

## Easter 2 (C): CCSY, 11 April 2010

### *Thomas & Baptism*

John 20:19-31

Alice laughed: “There’s no use trying,” she said; “one can’t believe impossible things.” “I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”<sup>1</sup>

Having hosted the Parliament of World Religions in December, last month Melbourne was the venue for an international atheists convention. Nothing like having a bet each way! Alice, of Alice in Wonderland fame, would have made a good patron of the atheists’ convention. As one who does not even attempt to believe impossible things, she is a better icon of cool rationality even than ‘doubting Thomas’. Certainly the Queen, who practices believing impossible things as a quasi, daily meditation, would have stood for the straw ‘religious’ person – that easy target of Richard Dawkins and his peers.

That said, I have a healthy respect for considered, rigorous atheism; atheism that is not itself a ‘position’ – its own form of blind faith.

I wish more atheists came to church. Some of my closest friends and members of my family exhibit what I would call a ‘holy agnosticism’, and perhaps – in the end – that’s all we can or should aspire to.

You may have heard me say it before; you’ll probably hear me say it again: the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. I don’t know about you, but for me, doubt plays an integral part in my journey of faith, in my believing. I grew up in a tradition where there wasn’t much room for doubt: you either believed this package of propositions, or you didn’t.

Believe what though, exactly? Believe how? The grey areas of my early adult experience couldn’t find a place in that black and white universe, and so I had to find a new spiritual home, one in which I could breathe, and move, and wonder, and question, and think.

As catholic Christians in the Anglican tradition, we are not expected to check our brains at the door when we come to church; nor to deny the complexity and ambiguity of our personal or collective human experience. Thomas, I would argue, is a model Anglican; he wants to use his God-given reason when encountering the tradition of the risen Christ – but not ‘coldly’, not in splendid isolation from his self-understanding as a whole, embodied, feeling person; rather, he needs to have his senses engaged: to see, to touch, to make real connections between the data of his experience and this foundational story of the early church. These are very Anglican, small ‘c’ catholic, instincts.

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<sup>1</sup>

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*.

The other thing about Thomas that I find deeply reassuring, especially on a day when we are baptising, is that he hangs in there with the disciples, even when he can't yet believe what they're on the way to believing. 'A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them.' (Jn 21:26) Now that might have been a function of the need to stick together in dangerous and confusing times; it may have been because these guys had become his friends, his primary community, his people; or it may have been because this house church served good coffee. I don't think it matters why Thomas was still there; only that he was still there. His belonging and his believing are of a piece.

Just before we baptise Seve and Fidele, we'll say the Apostles' creed together in a question and answer format. I've often wished we could see all the different thought bubbles hovering above a congregation at this moment: what does the Virgin birth really mean? How can I comprehend the communion of saints? Did I switch the oven off when I left home this morning?

I know that my own understanding of what the creed affirms has changed radically since I began reciting it decades ago, and I fully expect the mysteries into which it ushers me to have yet more spaces and aspects to explore. But, in the end, thank God, it's not about me. It doesn't really matter what I'm capable of believing before breakfast today, or tomorrow, or next Sunday. It's about the faith of the church. And not the faith of this church – not what is believed at Christ Church South Yarra – but the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of God, in every place, at all times; a universal communion of belonging and believing which, in turn, is made visible and given concrete form by the life and worship, the ministry and mission, of each local church which confesses the faith once delivered to the likes of Thomas.

If I only came to church on the days it all made sense, or when I had no nagging questions, you might not see me all that often. Maybe that's why God made me a priest: so I'd have to turn up! But of what I am certain, is that through baptism I belong to this household of faith, which connects me with the faith and the life of the Church universal, or catholic; and most days that is enough.

I'm sure that Seve and Fidele will answer the questions Mother Jenny and Father Paul are about to ask them with complete integrity. I imagine there will be times when they're not quite sure what to make of all this believing in God stuff. And I trust that what they understand by the words they say today will look different as they repeat those same words in years to come. Above all, I hope that their sense of belonging to the whole Church of God, made tangible by their connection with a particular community of faith such as this one, is something that will carry them through times when believing is difficult, or impossible. I hope they will know, because we will show them, that it's not all up to them, any more than it's up to any one of us. But that, as together we wonder, and doubt, and think, and wrestle, and touch, and see, and hide, and come out, the risen Christ will bless us for his work in the world.

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