

Thomas: Leaving Doubt Behind

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[0 : 00] As we sit, let's bow our heads and pray together. Our gracious Father, we thank you for your word. And Lord, having discerned that word, we pray that in the grace of the Holy Spirit, we might be obedient to your calling in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

So, there is so much, I think, to thank God for in the life of the churches in Swindon, and in particular, Christ Church.

I spend a lot of my time, given the number of vacancies that they've been in the deanery, preaching across different churches. And some of those churches are not even Church of England churches. And I see green shoots of growth everywhere I go. So, the thing is that if you total up across the 10 plus congregations in this town, how many people are actually in church this Sunday morning, you would be pushed to find more than 850 people.

And that in a population of around about 23,000 people. As Jesus said, the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

[1 : 57] And I've got to talk to you today on the issue of doubt, leaving doubt behind. And I want to start with a verse from Scripture.

And it goes like this. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I've been doing. And they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

I hope you noticed that. They, that is, us who are disciples of Jesus, will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

Now, in very conservative churches, they interpret these greater things as simply the conversion of people throughout history.

They say that is the beginning and end of the greater works that Jesus was talking to. If you go into churches that we label as charismatic, they're more inclined to take it more literally.

[3 : 08] And truly believe that God wants to bring signs and wonders to accompany the preaching of his word, in order that his word is given energy by those signs and wonders.

And then, there are a heck of a lot of churches, neither conservative nor charismatic, who quietly ignore this verse. You will do even greater things.

Sometimes I think, remember I've had a ministry preaching across the Church of England.

Sometimes I think the Church of England hasn't got the memo. I want to talk to you about doubt this morning.

And throughout history, philosophers, theologians, writers of literature, have had a rather ambivalent idea of doubt.

Is it totally a bad thing? And I'm just going to put up there three quotes for you now. The first is by the prophet Khalil Gibran, who said this, Doubt is a pain too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother.

[4 : 30] Kind of neutral position, I would think. Paul Tillich, the American systematic theologian, wrote this, Doubt isn't the opposite of faith.

It is an element of faith. He saw doubt as something very positive. And Frederick Buchner, the moral rearmament leader, wrote this, Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith.

They keep it awake and moving. So you can see from those three quotes, people are not saying that all doubt is wrong.

And therefore, when I saw the title of today's talk, Leaving Doubt Behind, it just made me a little wary. Though in general, I hope we would agree that leaving our doubts behind is a good thing. Jesus, at one point, confronted a child who had been convulsed with an evil spirit. And this is a really reckless boy's life.

[5 : 46] He had frequent seizures and was throwing himself around on the ground. And Jesus' disciples tried to heal it, heal the boy. And they couldn't.

And in response to that, Jesus sounds like he's taking a rather harsh line over doubt. And he says this, You unbelieving generation, Jesus replied, How long shall I stay with you?

How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me. They brought the boy to Jesus, and he was healed. See, Jesus mostly says that doubt, that a lack of faith is part of our problems.

And then Jesus says some very optimistic words for us, in Mark 9 and verse 23. If you can, said Jesus, everything is possible for one who believes.

And then the words of this man, who is nameless, we don't know who he is. But I suspect he reflects where a lot of you are in relation to faith and doubt.

[7 : 00] The man said, I believe. Help my unbelief. We're not quite sure exactly what he meant, but somehow those words seem to enshrine, I think, where many of us are in our walk of faith.

And then, of course, we come to dear Thomas, doubting Thomas, as we call him. Thomas said to Jesus, unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.

And you remember, as John read it to us, that Jesus allows him that indulgence, and his immediate response is, my Lord and my God.

And interestingly, Jesus doesn't give Thomas a rollicking for this. He makes a very general comment, and he said, blessed are those who have seen and believed, but also, blessed are those who have not seen and believed.

In other words, faith in the Jesus that nobody in this house this morning has seen is an even greater blessing than those disciples of old who walked around Judea and Galilee with him and experienced his physical presence.

[8 : 41] My own feeling is that I'm not sure that we will ever totally extinguish doubt of some sort in our lives this side of heaven.

And in a way, that's why we need faith. We're saved by grace through faith, by accepting God at his word and living as though we accept him at his word.

So, here are some reasons that I observe for people's doubt. The first is the fear of feeling let down. I sometimes think that many of us don't like to ask God for too much because we're not sure what we'd feel if God didn't deliver on what we want. There are people and there'll be some people in the house this morning and I pray God will heal you today who sit there and if they can search their hearts, they know that they're angry with God.

Why did he take away my husband, my wife, my child? How could he let that happen?

[10 : 09] My guess is there are people in this church for whom those questions shine very brightly in their hearts. They feel, to quote a technical theological phrase, God has dealt them a tough set of marbles.

Then there is the fear of letting others down. I've never forgotten that I used to be younger and even brasher and I used to be in a tiny church and there was myself and two ladies who constituted, well, mostly, most of the congregation actually but we were the little team that went out and prayed with people on this estate in Slough.

I know. And so we go out and the first time I went out I remember praying with this lady and I prayed this prayer. I mean, it was right out of left field.

It was extraordinarily faithful and the three of us said amen at the end of it but I suspect that that was code for good luck with that. And after it old Edie said to me she said do you think you should pray so directly to God?

I'm like, what do you mean? She said, well, the lady you were praying for might feel very let down. See, sometimes our fear of feeling let down ourselves is also a fear of letting others down.

[11 : 39] I suspect that's why there's a lot of ambivalence in churches toward the ministry of healing. I mean, it does seem rather selective doesn't it?

I mean, you know, I say we go to doctors I mean, you know, it's quite a fight to see a doctor these days but we go and see doctors and we don't, you know, they do a diagnosis if they got it wrong we don't think right, I'm never going near a doctor ever again.

Most of us don't think that. So, the fear of letting others down is a reason why some of us doubt whether or not we can see those greater things done that Jesus speaks about.

Third thing is too many prayers out of the left field I think can create a fear in us that other people might think we're fanatics. I've never forgotten Ken who was a member of the congregation in Slough who was a bus driver.

And I have never, I mean, you know, it's difficult to kind of measure from the outside in exactly how much faith he had but by the level of his prayers I mean, this guy was faithful and then some more. [12:52] Faithful to the power of end. And I remember one of his regular prayers was Lord, please, would you convert everybody in Slough? And we'd be like, wow.

And then he'd say, today. And a lot of people, interestingly, sidestepped Ken. It's just a bit, you know, is this guy a kind of, in terms of faith, the sort of equivalent of a Taliban Christian?

You know, is he completely over the top? And I think a lot of us are frightened of fearing that. Fourth thing is fearing that I'm just not good enough. Why would God bother with me?

Surprisingly, John Wesley, those you Methodists who'll be feeling aroused now, John Wesley suffered from quite a lot of doubt in his life, certainly before his true conversion.

[14:03] And he doubted whether he was good enough. he was plagued by the idea of joining this club called the Holy Club in Oxford. Rather off-putting name, I might suggest.

But he joined it. And they were rigorous in their self-examination of themselves and of each other. And the net result of that was, I think they didn't have any assurance of their salvation.

Wesley worried about that until God touched his heart. I wonder if today there are some of you in the house who aren't sure whether you're saved.

And I pray that if that's so, God would touch your heart. And then there is the general fear which exists in the kind of post-enlightenment hugely true of the Church of England, but true of lots of churches.

There is this fear of talking about anything supernatural. You know, we believe God can work in the world but there are limits.

[15:15] And the limit is God can only work within the natural realm. So of course God works in the natural realm. Aren't you like this? If you've got appendicitis, wouldn't you go and see a doctor?

Or would you just get your friends around to pray for you? Or even better, would you get your friends around to pray for you and go and see a doctor? Am I wrong?

Would you be mad not to see a doctor if you've got acute appendicitis? Of course you'd go to a doctor. Because God uses natural means as well as supernatural means.

You remember there's that story that sounds disgusting to us in the 21st century where Jesus with a blind man and Jesus spits, mix up the paste in some mud and then applies it to these guys' eyes.

This guy's eyes. And you think to yourself, wow, you know, I'm not sure what I feel about that. But at the time it was thought that a mixture of alluvial mud and spit would heal for somebody.

[16:34] My gran, right, who brought me up, wonderful woman, she used to always say, I was, you know, every living moment I was playing sport and we used to play in school on the tarmac and every day I'd go down and cut my knees.

And that's why in our school you couldn't wear long trousers until you were in the fifth floor. Imagine that. You've got these great, you know, six foot two boys walking around in grey shorts in December.

It's not my point. My point is, my gran's remedy for my cut knees was let the dog lick it. You know, even then I'm like, are you sure about this, gran?

Anyway, I mean, it really worked on me and the only thing is I dug, developed a terrible bloodlust and killed people in town. Just kidding. Look, we are, in many of our churches, in this kind of post-enlightenment cynical era in which we live.

We've written off the supernatural as a possibility for the way in which God might work. For the reasons for doubt, God doesn't always do what I want him to.

[17:54] I'd imagine that's a big one. And let me remind you that Jesus, when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane, I mean, how powerful a prayer is this? He knew what was going to happen to him.

He'd already been beaten. He'd already been up before the council. It was clear that they wanted him dead. What was Jesus' prayer?

Not my will, but thy will. Not my will, but thy will.

See, I do think that if you're a new Christian, this is really tough stuff and I get that, but actually, the longer you become a Christian, the more you are mildly become familiar with the words of our Father in heaven, the more you get it that really prayers need to be not selfish.

James says that in his epistle. He says, when you pray, when you do pray, you pray from selfish motives. You ever done that? Don't shout out.

[19:08] God. So, I want God to do what I want him to and if not, I'll take a bad attitude towards God.

Second, this is Thomas, isn't it? The need for empirical evidence. Empiricism means that I will only accept things that I can observe through my senses.

So, I believe it if I can see it. I'll believe it if I can smell it. I'll believe it if I hear it. And Thomas, I think like many of us, when he'd not seen the risen Christ, he'd just been told that Jesus is alive.

And I think many of us would feel a little cynical about that. And so, he says to Jesus, is it really you?

You know, I believe that if I can put my, you remember, they put nails through Jesus' hands so he presumably still had big scars there and they pushed the thing through his side, spear through his side.

[20:23] And it's like, unless, unless I can, physically observe, take note of that this really is Jesus, I'm not going to believe. I wonder if any of you are like that, where you promote a kind of faux intellectualism into a kind of idol.

And you just doubt. And unless somebody can prove to you the things of God, you're not going to buy in. Third thing is, the Bible is an unreliable document.

Well, I can tell you this. I think there's more in this book that rings bells with me than anything I've ever read. And I've read a lot of books. I think it tells me who I am.

It tells me what I'm like. It tells me who God is. It tells me who God is like. It tells me, having told me what I'm like and told me what God's like, it tells me how I can deal with my sin in order that I can enter the presence of the Lord, ascend the hill of the Lord.

You're saying, well, it's a bit anti-women, isn't it? Well, I mean, I think there is a measure of that and yet, on the other hand, it was Paul who's blamed to be the kind of founder of the patriarchy as far as some feminists are concerned.

[21:54] It was Paul who said, in Christ, there is neither male nor female. That was a radical statement at that time for Paul to have said that.

When I was a kid, I was made to go to a beach mission one day and we sang this song, the best book to read is the Bible.

I sang it, I mean, I'd never read the Bible, as a matter of fact, but I sang it. It was a good tune. And I think if you doubt the truth of God's word, you are going to find progress in the Christian life very difficult.

Confusion. This is a really subtle one. In Mark chapter 11, Jesus is with his disciples and they're walking past a fig tree which Jesus had cursed the previous day.

And Peter notes, oh, Master, the fig tree you cursed has perished. Funny, isn't it? We're always surprised when God does what he says he'll do.

[23:13] And Jesus goes off on one. He says, have faith in God. And in the Greek, the emphasis in that sentence is on the word God. I think a lot of preachers put an emphasis on the word faith.

But you see, we're not called to have faith in faith. It's not an issue of how big is my faith. You know, am I big enough to dare to say amen to this prayer? It's not like that.

faith is not a kind of abstract matter like gas or something. In fact, Jesus said, didn't he, if you have faith the size of what?

A mustard seed. How big is a mustard seed? I have never grown mustard, but I'm told it's a very small seed. So presumably, Jesus said, you don't need a lot of it, but presumably, you need enough that if you're praying for something, you don't let doubt be the kind of driving factor of what you're praying for.

And I think a lot of people get confused into putting their faith in faith rather than in God. It's have faith in God.

[24:31] That's a confusion. And the final thing is the kind of currency of our time, cynicism.

Anything that's been handed down to me, anything that comes from the past, any talk of our country being a great country, anything like that, and we're not going to believe it.

In fact, it's almost as if you feel that if anything is what we might call traditional, it's going to be junked. it's going to be junked.

Friends, how are we going to leave doubt behind us? Well, let me say, I don't think all doubt is bad. It makes us inquiring, it makes us want to think more.

I get all that. But I think the balance of our discipleship needs to put the weight on confidence in God.

So, four things that we need to do. And the first thing I want to say about this, really important, is that very often when Jesus castigates people for their lack of faith, he doesn't do it on a one-to-one basis.

[25 : 44] He says, as that first slide showed, a faithless generation. Come back to that.

So, I think the first thing we need to do, and you can start today, is to say with that unnamed man of old, Lord, I believe, but please help my unbelief.

Help me. And some of us find it difficult to say that terrible four letter word, help. But maybe we should just review that.

Second, it's just so important. Together we need to tell stories of God's faithfulness. I read a book some years ago written by a radically liberal American theologian.

Her name was Elaine Padgels. And one of the good questions she asked in that book was, what did the early Christians do before they had the Bible in its complete form to preach for?

[26 : 49] And she said they told stories. They told stories of the faithfulness of God and at the same time they told stories of martyrdom.

That's what kept the faith alive, says Elaine Padgels, before we had the final canon of the Old Testament and in particular the New Testament. Do we tell enough stories to each other? have we got a right context in order that we give ourselves space to tell stories to each other about the faithfulness of God?

Third, I put it like this, make faithful memories. There's a lot of talk these days about making memories which as far as I can see involves Instagram.

what I mean is why don't you try and put yourself in a position whereby if you're going to follow through on what you've decided you're going to need to apply some faith.

[28 : 02] It might be that you've got a terrible lurking fear that God might be calling you to something you don't fancy. why don't you put yourself in a position where you really test that with God.

You might be in a position where you're careful with money. Again, old Protestant virtue. And maybe the church has a need.

Well, you heard about one this morning and God fleetingly touched your heart and said, I ought to help with this. Put yourself in a position.

I'm amazed by the sheer middle classness of so many churches these days. People will tell you when there's an appeal out for maybe another staff member in a church or something critical to its development.

People say, I'd like to help, I can't afford it. here's my advice. Don't go on two cruises. Put yourself in a position.

[29 : 19] Make faithful memories. And then finally, faithless generation, said Jesus. it really is going to help the work of God in our church and in this town if we commit together.

Jesus didn't rip into Thomas and give him a, you know, verbal good hiding for his empirical desire to get proof. believe.

What he did was, he made a comment to a community, blessed if you believe and you've seen me, but more blessed are you if you've not seen me and believe.

I can't believe deep down inside that there aren't some of us, at least, maybe all of us, who would love to see those greater works of God.

Not just as something that happens so rarely that a person can write a book about it, but it would become so much part of our everyday experience as disciples that it could not could not if that were right, sorry, if that were our life together.

[30 : 56] It could only impact our community positively. 850 people in church, 23,000 people in town.

I'm on to it. And I'm looking for people to help me. Faithful, praying, people who are relegating doubt to the substitute's bench and believing God's word and then living as though we take him at his

word.

Let's pray together. Amen. just leave a few moments silence that the Holy Spirit might bring us conviction of what we need to do.

So Father, I pray for your people gathered in your house this morning. And Lord, I pray that your Holy Spirit would touch their hearts.

Lord, I'm thinking of those who feel that they've been badly let down by you. I'm thinking about those who are frightened to deploy more faith in you because they're frightened that if they did that, you might let them down or they might let others down.

[32 : 43] Father, I pray then for those who are cynical for those who, with Thomas, are looking for the kind of proof that actually they'll never get.

And Lord, we pray that whatever our strengths and whatever our weaknesses are as a congregation, we may not be found wanting in relation to trusting you.

So come, Holy Spirit. Touch the hearts of your faithful people and help us as far as we're able this side of heaven to leave doubt behind.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. And the people said, Amen. Amen. Amen.