

Honest doubt and strength

Acts 2.14a,22-32 / 1 Peter 1.1-3 / John 20:24-31

We have just heard a story about St Thomas which I find extremely moving and helpful. Having doubts is part and parcel of being human. When people tell me they have no doubts at all, then I am happy to tell them I will come to see them in hospital. Blind faith which is unquestioning sounds so strong - but in practice it is very weak and very fragile. It is also totally unrealistic. If we are to love God with all our *minds*, as Jesus commended we should, amongst other ways, then we are bound to have questions. And because our minds are human and limited, some of our questions will be unanswered, or indeed unanswerable. We cannot fathom God - we can catch glimpses of what he is like. We can have facts - baldly stated, but that doesn't make belief certain. As Tennyson memorably put it:

There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, that in half the creeds

Think about that old-fashioned thing, a telephone directory. I want to ring someone up. Now - that book is full of baldly stated facts. It is the most boring book in the world, if we tried to read it from cover to cover - but it is full of quite definite facts. The numbers are correct - not roughly so. It would not be able to fulfil its purpose if they were not accurate. But having the fact of someone's number does not make the connection for me. It points to a possibility. For the fact to be translated into something useful, there are all sorts of other factors as well. I need a phone to use, for a start. I need to be able to read the number, I need to be able to see the dial or the buttons. I need the phone at both ends to be in working order. I need the other person to be in. There are so many factors to be taken into account. It isn't as simple as the fact of someone having a telephone number might make it seem. So when people long for over-simple answers, they are on a hiding to nothing.

Let's apply this principle to some of the other things we do in church. Take for example baptism - bringing someone into the community of faith, making them a member of the Body of Christ. That is a fact, as clear as the facts of the telephone directory. Something happens when we baptise people. This is parents taking action, offering a new life to God. This is the Church in action, offering itself as a place for that child to be nurtured in faith. Most importantly, this is God in action, doing something for them, accepting them and making them one with their Lord. Those are facts, like the numbers in the directory. But they also point to possibilities. For these actions to reach their fulfilment, it will depend on all of us taking the actions we have taken seriously. We can depend on God taking his part seriously, but we have to look to the other two action-takers as well. The church community, and the parents and godparents each have to do their part if everything is to happen as it might. Thank God children find faith growing despite parents and godparents who let them down spiritually - probably many of us, including me,

wouldn't be here if that were not the case. Thank God that children find faith despite the church letting them down spiritually - not making them welcome, not providing the nurture they need. But that isn't the way we want it to be. We have opened up the possibility of someone growing into a wonderful and life-enhancing faith. We *all* have to make that possibility a reality.

Similarly, we come to receive Holy Communion. The facts are clear enough - we do what Jesus told us to do, and he promised that he would feed us as we took bread and wine. His promise to be with us is certain. But again, we have to acknowledge the 'possibility' aspect of all this. We are only fed if we bother to come. In any covenant relationship - indeed in any relationship, it takes two to tango. And we have to bring ourselves as we really are. Now the chances are that 'as we really are' is a mixture of faith and doubt. My confusion may be your certainty. My clear understanding may be your no-go area. I think the liturgists had a good point when they changed the openings of the Creeds from I believe to We believe. There are parts of the Creed I don't understand properly, let alone believe. The more I study them, the more likely it is I will get confused! But that doesn't mean I can't say it with a good heart. Because I am standing behind what WE believe - what is the Faith of the Church, what our combined insights have to offer, not my limited one. So we are back to my telephone directory, in two different ways. We have the facts of the faith as they have been handed on in the words of the creed. They point to the possibility of what believing those facts can do to us and the world around us. And it brings us back to the directory in a second way: we have all seen someone tear a telephone directory in half. I couldn't possibly do it - you need much greater strength than I have in my hands. Yet the directory is made up of incredibly thin sheets of paper which the youngest child could easily tear. The strength comes from its being many sheets of paper together. And that is exactly how it is in terms of faith. Together, we have immense strength. But alone, any one of us, be they Bishop, Priest, deacon or Layman, old or young, is very weak and vulnerable.

That is why the Christian faith is so firmly rooted in community - being the church together, not individual believers. It is why ideally we baptise children with as many of the community of faith taking part as possible - because it involves us all - it is not the private act of an individual family. Indeed this service says of *all of us* 'We have brought this child to baptism...

Our readings today swing from the amazing certainty of Peter preaching about the risen Christ on the day of Pentecost, and his confidence about eternal life expressed in his letter to Thomas' total disbelief in the upper room. He changed his view from cynicism to faith when the possibility of testing his doubts was offered to him. God gives to everyone of us who has been baptised, life of a new and eternal kind. He also gives us the possibilities that can follow from that. But God never forces our hand. He offers, and it is up to us to take. As with the Directory - there are the facts. But they are only pointers to the exciting possibilities that come from taking those facts and acting on them. Thank God for those facts, and for those possibilities. Let's grasp them and act on them with joy.