

What is truth?? We have heard this question so many times in the past few weeks, not only in the Passion readings in the lead up to Easter when Pilate questions Jesus; but also in the media and public discourse as we listen to reports from many perspectives about the situation relating to Brexit, China, the Middle East, Trump, and even Climate Change.

The question of what we choose to believe, and what we take as fact seems to be a question which is as old as time itself. In fact it seems so central to the human psyche that it is at the heart of questions in the creation and fall narratives not only in Christianity but in many world religious traditions – which date back to the beginning of humanity itself.

How do we know that we should believe what we are being told?

For a long time I believed the answer to this question was a simple one – there are things that are simply true; and there are things that are simply false; and then there are a large number of things in the middle which are hard to prove or disprove that we just to live with! The challenge for me has been though as I get older, there seems to be less that I am certain of, and more that seems to fall in the complicated or messy middle of life.

The complication is of course is that so much of our understanding of what truth is, comes from where we sit, or how we interpret the world. This is influenced by our education, our families, our cultural and also how our brains individually work.

Easter holds within it many truths, and yet these truths seem to be regularly challenged, by ourselves and also by the biblical narrative.

The disciples had followed Jesus throughout Canaan and Galilee – some of them for three years – all believing what Jesus had said as truth. All knowing that there were those who did not believe and felt threatened by what Jesus was saying. But the main thing that they believed about Jesus was that he was the Messiah – that he had come to bring about a change to the way things were. For many of the disciples this was a very literal and immediate change they were looking for. They thought Jesus, like Moses, would release them from captivity – that there would be an end to Roman occupation – that God would reclaim authority Jerusalem. (hence the reading from Exodus this morning)

It is not that they weren't listening to Jesus – it is more that they (like us) had no reference point for what God's Kingdom might look like – other than one that was bounded by their human experience. They interpreted what Jesus was teaching them through the language of their experience. They had known Jesus – known he was different – they understood that things were changing – they had heard Jesus say that he would die and that on the third day would rise up – but they had no context for this until it happened.

After Jesus died, there were those who then wanted to kill the disciples, to ensure that the message of Jesus was silenced – and so the Apostles had locked themselves

in a room for fear of what had happened to them. This fear increased when the women had told them Jesus had risen – because they could not believe at that point. They also knew that the Temple leaders, as well as the Roman authorities would think they had stolen the body – they knew others would now looking for them.

They are fearful for their lives; full of grief and anger at Jesus death (and if truth be known also at Jesus). How could Jesus have let this happen? How could he have not sorted all of this before he died? (I wonder how many of us have asked that question after someone we loved died?) They were no doubt disappointed too – what would happen now – this would not have been the life of faith they were expecting – the death of their Messiah who was going to change all things!

For us, who look at everything in the context of all that has happened since in the Christian church, it may be difficult for us to understand this. Surely Jesus made it clear to the disciples before he died that he would rise from the dead – why did they not trust and believe like the women who had been at the tomb? It is clear to us because we know the whole story – but because of the fear and disappointment they felt – it does not seem that it was clear to the disciples.

Every year on this first Sunday after Easter we hear the story of ‘Doubting Thomas’ the one who had to see to believe. And every year we are reminded that we too must have faith. The reality of this Gospel passage however is that none of these disciples believed without seeing – they had all locked themselves away and did not begin understanding until Jesus appears in their midst. Sadly at the time Thomas is not present, and so he replicates their behaviour by continuing not to believe until he has seen for himself!. No doubt this for Thomas was also further disappointment – not just disappointment at Jesus death and their emerging exile – but also now disappointment that the others had shared in an experience he had missed out on.

Before we are too hard on the disciples or Thomas let us consider what they were being asked to believe. The Resurrection is a magnificent thing, and so hard to grasp - or, if we do grasp our knowledge is fleeting. Indeed, apart from the Beloved Disciple (John 20:8), it seems as if the disciples were locked into familiar tombs: upon seeing the empty tomb, the disciples didn’t preach, they didn’t join the party, they went home – so hard was the news to comprehend! (John 20:10)¹.

John’s gospel account shows us that the resurrection was not an easy thing for anyone to swallow – it took time to understand and embrace – it was such a difficult concept , hard to see as truth– especially in the context of grief and disappointment to accept.

And it is not just the disciples who struggle with this concept in the beginning – it is still the biggest issue that many Christians struggle with – and it is often the most

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2808

pressing question of those who are seeking out the Christian faith. How is the resurrection possible and what does it mean? How do we know it is true?

Like so many of us Thomas wanted evidence that Jesus really had risen before he would believe. He wanted empirical proof before his brain could even entertain the idea of resurrection or what the implications of that might be.

I think one of the key reasons it is important for us to consider this version of the resurrection story each year is it confronts two things in us. How do we respond to the story of the resurrection – are we able to believe it ‘without seeing’ the physical risen Jesus – though we may see in a spiritual sense. But also I think it invites us to consider equally how we respond or deal with the disappointments of our faith which we will have inevitably encountered in the past year. The times God has not behaved as we have wanted, or the world has not found peace in the way that we have hoped.

How we respond to the resurrection and also to disappointment are key marker points in our faith? But John gives us an insight.

Not insignificantly, Jesus’ appearance in this context of fear culminates with one of the distinctive marks of the Christian community, the practice of forgiveness (John 20:23). As a practice, forgiveness entails doubting our own fear-based conclusions. Forgiveness calls us to trust in God’s power to initiate resurrection in our midst, precisely where we least expected it². This includes forgiving ourselves for our own doubt.

Of course like Thomas we want to see Jesus. Of course like the disciples we are at times disappointed that God’s Kingdom does not seem to be fulfilled in the way that we expect. But this does not stop the resurrection being truth; nor does it stop God working in us and through us. Because in this Eastertide, God invites us to remember that we are forgiven for our fear and doubts – and welcomes us to initiate the power of the resurrection in our midst, for it is only in this we will encounter God’s kingdom and presence – when we least expect it. Amen.

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2808