

The Apostle Thomas has been immortalized in the descriptive grammar of our language as 'Doubting Thomas' – he has become a noun. Maybe we might argue that he should have had a bit more faith in the promises of the Lord and the witness of his fellow apostles – but the fact is, for human beings, doubt is often inevitable or unavoidable; sometimes, indeed, doubt is a very good thing.

The 17th century philosopher, René Descartes, who wanted to build an irrefutable philosophical system step by step, that led up to proof of the existence of God, famously said: *Cogito ergo sum* – 'I think, therefore I am.' In fact, he actually began his system with doubt, because doubt is an act of thinking that cannot be refuted or denied; I can't doubt that I can doubt – if I doubt that I can doubt, I end up doing the very thing I'm denying that I can do. Descartes proposed: 'I *doubt* therefore I think, therefore I am.'

Whatever we might suppose, doubt isn't a problem in religion, because even though we might doubt, we

can still have hope – sometimes our doubt is greater, sometimes our hope is, but the two can co-exist. They're *made* to co-exist. We can doubt and we can hope at the same time; we can doubt and we can *believe* at the same time, because the existence of doubt is what makes hope and belief possible. On the other hand, sure and certain knowledge makes hope and belief impossible: if I *know* something – for example, that the sun is hot – I don't have to hope for it or believe in it. When we recite the Creed together every Sunday, we say "I believe in one God" – we don't say "I know there's one God."

Faith is never a matter of giving intellectual assent to a set of propositions – it's not an act of agreement with a series of theological statements. Saying "I believe in one God" doesn't make me a Christian – or even a good person – it's how I live that belief in my life that actually counts. What good does it do me to affirm "I believe in one God" but then go out and treat other people unkindly, unlovingly?

The gospel story today isn't really about doubt at all – and certainly not the kind of doubt that is a normal and necessary part of human life. Thomas, the Apostle wasn't doubting; he was refusing any kind of hope and denying any grounds for belief. He wasn't open to even the possibility of faith; Thomas' mind was closed, but true doubt is always open. If I say: 'I doubt that Jesus rose from the dead,' I am also implicitly saying: 'But I could be wrong.' On the other hand, if I declare: 'I *know* that Jesus didn't rise from the dead' – which is what Thomas was saying – I am also declaring: 'And I'm not wrong.' This is the difference between agnosticism – which is open to being wrong, and atheism – which isn't.

Thomas also demanded proof, but proof turns hope into certainty and certainty leaves no room for hope or belief. Certainty in faith is a far greater danger than doubt, because certainty breeds the kind of fundamentalism that says: 'We're right and everyone else is wrong and if you don't agree with us, we'll kill you.' The Anglican writer and monk Harry Williams

once said: 'Absolute certainty belongs only to the insane.'

Throughout the gospels Jesus completely rejected the demand for proof; yet Thomas said: 'Unless I see the wounds in his hands and feet and side, I will *not* believe.' I think most of us would have quite a lot of sympathy for poor old Thomas – I know I have. When we look around at the world and see the things that are going on in it, hope and belief that God's love continues to care for and sustain it, can sometimes be extremely difficult, especially in these times of pandemic; it would be a blessed relief, I think, to have even one little smidgin of 'proof' that he does. In this sense we are all agnostics: we hope and we believe as best we can, but not one of us actually knows for certain.

If we look back on our lives and demand proof that there is a plan and a purpose to it all – even the worst of it – we're not going to get a satisfactory response. And yet how we would love just a crumb of affirmation that

our lives have not been in vain. Here, I think of the prayer of St John Henry Newman, who wrote:

“God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to any other. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for nothing. I shall do good; I shall do His work if I keep His commandments. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth whilst not even knowing it. Therefore, I will trust Him, trust that whatever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still, He knows what He is about.”

This is not a prayer of knowledge, of certainty, it is a prayer of hope, of belief and faith. Newman can't 'prove' that what he says is so and he doesn't seek to prove it. He trusts that it is so. I think it's the perfect prayer for all of us at those times in our lives when hope and belief have been bundled into one tiny corner of our doubting hearts... and I'm very glad he wrote it.