

John 20:19-end: A recipe for Belief?

In the vicarage there are some cookery books. Not many, as you would expect from a single man, but a few, that I tend to use again and again. If I wanted to purchase some more then I wouldn't have to look very far: there are loads of them, of every variety, on the market; there are books with recipes for bread, books for cakes, books all about soup, several vegetarian cook books. No matter what the recipe is, they all seem to follow the same pattern, there's a list of ingredients that you'll need to make the Victoria sponge, or the onion soup, of the olive ciabatta, and then there's the method. Mix the flour with the yeast, add the egg, don't forget to lightly brown the garlic flakes et cetera, et cetera.

Having looked at these books, and this morning's Gospel reading, I was wondering about how you would go about making a recipe for belief. This was an exercise I once tried with a youth group; they were asked to come up with a recipe for faith, to list the ingredients and then come up with a method for mixing them all together. They came up with ingredients like love, patience, belief, the Bible, prayer. All sorts of lovely things. The methods they came up with can also only be called genius, there was things like take a sprinkle of love and add the Bible, mix together with the prayer. All really great things.

The ingredient that was missing though from them all was doubt. Which isn't really that surprising really because we always look at doubt as if it's a bad thing, and we view this story of doubting Thomas as victory of faith over doubt.

Jesus appears to his disciples, who are behind closed doors because they are, quite naturally, afraid. They have seen some horrible things over the last few days. Perhaps they felt that they had let Jesus down, especially Peter, poor old Peter who had denied Jesus not once but three times. They felt empty; perhaps they even felt inadequate, sorry for their lack of courage in the face of Jesus' trial. Thomas, for some reason, isn't with them. When he comes back he can't believe his eyes and ears – when he had left the house they were all sad, scared, uncertain. When he returns they are absolutely bowled over. They say they have seen Jesus again. Thomas very wisely says that unless he sees the mark of the nails on his hands and feels the wound on his side then he won't believe. A week later Jesus appears to the disciples again and this time Thomas is with them. Jesus isn't ignorant of Thomas' feelings of doubt, he offers him the proof Thomas felt he needed, and then Thomas proclaims Jesus to be “my Lord and my God”.

I've always felt a bit sorry for Thomas really. He doesn't get much of a mention in the gospels, really just a cameo appearance, and when he does, we all remember him as “doubting Thomas”, despite, in 11:16 and 14:5 being presented as a loyal courageous disciple of Jesus. But he is one of the most important disciples, because he shows us that doubt, rather than being a negative thing to be avoided, is actually part of what it means to be a disciple, and the gospel also shows us what can happen when we doubt, and how Jesus can use that doubt and turn it into faith. This isn't to say that doubt can't be a bad thing, unchecked doubt, like anything that goes unchecked, can be very bad indeed and can ruin a person's relationship with Jesus. But Christ knows exactly what we need, and our faith is incredibly important to Him.

When was the last time that you doubted anything, or worse, anyone? Doubt's a horrible feeling, it usually starts as a little niggle and then grows and grows until you end up questioning everything that you thought that you knew. Doubt is when we find it difficult to believe certain things; we find some things in our communal faith difficult. The disciples may

have had their moment of doubt in Jesus, but he didn't doubt in them. When was the last time you doubted in Jesus?

What this gospel teaches us is that Christ can overcome doubt, and that God knows this. Jesus says "Blessed are those who do not see, and yet believe." In writing his gospel John uses the same word in Greek as that found in the beatitudes: "makarios" meaning blessed, or happy, or favoured by God. blessed are the poor, weak, hungry. Blessed are the faithful, and we are given the Holy Spirit. And although these words do not appear in any of the gospels, I believe we can extrapolate them quite easily:

Blessed are those who are scared, and behind locked doors, for Christ will give them courage, and will stand amongst them.

Blessed are those who are absent, for Christ will come to meet them where they are.

Blessed are those who doubt, for they will be given the proof they seek.

Amen.