

Sunday 3rd July 2022
St Thomas

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Habakkuk 2.1-4

NT: Ephesians 2.19-22

Gp: John 20.24-29

A few days ago I passed someone on the street wearing a tee-shirt which said across the front: “I think therefore I am.” I know nothing about the wearer or her motivation, but I wonder how much those who bought the tee-shirt know about Descartes. The phrase is not a random soundbite from his writing, but a significant part of his method. Here we have a philosopher who proves his own existence and also proves the existence of God, but his starting point is very different from that of the church.

What does the church tell us? Well, until relatively recently, if you lived in Britain you would probably believe in God, and probably attend church once in a while. But the basis of your belief in God would be that you had been told he exists by your parents and your Vicar. In any case, if you wanted to go to University or to hold any public office at any point before the 1830s then you would need to be a communicant member of the Church of England. And what did you know about God? Well, it was all laid out for you in the Bible, and in case there was any difficulty in your own interpretation of it, the Church of England made it very clear for you in the 39 Articles, the Book of Common Prayer, and these rather peculiar things called The Homilies which were rather like state authorised sermons. But nearly 200 years before being a practising Anglican was a pre-requisite for public office, Descartes was talking about the existence of God without relating it

to the Bible or to Church doctrine. His starting point was not what he had been told, but rather what he himself could understand from his own being.

And now think of the impact on that on the Church. Suddenly, there was a challenge to the Church about knowledge of God. Atheists were different: the Church could easily condemn them and suggest that they were heading for damnation. But far more dangerous for the Church were those people who believed in God, and who also believed that faith could be mediated outside the Church. Such people were implacably separated from the Church. By the middle of the 19th century the tide began to turn, and we find Church people applying the doubts and questions of the Enlightenment to the proofs which the Church offered for God, namely, the Bible and doctrine. Before church luminaries such as John Henry Newman, Frederick Temple, and Charles Gore began this journey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (who returned to the Church of England in 1814) was busy writing poetry and using drugs, and also thinking. Coleridge saw a person's energy as being his will and so the starting point for Coleridge's theology was the individual, the "intelligent Self". This approach owes something to modernity for the very fact that he did not set about trying to 'prove' Christianity, but rather he looked at our own need for Christianity. I don't think it would take long to pick philosophical holes in Coleridge, because he saw that reason itself would direct one towards Christianity as the satisfaction for our human need, but it is that change of approach which is significant. The approach for Coleridge was taken from the philosophical schools, whereas the Church was still trying to trump modernity through either its pronouncements, or its dubious appeals to history.

And all of this makes me look at St Thomas in a new light. There will be sermons across the country today from evangelicals saying that Thomas is the model for how you just have to believe: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” And there will be sermons from more thoughtful people about how belief without doubt is not belief at all but slavish dogmatism. But today I’d like to propose that Thomas is the proto-modernist, and in fact far more significant for our own faith because of the methodology we derive from him. The Enlightenment was, in part, a clash between the objective and subjective worlds: in other words, does your understanding of the world come from instruction or experience. If our ecclesiastical inheritance struggled on until the second half of the twentieth century with a foundational tenet that the Bible (or the past) has told us the order of the universe, then we should be asking whether the decline in the Church might be connected with our failure properly to embrace modernity in the pulpit rather than just in the academy. Coleridge, Newman, Temple, Gore were pushing back the boundaries in the nineteenth century, and significant theologians in the twentieth century such as Rahner, Ratzinger (before he went a bit reactionary), Moltmann and others took forward this work, but it was not until Rowan Williams became Archbishop of Canterbury that we had modernity brought to the pulpit. And yet in the heart of the resurrection narratives is Thomas.

So let’s look at Thomas. Putting aside all the language of ‘doubt’, his starting point is a reaction to objective instruction. Rather like David Hume’s 1748 essay *On Miracles* (another Enlightenment classic!) which argues that the testimonial weight required to give credible witness to a miracle

has never been met, Thomas is strong enough to stand against the testamentary weight of his fellow disciples. Presumably he witnessed the miracles of Jesus and accepted them through his own witness, but without his first-hand experience of the resurrection he could not make the experience of the other disciples his starting point: “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.” Thomas understands that faith and understanding must start with the subject and not the object. As the account unfolds, Thomas is given the opportunity for a first hand experience, and Thomas answered Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”

What theologians since the Enlightenment have had to articulate is how we can give subjective validation to our faith without that rather direct validation which Thomas experienced. There are many ways in which we can talk about this, and my own belief is that the foundational knowledge of God is there when we are born. This is what that great father of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, termed a priori knowledge. But in fact charismatic evangelicalism is also not too far from the mark when they focus on the experience of the Spirit as a primary witness to God in our lives. This, and also more catholic spirituality, teaches us to be open to the very real relationship which we can experience with the living God, and that this relationship does not need to be mediated through the church or the Bible, although very often the mediation will come through the sacraments of the church.

So Thomas is, for me, not just a character, but a trailblazer for where we are today, and when the comfort food of biblical fundamentalism has run its course, Thomas will still be there to show that foundational belief must be experiential rather than dogmatic. Thomas would not be told what to believe, but he lived his faith through experience. When you go out from here, go and experience God, because he is standing amongst us, wounds and all.