

Without All Doubt

(From the Collect, Epistle, and Gospel of the Feast of St. Thomas)

The Collect.

Almighty and everliving God, who, for the greater confirmation of the faith, didst suffer thy holy Apostle Thomas to be doubtful in thy Son's resurrection; Grant us so perfectly, and without all doubt, to believe in thy Son Jesus Christ, that our faith in thy sight may never be reprov'd. Hear us, O Lord, through the same Jesus Christ, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, now and for evermore. Amen.

The Epistle. Hebrews x. 35, and part of Chap. xi.

CAST not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul. Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Today is the day of our patron saint, Thomas the Apostle. It seems unfortunate that his legacy among the apostles is in part a negative one, as he is called “doubting Thomas”, a term that has worked its way into general usage for anyone who persistently calls something into question, in the face of obvious facts.

On a certain level, however, this labeling of the apostle seems a bit hasty to me. We are quick to hold up biblical figures, with all their very human foibles, and stereotype them. And so we gawk rather triumphantly at their weaknesses, as if to assure ourselves that, given the same circumstances, we would have done things differently. But I would like to look closely at Thomas’s doubt, and draw some conclusions about doubt, in general.

Did he have a right to doubt, or his doubt, at least, understandable? This is a complex question. Consider the circumstances. His Lord, in whom all his hopes were placed, had been executed publicly in the worst possible manner. Christ had assured them of His resurrection from the grave many times, but such promises would have been totally eclipsed by the terrible nature of His passion and death. So when the other disciples declared to Thomas that they had seen with their own eyes the risen Lord, can we be quick to censure him for his reluctance to accept their testimony? What does sorrow and grief do to a heart? Thomas was a sorely wounded man in great need of healing. His whole world had collapsed. He was unable to summon within himself a hopeful response to a joyous discovery that was beyond comprehension at such a moment. Was it really stubborn doubt and unbelief that prompted his refusal to accept the Good News, or had he not yet been able to emerge from the shock and horror of the recent events he had witnessed?

It is true that Jesus had often rebuked the disciples for their unbelief. His word should have been sufficient at all times to overrule their skepticism and unbelief. But it took many, many hard lessons before they were able to completely trust Him, and with regard to His crucifixion and resurrection, they simply could not come to terms with such an idea, until they actually saw Him alive from the dead. They even refused to believe the eye-witness account of the women who had actually spoken Christ outside the tomb, until they confirmed the matter themselves.

So Thomas, who has been hit hard, as had all the disciples, demands hard evidence in return: *Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.* He will accept nothing less than physical contact with His Master's awful wounds, a bold, audacious request that one can hardly imagine any of the other disciples daring to make. But notice... Christ fully grants Thomas's wish, uncovering His sacred scars not only for this one struggling disciple to behold, but all of them.... and through them, in our mind's eye, all the rest of us, as well. How vivid is the picture: *Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side...!* What did those wounds feel like? What was the experience of that incredible moment, never to be repeated in human history again? We can only infer the answer from Thomas's response: *My Lord and my God*, a unique confession in the Scriptures of Jesus Christ as God Himself.

Yes, the Lord chides Thomas: *be not faithless, but believing.* If Thomas had exercised himself, perhaps he could have risen above the influence of his emotions and the immediate circumstances that had blinded him to the Lord's promises, and prevented him from accepting the testimony of his fellow apostles. But I find in him a friend, because I find him like me. If he had done the right thing, the perfect thing, I would have felt that he was completely beyond me, leaving me utterly alone in my own struggles with doubt and unbelief.

This is where it gets down and personal. Religion, if used improperly, places unbelievably high demands upon its practitioners. We hear a message at times that suggests that there is no place in the Christian life for doubt, nor fear, nor a deep and painful struggle with our faith. It seems to arise from those whose lives never seem to touch the ground, who are so successful at ordering their circumstances that there is no risk of bumps and bruises that would cause them to lose control. But Thomas is a real character. Closeness to Christ has taken him, along with the other eleven apostles, completely out of his comfort zone, into a place of uncertainty and unpredictability where only faith in God can prevail. He has been stretched beyond the breaking point, but when the Lord, who has been the Author of his trials, resolves his struggle, Thomas can only cry out in awe and wonder *My Lord and my God!*

And this is why we can conclude that there are two breeds of doubt. One of them is the part of the process of striving with the truth in an attempt to work through one's conflicts and

fears to a place of unshakeable certainty. It is a search that doesn't accept facile and superficial answers. It may take one step forward and two backward. It may take us into places of great darkness and sadness that seem more like endless caverns, rather than tunnels which may offer us the faint light of hope. This is the doubt that may follow periods of intense disappointment, of personal hardship and loss, when, like Thomas, the Lord appears to have brought us past a point of no return. It is a process, however, that will always result in "greater confirmation of the faith", as today's Collect reminds us.

But the other kind of doubt is sin. It really is *sin*. We see it in today's Epistle from the book of Hebrews: *if any man draw back [to cower or shrink], my soul shall have no pleasure in him*. This is the sort of attitude that truly mistrusts God: "God will fail me. He will let me down. I cannot believe His promises. They won't work for me." It is a persistent refusal to obey God that hardens into unbelief and rejection, *unto perdition* [ruin, destruction]. Such a soul may think it is protecting itself by relying on its own resources. And the whole world that unites itself against God supports this sort of attitude. It is even looked up to as a virtue. It makes men cry out "I'm a victim!", martyred by God, man, and circumstance, instead of taking the blame for abandoning faith in the One who has promised that *he will come, and will not tarry*.

So, let's not be too hard on our Patron Saint. He is us. Because Thomas hesitated, we are allowed to see and feel together with him the very wounds of Christ, and to fall down on our knees in worship. And, according to the Lord's own words, we are part of a particular group that is specially *blessed: Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet believed*. We have indeed seen Jesus Christ our Lord, but only with eyes of faith. And through those same eyes we can continue to see Him each and every day, in loved ones, in every encounter, and in every circumstance.

We will also behold Him by faith very soon on Christmas Day as He lies a newborn Infant in His mother's arms, our Savior and Lord. And some day we will see Him, just as Thomas did, face to face, when He returns in triumph to inaugurate His Kingdom.

Then, truly, we will be "without all doubt".