

## **Faith and Uncertainty – SJD – 23/4/17 -John 20: 19-31**

The story of Thomas produces quite different reactions in people. Some find in him an inner disquiet because the very thought of doubt is somehow negative and anti-faith. Others though find something encouraging and realistic that like them even these first believers harboured doubts and uncertainties. Faith, by definition, exists on a spectrum. It is more than 0% - that is unbelief, but it is less than 100% - for that is certainty. Doubt describes the part which is as yet unconvinced of the certainty. But faith also need an object in which to be directed. We may say we have faith that 'Brexit will work' or 'my dentist can solve the problem with my aching tooth' or even that 'it will rain tomorrow'. All of these have uncertainties or doubts which will only be truly evaluated after the events.

But there is another issue here too. It is the mind-set that we possess. How we gauge what is true and what is not. For all of us this is largely based on our life experiences and teaching we have received. This teaching may be formal or informal, factual or anecdotal. It can be based on what a friend said down the pub, or what our mother taught us as a child. Unfortunately, what we have seen so clearly in recent years, it can be based on fake news, false assumptions, or people seeking to follow their own agenda. Yet we can be so easily taken in by what others say or write.

Mary Midgley, the veteran British Philosopher, is a ferocious critic of the tendency of some famous people who launch into all kinds of 'quasi-scientific speculation' in the final chapters of their books. She is particularly critical of Richard Dawkins. How, she asks, could anyone know that the universe is meaningless? How could they show that it has no purpose? These, she says, must surely remain open questions.<sup>1</sup>

Contrast this approach to that of Carl Sagan, the famous Astronomer, who died in 1996. He wrote that, 'Science is much more than a body of knowledge. It is a way of thinking. ... Science invites us to let the facts in, even when they don't conform to our preconceptions. It counsels us to carry alternative hypotheses in our heads and see which ones best match the facts.'<sup>2</sup>

This, it seems to me is the crux of the problem facing Thomas as he is presented with the stories of his fellow disciples. These new facts about a resurrected Jesus do not fit his previous theory – dead men do not come back to life! He is not content with the experience of others, even those he has lived with for the past few years. In this he is to be congratulated for his honesty and awareness of what is needed for his own doubt to turn into faith.

Such honesty is rewarded, as it always is by God, when the risen Jesus appears again to the disciples, this time with Thomas present. He directs Thomas's attention to the evidence of the nail holes in his hands and the spear wound in his side<sup>3</sup>. Thomas is provided with the

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Midgley (2004). *The Solitary Self: Darwin and the Selfish Gene*' Durham, Acumen quoted in Alistair McGrath (2015) 'Inventing the Universe' Hodder & Stoughton p. 25

<sup>2</sup> Carl Sagan (1990) *Why we need to understand Science*' in *Skeptical Inquirer* Vol 14 no 3 Spring 1990 quoted in Alistair McGrath (2015) p 49.

<sup>3</sup> John 20 v27

physical evidence he needed to change doubt to faith, at least as far as the resurrection of Jesus was concerned. It was now up to him to make sense of what it all meant and what the implications were for his own life. His response of faith deals with the former<sup>4</sup>, while the latter would be worked out in the years ahead.

Being open to new facts, as Carl Sagan suggests, is the basis of any understanding and growth – not least of all spiritual. Thomas could have closed the door, turned his back on God and those he had lived with but he chose not to. He found God faithful to his honest and open enquiries. His answer was dramatic and quick, perhaps because of the directness and honesty he showed.

As humans we may yearn for certainty, but nothing, not even science, can give us answers to all the questions we have. We need to live with doubt but in a constructive and open way, as Thomas did. Doubt does not mean that there are not answers but it does require us to be realistic and open and perhaps explore in new ways. God longs to take us all further forward into faith but he needs us to be receptive to what he wants to give us. The alternative is to be like most of the Scribes and Pharisees who heard the words and saw the miracles of Jesus but whose closed minds prevented them understanding and benefitting from their true meaning.

Jesus concludes to Thomas, '***Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not (physically) seen me and yet have believed.***'<sup>5</sup> Faith can come in many different ways – we are all different BUT, as Thomas shows, faith in the risen Jesus Christ, with all that that implies, can come to anyone if we are open to the possibility of God at work in our world!

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<sup>4</sup> John 20 v28

<sup>5</sup> John 20 v 29