

Second Sunday of Easter 2013. St Philip's, Earl's Court Road

John 20.19-31

What does it mean to believe?

Jesus raises questions about why Thomas has come to believe:

*'Have you believed because you have seen me?'*

Jesus's question sounds odd to us. It seems obvious to us that seeing is the reason why Thomas believed. He wanted proof and he got it.

But in John's gospel, the first moment of belief that Jesus had risen didn't involve anyone seeing him.

For the disciple whom Jesus loved, it took no more than an empty tomb & the cloth that had been on Jesus's head not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Simon Peter had gone into the tomb before him, seen exactly the same, yet there is no mention of his belief.

An empty tomb and a cloth.

When Jesus says to Thomas in John's Gospel

*'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe',*

he's talking about the disciple whom Jesus loved, who believed before he saw the risen Christ.

This verse is often applied to those of us living centuries later, who also believe without having seen. But Jesus, speaking just one week after Easter Day, actually speaks of things that have already happened:

*'Blessed are those who have not seen ...'*

So seeing isn't necessary.

But seeing also isn't enough.

Mary Magdalene sees the risen Christ but doesn't believe. She assumes he's the gardener. Even hearing his voice isn't enough for Mary to believe. It's only when Jesus speaks her name that Mary recognises him.

There is an extraordinary verse at the end of Matthew's Gospel which also makes it clear that seeing wasn't enough.

In Matthew's Gospel, the events in and around the tomb are witnessed only by Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. No men are involved. There is an earthquake, an angel descends, rolls back the stone and speaks to the women. Later the women encounter the risen Christ. Both the angel

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& the risen Christ instruct the women to tell the disciples what has happened.

But when the disciples finally encounter Christ for themselves, on a mountain in Galilee, Matthew's Gospel tells us that:

*'some doubted'.*

So seeing is neither necessary or enough.

But what is enough? What would it take to persuade someone that Christ had risen from the dead?

Thomas starts out being sure what would be necessary to persuade him:

*'Unless I ... put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'*

Thomas wants to touch and feel Christ's wounds. But in the event, he appears to change his mind. There is no sign in the Gospel account of Thomas touching the risen Christ. And yet he believes.

It is impossible for us to know in advance what might be necessary for belief.

In any area of our lives - in any field of human activity - there's a problem about drawing up tight rules in advance about what we'll accept and what we won't accept.

The problem is that it anticipates a life with no surprises.

But life is full of surprises. And our own lives are stunted & desiccated if we're not open to them.

In the arts, time and time again people have drawn up rules trying to fix in advance the limits of what is good music, good painting, good poetry. A way of preserving standards.

But these rules have never lasted. Always, great creative geniuses have come along and produced art which broke the rules but were eventually recognised as masterpieces. Such art creates its own rules.

In science, right at the heart of physics for the past century, in quantum mechanics, are ideas which would have been thought ridiculous by earlier scientists.

And so the issue, in every area of human life, is how we can remain open to surprises, to what is genuinely new, without being credulous, without losing discernment, our ability to recognise shoddy art, false scientific theories, crazy religion.

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Something similar is true in our everyday lives. It's important for us to know who we can trust, to be on our guard against people who would abuse our trust. But how do we do that without closing down the possibility that we might meet new friends?

The discernment we need to exercise throughout our lives is as much an art as a science. At its heart is a kind of recognition.

And maybe 'recognition' is a word we need to hang on to. Because lurking in the background for many of us is a very different word, the word 'proof'.

I suspect proof is what many of us think we'd like. But proof is a completely inadequate & inappropriate concept in this case.

The kind of proof which delivers us certainty is only available in the fields of maths and logic. Neither provides us with any new information about the world, but with tautologies, with the knowledge that what sits on one side of an equation is identical to that which sits on the other side.

This kind of proof is unknown to science. Those who study the history of science and analyse the way it works are clear

that it is a far more tenuous and tentative activity, though it's hard to hear that amidst the shrillness of some contemporary debates about science and religion.

Scientific discovery includes a role for recognition. An illustration of this is provided in the BBC's film 'Life Story', the story of the discovery by Watson and Crick of the structure of DNA. I don't know whether the film accurately portrays conversations which happened at the time, but it certainly reflects a view shared by many scientists. When the biologist Maurice Wilkins sees the final model, he says: 'Of course. It has to be. So elegant. So beautiful.'

If recognition - rather than proof - was what made belief possible for the early Christians, the same is true for us today.

The story we've heard today probably came originally right at the very end of John's Gospel, with chapter 21 being added later.

If that's right, then Jesus's final words in the gospel are:

*'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'*

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and these words are followed by the gospel writer's ending, which echo these words and apply them to the gospel's readers:

*'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'*

But how could these words bring about belief?

Surely not by providing evidence, let alone proof? All we are given are stories, when what we would need are historical documentation and careful argument.

I believe that whenever someone reads these words & believes, it is because through the retelling of the story they are in some mysterious way themselves having an encounter with the risen Christ & recognising Him. They find themselves in the room with Thomas and end up sharing his response.

And this suggests that, as in other areas of human belief, our imaginations can play a key role in the act of recognition. It's interesting that Thomas's imagination is engaged right from

the beginning of this story. At the very moment he declares his scepticism, he can't help picturing the risen Christ:

*'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'*

The search for proof, in my view, is misguided.

It's misguided on the part of unbelievers who use its absence to argue against the reality of something they haven't experienced.

And it's misguided on the part of some believers, who mistakenly and neurotically crave an illusory certainty to lend credence to the vision of the risen Christ which they have glimpsed.

What matters is whether the risen Christ is revealed to us as we listen attentively to these stories and whether we recognise Him.

If we do, then along with Thomas we too can respond

*'My Lord and my God!'*