

Trinity College Cambridge
5 May 2013

Picturing Easter: Doubt
Cima da Conegliano *The Incredulity of St Thomas*

Isaiah 54: 1–7 John 20: 24-29

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Doubting Thomas. The famous incident in St. John's gospel has entered the lexicon and two thousand years later this saint and martyr is associated principally with his famous declaration that he would not believe the resurrection until he could put his hands in the wounds. *I'll believe it when I see it*, is how we would render his reaction in modern parlance. The scene when he does that and proclaims the risen Christ "my Lord and my God" has inspired many artists, not least Conegliano whose work, *The Incredulity of St Thomas*¹, is our illustration this evening.

Yet this is but one of many examples of doubt from the Bible. To have doubts is a natural function of the human psyche. People in love doubt they are worthy of that love being reciprocated; strivers doubt whether they will ever reach their goals; the most innocent of accused men may doubt if he will prove that innocence. We doubt the weather forecast and politicians' promises. Doubt is a natural product of having to make judgements about anything that is not visible or audible or of a tangible form.

So some of the greatest biblical heroes had doubt but interestingly God's reaction varied enormously and that is often the unexamined aspect of doubt in the Bible. Let us begin with Moses. Any politician would have some sympathy with Moses, who was implored by the children of Israel to get them out of Egypt and then when the promised land did not immediately materialise turned on him and said they would have been better off in Egypt. They were angry and fractious and now they were also desperate because there was no water. God told Moses to take them up to a specified rock from which He would cause water to pour. Imagine the scene: the crowd has been promised water and there they all are standing at the rock waiting for it and nothing happens. They look from the rock to Moses and from Moses to the rock and nothing happens. And one can imagine what the suspense does. They begin to mutter, certain they have been misled, as they all look at a perfectly ordinary rock doing nothing except be the lump of stone it has always been. And one can imagine Moses feeling increasingly embarrassed and suddenly doubtful. So he strikes the rock. Let he who has never tapped a television set to encourage it to perform cast the first stone. But God is sufficiently angry to deny Moses entry to the promised land.

¹ <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/giovanni-battista-cima-da-conegliano-the-incredulity-of-saint-thomas>

So God punishes doubt? Well, not in the case of Gideon. The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, “The Lord is with thee”. And what does Gideon reply? The Hebrew equivalent of “Oh, yeah?” He demands to know why, if the Lord is with the Israelites, they are suffering at the hands of their enemies. And where are all the miracles He used to do? God does not, so to speak, take offence. He doesn’t say, “Here is an angel. Is not that proof enough?” Instead he patiently explains that He has chosen Gideon to deliver his fellow countrymen from their enemies. But still Gideon is beset by doubt and actually asks God for a sign that He really is speaking to him. So God arranges a fairly spectacular display of fire from a rock but even that is not enough. He actually asks God not only to send a sign but he specifies what it must be: he will put out a fleece and asks that next day the fleece be soaking wet but the ground around it dry. God obliges. And that’s not enough. Now just to be absolutely certain – one angel, one fire and one wet fleece later – that it is not all coincidence and imagination he asks God to do the reverse and give him a dry fleece and wet ground. And God does.

So, two very different responses to doubt in the Old Testament. Now let us turn to the New and to Zachary, a just man whose works are pleasing to the Lord, and whose wife Elizabeth is barren. One day Gabriel appears to him and tells him Elizabeth will conceive. He doesn’t believe it and asks how it can possibly be so when his wife has been barren for years. For Zachary there is no fire from the rock, no miracles with fleeces only a hefty dose of divine anger as God strikes him dumb for the duration of the pregnancy, saying it is because he doubted the word of the Lord.

So God punishes doubt? Not with Thomas. He is actually encouraged to test the resurrection for himself by feeling the wounds. The reactions are different in these four examples because the men concerned were at different stages in their spiritual lives and the clear message is that we are not expected to be in a state of certainty from the moment we believe, are not expected to dispense with doubt, that faith does not collapse the moment a small niggle attenuates it. Indeed the message is that God can use doubt, that it is a tool of our maturing in faith not an obstacle to it.

So let’s compare Moses and Gideon. Moses had walked with God for a very long time and God had never let him down. Moses had seen it all: the burning bush, the plagues of Egypt, the staff turning into a serpent, the parting of the red seas. He had heard the voice of God literally. The children of Israel had been extracted from difficulty after difficulty – manna from Heaven, flocks of quails. In short Moses had been delivered proof after proof of God’s faithfulness, had himself been favoured by God above other men, was charged with a sacred trust, and was given authority by God himself. By the time the grumbling tribes arrived at the rock there should no longer have been any room for any doubt at all. But Gideon was in a very different position. He was being plucked from obscurity to defeat the Midianites and must have been beset by doubts and fears. He was at the beginning of his walk with God, his faith in his mission at an early stage and the doubts that he had were part of his journey to fulfil that mission. It is not fanciful to imagine Gideon looking back in later years and saying, “Whatever was I thinking, to keep asking for signs like that? That business with the fleece! Why did God put up with it?”

It is a comforting image: whatever doubts we have now we can look forward to a time when they will have gone.

So now we come to the New Testament and Zachary. We are told that both he and his wife were 'righteous before God, walking in all the commandments, blameless' and that they were of advanced years. So they had walked with the Lord a long time, he held priestly office and now here was Gabriel himself. Zachary had reached a stage where he was expected to trust and so God was not pleased when he failed.

Thomas of course had at first glance advantages not shared by Zachary. He would have seen some of the miracles at first hand, had accompanied Christ himself but he had of course also seen the arrest and crucifixion and would have known of the burial. And he wasn't doubting an angel of the Lord but rather the excited babble of his bewildered fellow humans. All the evidence is that the real test of the early Christians was just beginning, that they were about to be left on their own and facing a journey very different from that involved in travelling the country with a crowd-pulling miracle worker. So, whatever they may have seen in the past, they were now at a very early and vulnerable stage of their journey with God.

So more is expected of us as we grow. But God uses doubt and we often forget that. We pray, 'O, Lord, I believe. Help Thou my unbelief.' Yet we can also pray, 'Use and bless my unbelief.'

Let us look at our four examples again. Moses: there would have been those in the crowd who saw the doubt on Moses' face, who thought, "even the gaffer wasn't sure that time", and who would remember that next time and be more receptive to promises. Gideon: in future years he could always say to any admirer who thought his faith perfect and his own pathetic, "Oh, once I looked upon the angel of the Lord and still had doubts". Zachary's dumbness prepared people for the baby being something very special. That Elizabeth was expecting may have been a miracle in its own right but that strange affliction added to the mystery that was to be John the Baptist. And Thomas, whose doubt has inspired so much art? That rational mortal whose reaction to the wild tales of his companions was probably exactly what our own would have been? Who probably said to the women the first-century equivalent of, "Calm down, dears". The fruits of his doubt lie in the message which rings down to us across two millennia: Blessed are they who have not seen and yet believed. That is our call, our challenge and our comfort. The greatest servants of God have doubted, even those who had already put Him to the test and for them as for us doubt can be a positive influence.

Faith is a great gift of God and so is reason. If occasionally they collide it is because they must exist as one not as things apart and unreconcilable and it is the moment of reconciliation of faith and reason which defeats doubt. You cannot be courageous unless you are first afraid, for without fear no courage is required; and you cannot have faith without doubt, for without doubt where is the need for faith? To be without doubt is to deny ourselves the joy of that moment of realisation in which we can say, with Thomas, "My Lord and my God".