

28 April 2019

John 20: 24-25

... "Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We saw the Master." Thomas said: "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

BETTER FAITH THROUGH DOUBTING

I am often like Thomas. "If I can't see it, I won't believe it. That's your opinion; let me see the facts and figures for that. I want data!" I suspect that my doubting Thomas nature is one that many of us share from time to time. I used to fear that doubts were undermining my faith. I used to pray, "Lord deliver me from my doubts." After a while, I slowly came to the realization that my doubts were not destroying my faith, but rather were building my faith. I finally understood that I was giving myself all of these problems with my faith because I didn't really understand two things: First, that I expected the wrong things from the Bible and secondly that there were different ways to understand the world and my place in it.

Let us look at some of the **wrong things that we expect from the Bible**. Fundamental to being wrong-headed about the Bible is a belief in *Biblical* inerrancy. This is a belief that there are no errors in the Bible and, consequently, that all is true and generally may be taken literally. The Episcopal Church, and many others, put this belief behind us many years ago. The *Bible* is full of errors; chronological ones that hold something happened when good evidence says that it did not happen at that time, historical errors holding that something occurred when clear evidence shows that it did not and factual errors detailing the lives of people who were mythological only. While we may believe that the *Bible* is the inspired word of God, it was compiled over the centuries by men with their own agendas and foibles and lack of knowledge.

We also find that there are those who want the *Bible* to be a geology text. They believe that the earth is 4000 years old and that humankind and dinosaurs walked the earth together. *Genesis* is a wonderful poetic view of creation and humankind's place in that creation, but it is pretty useless as a guide to drilling for oil.

Then there are those who view the Old Testament as a three thousand year old real estate deed guaranteeing Israel the right to Middle Eastern territory. Establishing homelands for specific ethnic groups may well be a good thing, but let us not confuse international politics with biblical prophecy.

Nor is the *Bible* a biology text. We all can learn many beautiful, good and behavior enhancing things from the Old Testament, but we learn nothing useful about the evolution of living things, nor do we get useful dietary information applicable to today's environment.

That brings up one of the most major problems with what we expect from the *Bible*. That is the problem of context. Social rules can only be understood in the context of their times. St. Paul's problems with women's role in the Church, his insistence on women keeping their heads covered in church, slavery, divorce, gender identity and marriage relationships all need to be understood in their historical context. Those are rules that make no sense today. Indeed, they tend to generate rules and actions that are contrary to the message of love that Jesus brings to us.

If we realize that the *Bible* is the history of humans grappling with the problem of meaningfulness and that the New Testament, the Gospels in particular, are showing us a new

redeemed life and relationship with God, then our doubts transition to understanding and faith. Ladies do not have to wear hats in church to be saved and you do not have to believe that a whale swallowed Jonah to be a good Christian.

Our doubts will lead us to a better faith if we also understand that **there are different ways to understand the world**. Since the 1700's we have increasingly lived in a time of **science**. Problems are to be addressed using the scientific method. Experimentation, data, systematic thinking and mathematical reasoning tend to dominate the intellectual landscape. Science and technology have given us great improvements in our way of life. There are many people, they are currently so loud that we are inclined to think that there are more than probable really exist, who insist that God and science are enemies. These are people who have created their own, very small god. A god so small that the researches of Darwin and the Hubble telescope destroy him (such a little god is always referred to as a "him"). To Episcopalians and many other religious believers, science is simply unrolling God's manuscript of creation so that we might see it more clearly and praise her more dearly.

Another way of understanding the world is to look at, and participate in, **nature**. Whether contemplating the cosmos or the Badlands of the Dakotas, one can see and experience God's handiwork. One does not need to subject a mountain or a moon to scientific analysis to appreciate their beauty. They need no explanation, their existence is enough.

There are also those for whom the knowledge of the universe is revealed in **art, music and writing**. Listening to music, walking through an art gallery or reading a poem or book can link you to humanity and the infinite at the same time. da Vinci's Last Supper or Michelangelo's David links us to those who have gone before as surely as does our DNA.

One of the oldest and most persistent ways of knowing the universe is the **spiritual** view. To many of us this is the only holistic approach to answering the questions of origin and meaningfulness. The spiritual may embrace all other views and keep us centered on God's continuing creation and the meaning of our relationship to that creation.

Conclusion: So what has all of this to say to the doubting Thomas within us? The message is straight forward: Have your doubts, ask your questions, and find your answers in science, nature and the humanities; always remembering that the integrative, holistic way of being with God is through the world of the spirit. For a life way to belief and faith, expose your doubts to all of the ways of experiencing the presence of God. Amen.