



Easter Scenes

Caravaggio (1571–1610)

The Incredulity of Thomas (c.1601)

Sanssouci Gallery, Potsdam

3 June 2018

The Dean of Westminster

Song of Solomon 3: 2–5; 8: 6–7 John 20: 19–29

I have been thinking recently of the conversion of one of the most famous teachers in the history of the Church, many of whose writings remain freely available to us. St Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa for 35 years until his death in the year 430, had been a brilliant philosopher and teacher, who came under the influence of St Ambrose, bishop of Milan. In his book *Confessions*, Augustine described in some detail his life as a pagan and a Manichaean and his conversion to Christianity at the age of 31.

One day, he was reading a bound copy of the letters of St Paul. He had recently heard the story of the conversion of St Antony of Egypt that had taken place not many years earlier. Antony had gone into a church and heard there the account of Jesus telling the rich young man to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. Antony heard the story as addressed to himself, and did what he had been commanded.

Now, in the garden, Augustine heard a child in a neighbouring garden chanting some words in Latin, *tolle, lege*: pick it up and read. He found in it a message for himself from God. He opened the volume of St Paul's letters at random and read what he first saw. 'Let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.'

For Augustine, this was as clear a call as could be from God, to put away the kind of life he had been leading and to take on the life of a Christian. He lived thereafter a celibate life and was baptised and confirmed by St Ambrose in his cathedral in Milan at Easter. Five years later, in 391, he was a priest and very soon a bishop.

Later, Augustine was to criticise the practice of being guided by the Bible through random opening and reading. In truth he was ready for conversion, agonising about whether the path he had taken was the right one. On the day of his conversion he had withdrawn to a remote part of the garden and in his agony of indecision had wept. 'Lord,' he had prayed earlier, 'make me chaste, but not yet.' Now, the time had come.

So, the question for us this evening is about how we come to believe in God and about the conversion of life. St Augustine may offer us inspiration, but our proper model is Thomas, doubting Thomas.

As we know, it is St John and St John alone, in his Gospel, who gives the account of doubting Thomas and of Thomas coming to believe. St John, you might say, is almost obsessed with the question how people come to believe in Jesus.

Take for example, the event at Cana, during the wedding feast. When they have seen him changing water into wine, St John tells us, his disciples come to believe in him. 'Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.' Already in St John's Gospel, we have heard John the Baptist say after the baptism of Jesus, 'I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God,' and Jesus say to Nathanael, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.'

A little later in the Gospel, we see that even the Samaritans get it. 'And many more believed because of his word. They said to the [Samaritan] woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.' So it goes on.

Take this for a moment. At the end of chapter six, which begins with the feeding of the five thousand and works its way into a beautiful extended discourse on the Eucharist, we hear that 'many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.' Jesus asked the twelve whether they too wished to go away. It was now Simon Peter who said, 'We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

St John has teased us throughout his Gospel with accounts of people, sometimes surprising people, coming to believe in Jesus. The final word is linked to the account of the apostle Thomas, not present when the risen Jesus first appeared to the apostles. We heard earlier of his doubt. 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

On the Sunday following the resurrection, there is Jesus with them again and this time Thomas is there. 'My Lord and my God,' he says. His faith in the risen Jesus goes beyond what anyone has yet said, 'My Lord and my God.' But Jesus drives home the point for us. 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Although St Thomas is lumbered with the sobriquet 'doubting' Thomas, in truth he is believing Thomas, the model for all who doubt, all who are uncertain, and all who come to believe. He saw and believed. We cannot see. But do we also believe? And if so, how do we come to believe?

I am possibly not the best person to speak of this. I was brought up in a family founded on Christian belief and practice and was part of the Church of England from an early age, a server from the age of 5, a chorister from the age of 8, then a server again and a chorister. I could tell the story of how, at the age of 17, I committed myself to the decision to seek ordination, remaining as I am more than 50 years later vividly conscious of the particular moment and its circumstances. But for me, belief in God and the aim of loving and following, however imperfectly, Jesus Christ as Lord have been a constant throughout my life.

One thing I can say, though, is that coming to believe is not essentially an intellectual activity. It cannot be that we say: this seems credible; I think I could just about bring myself to think that could be possible; so on the balance of probabilities, and not beyond reasonable doubt, I can just about say that I believe in God. It cannot be like that. It is surely much more like falling in love. Ultimately it is a matter of the will.

A priest I knew a long time ago talked about being in the Parachute Regiment during the Second World War. He was preparing us for confirmation. He stood on the church's chancel step and jumped off it on to the floor of the nave. He said that jumping out of an aeroplane with a parachute on your back was no different: one small step. But the courage taken to do so was a little more. He was attempting to describe taking the step into Christian faith as leaping into the unknown hoping, trusting, that your parachute would open. You cannot find faith by standing on the brink and adding up what you might believe and what you can't believe. Faith is taking the step. Faith is trusting that loving arms will hold you. Faith is a matter of the will, a decision to believe and trust. It is only by experience that you can discover whether it works. Faith is in the end existential not intellectual.

It is also fascinating to see what happened to the apostles, and to St Thomas himself, once they had seen and believed. They were to follow Christ and to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, almost all of them, to a terrible death. They were transformed by the gift of the Holy Spirit from 'wee, sleekit, cowran, tim'rous beasties' into lions, giants of faith, who feared no longer for their lives but only lived to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and themselves as servants for Christ's sake.

Their faith was confirmed by their conversion of life. Doubting Thomas's faith was confirmed by his conversion of life. Transformed, confirmed, by the Holy Spirit, they travelled and taught and converted others and in the end gave their lives rather than deny Christ.

'Have you believed', Jesus asked, 'because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' Blessed are we who have not seen and yet have come to believe. May our faith be shown in the conversion of our lives.