

EASTER DOUBT

We've lost Prince Philip and to many people this loss feels almost personal, so much has he been around all our lives. Diocesan bishops have a surreal invitation to spend a weekend at Sandringham with the Queen, and to preach on the Sunday. When I did this the reading was John 2, the wedding at Cana. I duly preached about the extravagance of God, and tried to soften Jesus' harsh-sounding phrase, 'Woman, what has that got to do with you and me?' Over pre-lunch drinks the Duke of Edinburgh sauntered up to take me on, and we had a good exchange on what Jesus meant. Finally I thought it would be politic to retreat, so I said, 'I'm sure you're right, sir.' He came straight back at me, 'I'm sure I'm not!' he said. He loved straight talking. He didn't strike you as a man plagued by doubt. On the other hand, he said to a friend of mine, 'Never be dogmatic.' He was serious about his faith; theology was important to him.

If you've never doubted your faith, never had questions that you've buried because they were too unsettling, never wondered if you've been making a big mistake in your faith – then good for you! Don't knock it. But most people do, at some stage in their faith journey, face uncertainty. And then we have a name for them: doubting Thomas.

Mind you, I think that's a shame because Thomas wasn't a shaky disciple so much as a deeply serious one, a disciple who had so much riding on the truth of Jesus, so much desire for Jesus to succeed, that he needed unequivocal proof of this resurrection that the other disciples were talking about. 'Unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I won't, I can't, believe.' He was desperate for what his friends said to be true – but he hadn't been there. He'd popped out to get a Sunday paper and he'd missed Jesus.

Remember this was the Thomas who a few days before had said 'Let's go to Jerusalem and die there with Jesus if we have to.' He wasn't a half-hearted believer; he was a 110% believer. Nevertheless, he's stuck with his nickname, 'Doubting Thomas.'

But I think it's important to say, 'let's hear it for doubt!' Doubt is a friend. It helps us to grow. Because the opposite of doubt isn't faith; it's certitude, and we live in a culture that's dangerously obsessed with certitude. Everyone wants to be absolutely right and to condemn those who don't agree. Think Brexit. Think Trump. Think covid-deniers. It's also true of too many people of faith, 'cancelling' those they disagree with.

But not all believers are like that – and doubt helps them. The writer Howard Jacobson pointed out the paradox that 'so many people of religious conviction are people of doubt, and so many religious doubters are people of utter certainty... The great failure of secularity as a guiding principle is that it does the opposite of what it says on the packet – it doesn't liberate or enlarge us, it *confines us to certainty*.' It's those who have the truth captured, stuffed and mounted on the wall who are most scary, whether their certainty is about politics, the Second Coming, or assisted suicide. Coming to a clear judgement may be attractive, but it often leads to great error.

There's a spectrum of religious doubt. At one end is the cynical, self-serving doubt that doesn't know or understand, and therefore seeks to destroy. The aggressive atheist. Further

along the spectrum is the honest doubt of someone who admits the mystery, the not-knowing, and stays open to the questions. The agnostic. But further along again is the doubt of the believer, where many of us are at some point of time in our pilgrimage. And here doubt can be a healthy ingredient of faithful living.

The doubt of the believer is like the roots of a tree searching down into the depths of the earth, and therefore going **in entirely the opposite direction** to that of the tree as we see it above ground. But only because those roots are deep is the tree secure from the blasts of winter. Shallow roots would be ripped up. The deep roots of doubt, going apparently in the opposite direction to faith, are actually a guarantee against immaturity and the premature shipwreck of faith. To have entered the zone of dark doubt is to have had to face the demons, the negative arguments, the wondering 'if this was all folly,' and to have found a good accommodation, a way of staying in there, a living faith.

The philosopher Unamuno wrote, 'Those who believe they believe in God but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, *without doubt and even at times without despair*, believe only in the idea of God, not in God himself.' (21) And Dostoevsky, too, wrote 'It is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ. My *hosanna* is born of a furnace of doubt.'

Here's a suggestion. If we've been on the Christian journey for some time we might well have gone through a number of different stages of faith. The first one I call simply '**first sight**.' It's when our faith comes alive in a new way and we realise it isn't somebody else's faith (our parents for example) but *our* faith. For some it's a deliberate commitment, for others a natural growth, for some it's a dramatic moment, for others like a gradual dawning in the mind, a warming of the heart. First sight is lovely – refreshing, there's so much to enjoy and discover, the pleasure of having a centre-piece to our lives. I loved that point in my time at Oxford as an undergraduate. It was summed up for me in the last words of a book by a Professor of History from Cambridge. Herbert Butterfield recommended this position, '*Hold fast to Christ*, (he said) and for the rest be uncommitted.' We've got the rest of our lives to sort things out.

But after first sight the doubts wander in. Is this faith of mine a bit too simplistic? What about those other approaches to faith? Is it fair for me to say I'm right and they're wrong, we're in and they're out, I'm a true believer and you're a liberal heretic? Don't I need to broaden out and learn other ways of being a Christian? Fundamentalism for me meant I left too much of my brain outside. So doubt helped me to enjoy theology and Biblical criticism, to be intrigued by the Desert Fathers and the mystics, to learn from Quakers and those who went on pilgrimages and prayed with icons, to see the social and political implications of the gospel. This wasn't first sight; this was '**second sight**.' It enriched my journey for years.

But then, quite a bit later, doubt wanders in again. We become aware of the complexity of faith, questions that are hard to answer. Why is there so much suffering if God is so loving? Do I really believe the miracles in the Bible, or miracles now? How does God interact with the world we see around us? Is prayer any use? Why has the Church been so terrible sometimes? Why do our church leaders have feet of clay, shouldn't they be better?

And maybe we find the reality of our faith is draining away, we're going through the motions, God is slipping out of our life if we're honest. Maybe we should stick with social action and work in the community, and drop the spiritual stuff.

What we need now isn't first sight or second sight, but '**night sight**,' a determination to keep going through the night of doubt and sorrow, to pray into the dark (like Jesus on the cross), to look back and remember better times, to talk to a wise friend, to read books that might help, to try other paths of spirituality, above all *never to stop loving*. St John of the Cross said that we can only grasp God by love, but by thought, never. Night sight means reaching out, longing, waiting, desiring, loving through the cloud of unknowing.

But then hopefully we'll start doubting our doubt! We'll work our way through the darkness and scepticism because we'll realise it's not a great place to remain. Some people do find they stay there a long time but if we have any choice in the matter we'll want to emerge from night sight into what I call '**insight**.' This is where we stop fighting with our faith and trust our instincts. We overcome our dualism, we think 'both-and', not 'either-or'. We positively enjoy mystery and paradox. We agree with whoever said, 'the opposite of one profound truth is often another profound truth.' We become less dogmatic, more open and accepting of others and their views. We become less noisy and anxious in our faith, more gracious, and more valuing of silence in our prayers. We see God in all things, not just in odd things. We agree with the psalmist: 'The world belongs to God and everything that is in it.' We look at God, the world, faith from the *inside*, trusting, hoping, loving. This is *insight*, a kind of second simplicity.

Kate was a young wife and mother in our congregation in Taunton. She was thoughtful and caring – she looked after our Pastoral Visiting Team. Her husband didn't come to church – he was a Commander in the navy. After we left Taunton, Kate and Andy went to live in Italy and Kate no longer had a flourishing parish to be part of. She struggled with her faith, but was received into the Roman Catholic church to be part of local culture. And she carefully found her way through from second sight in Taunton, through night sight when she moved to Italy, and towards insight, a new stage of her spiritual journey. This is what she wrote to me at the time:

'Today I sit reasonably happy with the uncertainty. Christ is a way of saying the truth; a way we can truly follow; true in a deeper sense than history – though Jesus is history... Right now I love more not less the God he called his Father, because it's the breath of life. Surrendering means to me doing without the proofs and reaching out towards an Infinite beyond conclusion; finding that Infinite to be peaceful, just and good – and in that sense personal..'

Kate's way of putting that was purely her own. None of us would say it in quite the same way. But hers is a journey many of us make – from first sight to second sight, through night sight to insight. And the saints go even further, '**out of sight**', but that's beyond my pay grade. It can be a kind of spiral too as we go through the cycle again, but differently.

And always it's doubt and accepting the validity of questions that helps us move on, that keeps us from getting stuck or bored or disbelieving. Don't be afraid of doubt. It shows we're serious about our faith.

I think Thomas would understand. And so would Prince Philip.