

‘Thank heavens: Pope puts hell in doubt’. This story, in Good Fridays, ‘Times’, arose from conversations between the Holy Father and an atheist philosopher, and was met with cries of ‘heresy’ in some Catholic circles and a call for the Pontiff’s resignation. For the Pope’s critics, doubt may be acceptable in everyday life, but never when it comes to religion. They imply that good Christians should never doubt; wouldn’t do so if they prayed harder and were less intellectually lazy, and that doubt is a form of spiritual cowardice.

Thomas has rather unfairly become a byword for doubt. John’s gospel was written 50 years after the Resurrection. Jesus’ implied rebuke after Thomas having touched his wounds and said ‘My Lord and My God’ may have been added by the Evangelist to encourage later followers who had to take the Resurrection on trust. However, if the other disciples had not previously seen and believed, Christianity would not exist. They were hiding in an upper room a small band of Galilean men and women, displaced and

fearful in an unfamiliar city, feeling most of the time pretty uncertain what to make of Jesus' appearances, and wondering whatever was going to happen next.

Christians today in the Middle East and parts of Asia and Africa are experiencing persecution as vicious as anything that happened in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. They must feel that their situation is not unlike that of those first disciples. In Britain, though physically safe, the church, like the country, is often anxious and cantankerous. We believe that the Risen Christ has charged us with making God's kingdom a reality, but are not sure how to proceed. We don't inhabit the same mental world as the Early Christians, when atheism was unknown. Scepticism is the default position of modern society: there is a common assumption that if science cannot explain and measure something, it isn't real. Unlike our ancestors, who saw themselves primarily as members of a group or community, we are first and foremost individuals: we are told that our lives are our own and how we choose to live it is up to us. Belief in God is seen as a

private lifestyle choice or a crutch for those feeble souls who need such comfort. Nevertheless people do ask spiritual questions like 'who am I, why am I here and what must I do', but most don't seem to see organised Christianity as providing the answers.

Doubt can unnerve individuals, and cause organisations to lose their way. A common problem is that many Christians have often been brought up to confuse faith, which is trust in God, with The Faith, the doctrines, rituals and other practices by which we nurture and express our trust. For the Pope's critics and for many Christians The Faith is a fortress of unchanging belief against the changes and chances of the world as it had been since Constantine made Christianity the state religion. To live in a fortress can be very reassuring, but although building high walls can shut out threatening thoughts and ideas, if they are too high and too solid there is danger that they can also shut out the Holy Spirit. High walls need maintenance, left untouched, they start to crumble or just as when gunpowder and artillery made castles

obsolete, something can come along that brings the whole edifice of belief tumbling down. In a view of belief, where everything must be just so, when cracks appear, organisations are thrown into turmoil and individuals can find themselves at each other's throats. We only have to look beyond the South Door to the Martyrs' Memorial, to realise that to believe the wrong thing openly could mean ostracism and often prison, torture and death. Roman Catholics in Britain have only enjoyed full toleration and civil liberties for less than two hundred years. The fortress mentality affects most religions. ISIS and Al-Qaeda have their roots in Salafism, a puritanical version of Islam, once confined to Saudi Arabia. Salafism has increased its influence hugely since Muslims coming to the West from very traditional rural backgrounds have encountered with horror materialist and libertarian Western society. No wonder that there is a current of opinion, which considers that most of the evil in world throughout history can be attributed to organised religion.

Jesus' early disciples were called followers of 'The Way'. Faith is a journey in which grow to trust the love of God. Both books of the Bible are books of journeys. The Israelites travelled to and from Egypt, then into exile Babylon and back. The Gospels record Jesus' travels in Galilee ending in his final journey to Jerusalem and Golgotha. After Pentecost those beleaguered disciples, unlearned though they were, spread out across the Roman Empire and beyond. Thomas is reputed to have founded the Mar Thoma Church in South India. Their physical journeys were hard enough, but the journeys of the spirit as they ventured from their segregated Judaism into the Gentile world were far harder. The most cataclysmic spiritual journey happened to the greatest missionary traveller of them all. Saul the rabbi grew up seeing Judaism as a citadel to be defended even to the point of persecuting others. Stephen's martyrdom probably cracked his defences. On the way to Damascus, they fell completely, changing him forever: as Paul his writings are a foundation for Christian doctrine.

Whether we have to commute, drive round the M25, fly away on holiday, we all know that there is an element of doubt in every journey. Although Jesus rose from the dead, there is no guidebook to heaven. We all start from different places and none of our journeys will be the same, what we call The Faith supplies aids to navigation: in the Bible, in accounts of the joys and pitfalls of the journey in the teachings of the Fathers, in lives of the saints and in two thousand years of devotional and theological writing. We have clergy trained in understanding them. Sadly many people don't ask for help because they have at some stage been taught that faith is a package of beliefs to which they must sign up without question, and fear that to ask for help will reveal them as feeble or lost souls. They either give up and fade away or lead stunted and frightened spiritual lives.

Faith only struggles when we make it a private matter. Every journey we make depends on other people, most of whom we will never meet. Jesus and his disciples were Jews; for them faith was grounded

in scripture and reinforced by worship and common rituals. Though changed by Christ's teachings and actions, and two thousand years of Christian history, these rituals still underpin our common life. The Passover has become the Eucharist, which binds us together and feeds us. Everything we believe about the world and who we are has come to us through interacting with other people and their support. Much of what we say, think and do is because we have seen others do it and realise that it works, or where it doesn't, have been able to reject or modify it.

We are put on earth to further God's Kingdom. In order to say 'My Lord and my God' Thomas had first to touch Christ's wounds. Although it can sometimes seem like one, the Church is not a cosy private club; William Temple said that it is the only organisation, which exists for those who are not its members. Our faith only becomes truly mature as we touch Christ's wounds in serving the lonely, the fearful, the hungry, the dispossessed, the sick and the sorrowful.

Sir Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal, said the real question is why anything exists at all. We can never escape doubt: the text of one of the few sermons I remember from university was, 'Lord I believe help Thou my unbelief'. If we think we can get our head around God, then we are worshipping an idol of our own making. How can we comprehend the Creator of the universe, made up of 150 billion galaxies like our own, yet who is eternally present in every particle of it and who revealed Himself in a human being? The world is here not because we believe in God, but because God believes in us.

On the day I was confirmed my father said, 'May you never have doubts'; my mother however demurred saying 'No! May you always be able to resolve them'. Have I resolved my doubts? Yes! Some of them, but I have acquired more on the way. For me, doubt and belief are millstones that grind the seed of the Spirit and turn it into the flour of Faith. We all face the one certainty, death, about which we can know nothing. When I find belief difficult, I try to live in hope,



summed up by the psalmist: 'But as for me, I will behold thy presence in righteousness: and when I awake after Thy likeness I shall be satisfied'.