

The Significance of Doubt

I am going to speak tonight about doubt. I believe that doubt is an essential component of the Christian faith. I do not mean something close to despair, as represented by Psalm 88 which we have just heard but something to be celebrated and understood. I asked for the passage from the Gospel of Matthew which we have also just heard, near its very end - Chapter 28, and particularly Verse 17, “When they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted.” This whole passage is sometimes called ‘The Great Commission’, in which Christ sends out his 11 disciples to baptise mankind, to become Apostles. One of the 11, of course, was Thomas. I like Thomas.

But it is not only that sentence which considers doubt. Matthew specifically places the deliberate introduction of doubt into the Christian story immediately before the Great Commission, with a passage describing the chief priests bribing the soldiers to say that the disciples had stolen away

with the body of Christ while the guard slept – that is, the dead body of Christ.

If we believe in the risen Christ that is a falsehood but I think the placing of doubt so near the commissioning of the Apostles is very important. Doubt rather than certainty makes us think, makes us work at our faith. When my wife and I went last year to Israel, we visited the Golan Heights and saw the remains of some of the earliest Christian buildings in the world. They have arched roofs and the arches stand on loose rocks to give them tolerance against earthquakes: doubt is like those rocks, necessary to sustain faith by making us fear the closed mind of certainty about everything. Like those arches, we can soar skywards towards hope because of the need always to work at our faith.

In essence, I intend to give you a detective's view of the New Testament, a view which can be summarised in the words of Tertullian, who died early in the second century AD, "it is certain because it is impossible."

Precisely. The impossibility of the story lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Reading the gospel narratives, I do think that the careful detective can find clues and proofs on which he or she can rely but also some which appear to be clues but on which he or she cannot necessarily do so.

I want to believe in the virgin birth and the nativity stories but there is nothing amounting to proof. I want to believe in the fulfilment by Christ of earlier prophecies, whether that be the significance of Bethlehem at the beginning or the donkey at the end: but both of these could have been inserted in the story precisely to fulfil prophecy, even if they did not happen, or, particularly in the case of the donkey, deliberately arranged to do so. This is perhaps most likely in the case of Matthew, writing to convince the Jews about Christ and it being therefore important that He should fulfil what had been written about the coming of the Messiah.

I want to believe in John the Baptist and the miracles, or walking on water or the water and the wine or all of the stories of healing, including Lazarus but there is nothing near proof. In fact, with more proof, I would be prepared to believe them mostly, principally because, if this was God on earth, then I am prepared to believe that there was, at this particular time and place in human history, an inbreaking, as Hopkins would describe it, of the divine into the human sphere. I want to believe in all of this but there is nothing amounting to corroboration.

I want to believe, in my own Christian life, that there is power in prayer and that the occasional, momentary glimpses of the presence of God are real but I have to accept that this might be because human beings are hard wired towards the seeking of an explanation of life and death and have demonstrated that throughout human history, from cave dwellers onwards. It is noticeable, for instance, how similar are the behaviours and revelations of mystics of all faiths, Christian, Buddhist or Islamic, for instance. This may be good, in that such revelations may

display the divine: alternatively, it may be bad, in that it reveals nothing more than uncommon but culturally translatable human activity.

I want to believe that Simon Peter told Jesus that He was the Son of the Living God, that Christ then asked him to guard His sheep by Lake Galilee, that Mary met Him in the garden (I will return to her in a moment) but there is no proof.

Even the central message of a man without sin dying for the sinful could be a human construct, however earnestly we wish it to be true.

Preaching today on Trinity Sunday, it would also be possible to argue that the theology of the Nicene Creed looks like a very human construct.

So what kind of proof am I looking for? Well, in criminal trials, one looks for eyewitness testimony, for forensic evidence or for confession: if none of those are available,

occasionally a compelling case can be put forward of what is termed circumstantial evidence, that is surrounding and accompanying events and behaviours which can only be explained in one way. And here, I think we have it: or certainly, I find enough cause for belief.

The circumstantial evidence, in my opinion, lies in the Acts of the Apostles, as well as, in part, in the epistles. There are very few names in the Gospels: we do not know whose wedding it was at Cana, or who the Good Samaritan was or who were the recipients of most of the miracles or what was the name of the woman at the well.

But throughout the Acts, which appear to have been written by the writer we know as Luke and reasonably soon after the events he is describing, there are dozens of names, linked to places, people who would have been known to other people, whose stories and accounts were capable of verification. This is or was provable testimony.

My second proof is the speed of the early spread of Christianity. We do know, from Tacitus, that a man called Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem. What we then know is that belief in his cult, as I will call it at this stage in the argument, spread very fast indeed, throughout the ancient world, as the accounts in Acts and the very names of the recipient cities of the Epistles indicate.

And here I come to the centre of my thesis. The proof, if there is any, lies in the speed of spread (and persistence, of course, over 2000 years but that is a different argument), only if it is combined with the absolute impossibility of what was being suggested.

Let us begin with the Jews themselves. This story has a substantial number of substantial difficulties for the Jews. First, this is the wrong kind of Messiah. They were expecting a king or a warrior, from Jerusalem, not a poor man and peacemaker from with a heavy Gallilean accent. That would have been very disappointing.

Even more heretically, this was a messiah who was claiming and being acclaimed to be visible on earth as part of the Godhead, a God, please note, whom the Jews could not even name or make images of, let alone watch wandering around. There is no rabbinical suggestion before Jesus that the Messiah was going to be God: the Messiah and Christ being only the same words in Hebrew and Greek for the “anointed one”.

Then, you kill him. An idea so repulsive as to make Muslims assert that Jesus was substituted on or before the Cross and Abyssinnian crucifixes always be made, even to this day, with the eyes open because God cannot die.

To add to that, you have this man and his followers substitute the law of Moses, the central tenet of Judaism, with a new covenant. It is difficult to imagine that anything could be more insulting to Jewish traditions, other than, of course, that you open up this new revelation to Gentiles as well as Jews.

But none of these issues are the main point of difficulty. The main point is not a difficulty but an impossibility.

And here comes the next and, in my opinion, final bit of circumstantial evidence: this new spreading faith is based, quite extraordinarily, on something that everyone, Gentile and Jew alike, knows, as they know more than anything else on earth, simply cannot be true. No one rises from the dead. No one, not ever.

No other religion is based on such a proposition, with the possible exception of some aspects of Buddhism. It is an impossible, a ridiculous, a laughable concept. But it is the essence of the faith that the disciples spread and which we inherit. Eleven of the final twelve, including Matthias, were martyred for this faith and, we have to assume, that news of each death would have been brought to those who still survived and yet they went on.

A reading of the Acts and the Epistles makes clear that something happened after the crucifixion, which changed

peoples' lives forever, their behaviour, their value systems and their core beliefs. Something happened, perhaps in the upper room, perhaps in the garden, perhaps on the road to Emmaus or by Lake Galilee but certainly something happened. The historic events make that clear. You cannot read the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles without acknowledging that and also, at the same time, the sheer impossibility of what was and is being proposed; that a man was the Son of the Living God and that He rose from the dead.

If I was one of the expert counsel whom I have watched over the years in courts of law, this would be my case: how could a gospel be spread based on such impossibility, unless it were being spread by people who knew it and convincingly knew it to be true? And then, like great barristers do, I would add a touch of magic, a glimpse of glory, to the bare bones of argument.

I could do worse than quote from Hilary Greenwood's Easter hymn, which compares the Gardens of Eden and of

Gethsemene. It is entitled “Walking in a Garden” and the last verse reads:

Walking in a garden
At the break of day
Mary asked the gardener
Where the body lay:
But He turned towards her
Smiled at her and said
Mary, spring is here to stay
Only death is dead

The jury would be spellbound and accept the case not only on the balance of probabilities – or rather, improbabilities - but beyond reasonable doubt. It is beyond my doubt.

I have heard it said that that word, “Mary” said at that point in time is the most important single word ever uttered. For he is risen, for Mary and for all mankind: to promise the forgiveness of sins and resurrection to eternal life.

It is certain because it is impossible. “Certum est quia impossibile est.”

And that is why, even set against all the doubts and difficulties, miseries and unfairnesses of life, I can say with St Paul, writing to the Corinthians, ‘If Christ be not risen, your faith (and mine) is in vain’.

But it is not in vain because He was.

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