something else that contradicts it or rules it out.

Thomas was a bit like that. He didn’t immediately accept that Jesus had risen from the dead, because like most Jews apart from the Sadducees he didn’t believe there would be a resurrection of the dead until the end of time. The Sadducees didn’t think there would be any resurrection at all!

If someone today says they don’t believe in the Resurrection, it may well be because they believe something else. That belief may be grounded in the idea that scientific laws are unchanging and unchangeable, and that resurrection is scientifically impossible.

If you tell some such people that their position is a ‘belief’, they may react negatively! For they tend to believe it’s a fact. ‘Beliefs’ are only for those deluded religious people. But it is actually an act of faith to say that you think the whole of life can be lived on the basis of scientific discoveries.

They tend to say that we can’t prove our faith beliefs, but I would say they can’t prove theirs, either. There is more to this world than science, much as we welcome its discoveries. Not everything can be tested by science. We need other disciplines, like history, which works differently from science.

There is a lot of life where we need trust and faith as well as proof. None of us goes into a marriage with the complete proof that the one we love is going to be kind, loving, and faithful to us for the rest of our lives. Instead, we enter into marriage on the basis that we have learned enough about that person to believe we can trust them.

Finally, on the specific issue of believing in unchanging scientific laws, of course it's helpful to know that laws make for predictable behaviour. Imagine if gravity varied massively all the time.

But perhaps there is another way to see this consistency and reliability of scientific laws if you allow for the existence of God. And that is to see them, as I heard one preacher put it, as 'descriptions of God's habits.' They tell us how God usually does things. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus 'sustains all things by his powerful word' (Hebrews 1:3). But perhaps on rare occasions and for reasons known to his sovereign will the Lord occasionally changes his habits. That would permit the possibility of miracles. And if so, then we have to be careful about making scientific laws the ultimate standard by which we judge the truth and falsehood of other claims.

Thirdly, some disbelieve for other motives that are not logical.

I can understand someone who has been brought up on the idea of unchanging and unchangeable scientific laws using that as a test for truth, although as I've just said I don't think it's as watertight as some think it is.

But we need to recognise that some people choose disbelief for other reasons. For some it is because they believe their faith in God let them down. They wanted God to do something in their lives or in the life of someone they love but it didn't happen. Sometimes it's because they had a rather Sunday School image of God, even in adulthood. Sometimes it's the fault of the church that has told them that God will always heal.

It's tragic, really. If people reject Christianity because they think it can't explain suffering, they miss the fact that atheism can't explain love and purpose in life. If all we have is evolution, then life is just continued incidents of purposeless survival.

We could help people grow into a mature faith if instead we encouraged a church where we believe in 'the now and the not yet', that Jesus may heal in this life but he may not. And if we combine that with learning from the Psalmists about the possibility of believing in God but still bringing our darkest problems and emotions to him, instead of having to prettify everything, and make faith always neat, tidy, and clean. It isn't.

Another reason for disbelief, though, can be what amounts to outright rebellion against God. Certain atheists are on record as saying that not only do they not believe in God, moreover they do not *want* to believe in God.

Why? Because they want to be in charge of their own lives. They do not want to be answerable to someone else.

The thing is, belief in God can strike against personal pride. Whose life is it anyway? It's my life. Except it isn't.

In the same way, I've been told that surveys show that the more intellectual someone is, the less likely they are to believe in God. But this assumes that belief or unbelief is only a matter of reason and knowledge. When pride comes into play, everything gets distorted – just as Christians would expect, because it's sin. And so the cleverer someone is, the more at risk they are from taking pride in their intellectual abilities.

And the Gospel strikes against that. They don't like the call to repentance. We need to model what Paul said in Romans that it is God's kindness that leads to repentance (Romans 2:4).

Fourthly, the ultimate solution is an encounter with Jesus.

What changed Thomas? It was an encounter with the risen Jesus. He appears again behind locked doors, this time with Thomas present.

And he shows himself sympathetic to Thomas' concerns, inviting him to examine his wounds as he had requested.

But the encounter is enough. Thomas doesn't even get as far as exercising his demands. He says, 'My Lord and my God!' (Verse 28)

Sometimes we come to realise that all the logical arguments, important as they are for buttressing our faith, are insufficient on their own. We need an encounter with Jesus. OK, it won't be exactly the same as Thomas had, for we are among those 'who have not seen and yet have believed' (verse 29).

But he met us. That's what matters.

It's something to pray for when we know friends and loved ones who don't believe. Pray that Jesus will meet them in a grace-filled holy ambush.

I was talking with an experienced evangelist about a teenage boy we both knew who felt he had intellectual reasons for unbelief. She said, ‘What he needs is an encounter with Jesus.’ I think she had a point.

I remember a story told by Bishop Festo Kivengere, one of the courageous Christian leaders who stood up to President Idi Amin of Uganda in the 1970s. Kivengere told how he was called to a football stadium where some prisoners were going to be publicly executed by firing squad. He was allowed to meet with the prisoners and pray with them.

‘But,’ Kivengere cried out to God, ‘what do I say to them? What will make sense to these men who are going to be executed at the whim of an evil dictator?’

‘Tell them about me. I’ll make sense,’ were the words he heard back from Jesus.

So that’s what he did and many of those men went to their unjust deaths knowing their eternal destiny was secure.

‘Tell them about me. I’ll make sense.’ That’s our calling.