

Seeing is Believing?

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[0 : 00] I've got to be honest, I've always felt quite sorry for Thomas. And the reason I felt sorry for Thomas is that he's gone down in history as doubting Thomas. It seems like from one episode that might not have been his finest hour, that he's now become synonymous with the concept of doubt.

I mean, any one of us can have a not-so-good episode, and would we want to be remembered forever on the basis of that one episode? But when we look at Thomas, we see somebody whose story doesn't actually end with doubt.

It actually ends with belief. And I think that's actually really, really important there, because his story tells us something really important that I think we can probably connect with in terms of our own experience, namely, what does it actually mean to ask questions, to have a sense of doubt?

Because the way that doubt is processed can actually form a really positive and healthy part of belief.

And there is a huge difference. There's a huge difference between doubt in a healthy kind of question-asking kind of way, in a searching authentically after truth kind of way.

[1 : 21] There's all the difference between that and unbelief. See, doubt is not necessarily the opposite of faith. Properly understood, a certain type of doubt can actually be quite a healthy part of a healthy kind of faith that is growing and that is earthed.

It was in 1887 that the preacher Henry Drummond preached a sermon called Dealing with Doubt, and he said this, Christ never failed to distinguish between doubt and unbelief.

Doubt is can't believe, whereas unbelief is won't believe. Doubt is honest, whereas unbelief is obstinacy.

Doubt is looking for light. Unbelief is content with darkness. Now, loving darkness rather than the light, that is what Christ attacked and attacked unsparingly.

But for the questioning of Thomas, Philip, Nicodemus, and many others who came to him to have their great problems solved, Jesus was respectful, generous, and tolerant.

[2 : 39] So what I want to suggest is that it's worth asking the question, what can we learn from Thomas and how he handled that experience of doubt, in terms of what can it tell us about how to believe?

Because Thomas effectively really ought to be remembered as believing Thomas, because that's how he ended up, not as doubting Thomas. I want to suggest there are two things. The first thing, quite simply, is this.

Thomas refused to say that he believed when deep down inside he knew he didn't. See, it's not that Thomas didn't want to believe, of course he wanted to believe, it's just that he couldn't.

And he was honest enough and he had that integrity about him to stay with those questions, to be real with them and to lay them out there and say, look, I just can't accept this at the moment.

It's not that I don't want to, I just can't. And he had that concern for honesty and for integrity.

[3 : 42] And when we look at Thomas, we see somebody actually who was, someone who had both feet on the ground. When Lazarus died, Lazarus, who was subsequently raised from the dead, incidentally, we don't quite know exactly what happened to Lazarus, but we can presume that he eventually died.

His resurrection was a sign pointing towards the ultimate resurrection, the resurrection we see in Jesus. And what we see, just like everyone else that was healed within the New Testament, was a temporary healing, but a healing that highlights the power of Jesus.

But Lazarus died, and before he was raised, before Jesus and his friends went to see him, when the news broke that Lazarus had died, it's Thomas who actually says to Jesus and to the other disciples with him, he says, let's go then.

So before Lazarus has even died, when he was, when he is sick, it's Thomas that says, let's go and die with Lazarus. It's also Thomas when, in John chapter 14, with that conversation between Jesus and his disciples, and Jesus is saying to his disciples about the promises of eternal life and telling them that how he is the way and the truth and the life.

It's Thomas who says to Jesus, Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way? So there was a real honesty and an openness about Thomas.

[5 : 14] There was an earthiness, a groundedness about him. I think that's really important. And it tells us something really vital and relevant about the way he responded when he heard everybody else saying, well, you know, Jesus is alive.

And he said, well, come on. Really? Really? I'd love to think that is true. It's not out of skepticism or cynicism. He longs for this to be true, but he just cannot bring himself to say that he agrees, that he believes in something when deep down inside, he knows that he hasn't satisfied that thing.

And that's really important. It's really important because it is too easy to just go along with the crowd. Now, I can remember, growing up as a young person in a youth group, I can also remember as a student involved with student missions, seeing people who would come to faith at big events, big gatherings, would come to, would respond to a call that might have been made, a big gathering, a Christian message was presented, and seeing people come forward in their droves to make a commitment to Christ.

And then it wasn't actually that long afterwards where they were saying, actually, you know, I'm not really sure I believe this, and just dropped off. And the problem with that is that the danger can be that if we make it go along with the crowd, commitment in a way that actually doesn't engage with all of those deep, deep questions that we have, is that sooner or later, what is effectively something of a brittle faith will snap.

It can have the outward appearance of something that's strong, but it doesn't take a lot of pressure to snap. And if that's been our journey, then, in fact, we can then come out of that and say, well, you know, Christian faith, to be honest, it's not for me.

[7 : 08] It just doesn't work. It's just, it's got too many holes in it. But the problem is not with faith, it's just that we haven't really engaged seriously with it. Too many people come to faith at a very surface level and give up too soon because they have not stayed with those questions.

Genuine Christian faith is unafraid to ask questions. Genuine Christian faith recognises that the reality of God, the reality of the claims of Christ are far bigger and greater and deeper and wider than the questions that we have about those things.

And therefore, it is right to hold those questions and to stay with those questions. You know, we live in a world that will just tell us that there is no God.

And it's very easy to be picked up by those voices, to be picked up by that cultural move. And there's nothing new about it, of course. But it's very easy for us to be swept along with the narrative that, well, nobody believes in God.

Nobody really takes that seriously. You know, my experience has been that so many people who would claim to be atheists, when you get into a conversation, it doesn't take very long to expose the fact that, in fact, it's never really been thought through in an awful lot of depth.

[8 : 32] But even among those who have thought it through in a lot of depth, actually, we need to be very, very wary of... You know, I remember when I was a student, a theology student, we had a particular tutor, a philosophy tutor, who was an atheist.

And I remember, forget, he started off beginning of one term. He walked into this lecture room and he said, inhale deeply.

And he said to this whole group of students, inhale deeply. And he took a deep breath. And he got everyone to do the same. And he looked around the room and he said, can't you smell it? It's a stench in the room.

He really knew how to draw people in. He said, it's the smell of God. He said, it's the decomposing smell of the God who is dead.

And then for the next term, he took us through this series of lectures telling us how God is dead. And it's not credible to believe in a living God in any size, shape or form.

[9 : 40] He quoted a number of contemporary atheist thinkers. One of them at the time he subsequently died, but somebody called Professor Anthony Flew.

And Anthony Flew was one of the leading atheist philosophers from as early as the 1950s. And I knew of so many people that actually were swept along with the mood of those lectures and lost their faith in God.

Of course, you never lose your faith because you always have faith in something. If it's not in God, it would be in something else. In this case, it was putting faith in Anthony Flew's teaching. Now, this was in the early 1990s.

2003, Anthony Flew, again, very prominent atheist philosopher, was one of the signatories, big humanist manifesto that was published.

The following year, 2004, Flew, along with another writer, published a book together actually announcing that he'd changed his mind. And in fact, he decided that he did believe in God.

[10:49] He said this, he said, I had to go where the evidence leads. DNA research and other scientific evidence has shown by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which we needed to produce, which are needed to produce life, that intelligence must have been involved.

Now, he didn't go quite so far as to say that he had become a Christian believer, but he did go so far as to say that after decades of not only believing that there could not be a God and persuading others with passion and with intellectual rigor that it was impossible with any credibility to believe in God, that actually it made sense to believe in God.

A point I'm making is this, we can hear all sorts of very persuasive voices within our culture, within our world, within the workplace, within the home that says, what are you doing believing in Jesus Christ?

it makes no sense. Now, it's worth engaging with those questions. An authentic faith does engage with such questions.

But not at surface level. Let's beware that danger of just being swept along by the cultural currents around us. Thomas didn't do that.

[12:15] Thomas refused to go along with what everybody else was saying was true as long as he had this deep sense inside him that said, but I just find that so hard to believe. But he stayed with it and he stayed with it in a sense that was longing and had an authenticity and an integrity about it.

And because he did, he stayed there. It wasn't that long before he met himself with a risen Jesus. The second thing that Thomas teaches us through his experience of processing doubt and coming to belief is that when he when he did come to belief he really came to believe.

When he encountered the risen Jesus the conversation didn't kind of go something like this. Hi Thomas, I know that you didn't actually find it that easy to believe that I'm alive but I'm here.

Oh, right, yeah, okay, well I suppose I probably sort of might think about believing in you then.

That's not what happened. Jesus appeared, showed him his scars on his hands and his feet and in his side where he had been crucified, showed him that he was alive and still I'm quite sure with this sense of absolute shock and not quite sure how this could be true but Thomas' response is one where he says my Lord and my God.

That's what happens when we come to believe. You see, becoming a Christian is not just giving intellectual assent to a set of philosophical propositions that God exists.

[14:13] It is about a living encounter with the living Lord Jesus Christ in a way that transforms us. You know, we tend to make a separation between our head belief and our heart feelings.

we might call one belief and the other faith. But in the New Testament there is no such divorce. The one word is always used to describe both faith and belief.

It's a holistic reality. It's something that we do with our hearts and with our minds. And that is what we find with Thomas. And as he does so, it exposes the reality that all the while he was doubting and asking those questions, it was not because he had closed himself off that he was cynical and that he didn't want anything to do with it.

But precisely the opposite. It was precisely because deep within his questioning was a longing, a longing to know the truth and a longing to know the reality of God.

That when he was exposed to that reality, he accepted that relationship which is what faith is all about. My hope and my prayer is that we would doubt like Thomas so that we can believe like Thomas.

[15:41] Do you know there is one thing that stands out in this story that I think Thomas did get wrong and it's a helpful wake up call to every single one of us.

putting it bluntly, he wasn't around when Jesus showed up the first time. Now we're not told why he wasn't there, we're just told that he wasn't there.

If he had been there with the other disciples, he would have encountered the risen Jesus at the same time, but he didn't. Now he did eventually, but it wasn't until he was with the others.

That's really important because it reminds us in no uncertain terms that if we want to meet with the risen Jesus, we need to be with others.

That's not to say you can't have an experience of God on your own, of course you can. It's not to say that you can't be a Christian unless you come to church.

[16:50] But it is a reminder that if we are really to grow as Christians, if we are to keep on meeting with Jesus and to grow in Jesus, we need to be with others.

That's important because we live in a highly, highly individualistic world in the West. There was a story a few years ago about a famous actress, I can't remember her name now, she was known for lying about her age and in an interview she once said to somebody at some sort of gathering, her son was at the same event and the interviewer asked how old she was, she said, well I'm 68. He said, well I was just talking to your son over there and he says he's 60. She said, well he lives his life and I leave mine. But we do live in that deeply, deeply compartmentalised, highly individualistic world, in isolation from one another.

Now there are times when we need to be on our own, of course we do, especially those of us that are extroverts that struggle and find big crowds, hard work, we need time and space on our own. Some of us will need that more than others. There's no getting away from the fact that we're wired to connect with others, not necessarily big crowds but with small numbers.

[18:22] If we really want to grow and keep on growing, and keep on growing, which is what God wants of us as long as we are in this world, we need to connect with others.

My challenge to each and every one of us is that wherever we are at in our own spiritual lives right now, what might we do to take just one more step now to reconnect a little bit more with others? Maybe you're listening to this online and for whatever reason it's been really really difficult for you to actually get to a physical place of worship. And I want to say to you, I want to challenge you with that question, why not?

What might you be able to do? Even if you cannot physically be in a place of worship on a Sunday, might you be able to connect with somebody else in some way to talk with, to pray with?

But you know, even if we are, let's take the other extreme, let's say that we do come, we're gathered, we're part of a local church, and that means an awful lot to us.

[19:41] What might we do to connect that little bit more? If we're not in a home group, consider joining a home group. Maybe there might be an area of ministry in which as a local church you're really needed and you have gifts and skills and abilities that you could offer that you could actually connect in more deeply.

Maybe it's with our youth and children's work. Maybe it's music. Maybe it's joining a host team.

Maybe it's helping with administration. Maybe it's helping with driving.

Maybe there are so many different things that you could do, but I want to challenge each of us with that question. Because very often, if we feel that we're in that place spiritually where we feel we're drying up, where that sense of encounter with Jesus Christ is not as strong or as bright or as vivid as we long for it to be, maybe that is God's invitation for us just to step that little bit further, that little bit more deeper into his people and to connect more with others.

May we learn to doubt and to question and to wrestle like Thomas, that we might come to believe like Thomas.

of the Father. Let's pray together now. Lord, we thank you that you long for us to grow and to go on growing.

[21:27] Lord we thank you that you don't call us to suspend all the questions that we're asking but you invite us to bring those questions and to connect with you to stay with those questions that we might really wrestle and grow and go on growing in you and know you more and more and more as our living Lord so Lord help us like Thomas to stay with those questions and to bring them to you that we might meet with you Lord as we reflect on our own journey with you help us now and over these coming days to take that step closer to becoming more connected with other Christians whatever that looks like whatever that means for us

Lord help us to be really open about this maybe you might be calling us to serve you in a particular way that we've been thinking about for a long time and it's unsettling it makes us feel nervous makes us feel quite vulnerable Lord help us to be open and honest with you and with ourselves and whatever it may be help us to take that one step closer to connecting more with others we can connect more closely with you help us to do that this day help us to do it every day in Jesus name Amen Lord help us to brauch you thank you that way for you thank you thank you for doing for us thank you thank you thank you for you to take that day thank you thank you and call you to take that day and call you to talk about yourself next time