

Away with doubt, away with gloom

One of the easy traps for worship leaders to fall into is to imagine that we are speaking to one homogenous group and to address a congregation accordingly. But of course, everyone is different and many groups make up one congregation. As I have said before, here especially there are those who have been in the service of Christ for many years and, although you listen to what I have to say with indulgence and humility, you know more about the Christian life than I do! But there are other people, too. Those who have committed to the Christian church and are making progress, and others still who may feel 'outside' the full Christian faith and who imagine that they are barred from its experiences because they know so little of it. Added to all of this, we must allow for the multiplicity of age, background, culture and race. When you take all of this into consideration, it's easy to see how erroneous it is to imagine that one evangelistic approach can be a 'one size fits all' approach.

But there is perhaps, something that we all have in common: I suspect that each and every one of us has experienced something akin to doubt about our faith at one time or another, just as it seems that Thomas did, as we heard in the gospel reading. So, at the risk of appearing somewhat egocentric, I hope your indulgence will permit me to tell you about my Lenten project this year. Just as our new minister Pauline spoke about journeying two weeks ago, my project was a personal journey, and a truly remarkable one at that. Perhaps, as I speak about it, you may identify with some of what I say, and God will have been speaking *through* me, just as he has been speaking *to* me over the past weeks. (Incidentally, it might interest you to know that when I opined to my fifteen year old son, also, coincidentally, called Thomas, that I wasn't sure that I had enabled him to know enough about Christianity and that I was a little disappointed that he didn't choose to attend any church, he replied, "Oh but Dad, you don't need to think that: it's all being – what do you call it when something goes in at one end of a factory and comes out the other end? Processed. Yes. It's all being processed".)

Let me start with a quotation from John Stott: "A Christian mind asks questions, probes problems, feels perplexity, but does these things within the context of a profound and growing confidence of the reality of God and of his Christ. We should not acquiesce in a condition of basic and chronic doubt, as if it were a characteristic of Christian normality. It is not. It is rather a symptom of spiritual sickness in our spiritually sick age.

Thomas, it seems, when we read of his questioning, has arrived at a crossroads in his life. He asks many questions of himself; will he be trusting? Will he be faithful? Will he, most importantly, be certain? He finds himself unable to answer these questions and has many anxieties. But it is easy to imagine, because of a rather inaccurate translation of a Greek word, that he ever 'doubted'. A more accurate translation of the Greek word 'apistos' is 'not having trust or certainty'. And that is where my Lenten project started.

Like many of you, no doubt, I read Richard Dawkins' 'The God Delusion'. It is a huge tome, and there is no doubt that Professor Dawkins writes in a very charismatic and captivating way. So much so, in fact, that I managed to read the whole book in three days! (Teachers' holidays, you see.) Such was the manner in which he couched his polemic that I began to agree with some of what he was saying. Is it not true, perhaps (or at least easy to imagine) that a world without religion would be one of peace, harmony and love? Why, he asks, does 'God' have to be the answer to everything? (In

fact, Professor Dawkins destroys his own case by writing in the way that he does, but far be it from me to point that out.) And I have to agree that I do agree with some of his thoughts. For example, he says 'an atheist can be happy, balanced, moral and fulfilled.'. Yes she can. He is right when he finds himself to be annoyed at the religious labelling of children too young to have made up their own minds about their religion. You cannot, he says, say that a five year old child can be a 'Christian' or a 'Moslem'. They are children of parents of that particular faith.

There is much in his book which is worth a second glance, and it certainly makes one think. But, as you read it, you realise that his vitriolic raging is largely a result of internet-trawling, rather than considered theological – or atheological – research.

Having read Dawkins' book, I found myself in London about a week later. There, while I had half an hour to spare before going to a meeting, I experienced a truly theophanic moment. I looked across the road and noticed Waterstones bookshop. I knew that I had to go in. As I did so, the very first book I noticed was called 'The Dawkins Delusion, by Alistair McGrath. I did not know that that book existed, but I knew that I had to buy it. As I am sure you will know, Professor McGrath is an Oxford theologian who was a confirmed atheist during his time as a molecular biologist. In his book, he dissects Dawkins' theories with the precision of just such a professional, and he offers the reassurance – or at least part of it – that anyone having been challenged by Dawkins might want. Indeed, Professor McGrath writes: "A response is needed to The God Delusion, if only because the absence of one might persuade some that no answer could be given. There are many who are deluded about God, and I used to be one of them'.

So my Lenten project had already come a long way. I had begun by knocking a half-completed jigsaw off the table and started from scratch. I had to start putting the pieces back together again, and both Richard Dawkins and Alistair McGrath had helped me to do that. But then I found myself wanting to go deeper into my own theological reconstruction. If I had accepted that God was in my life, how could this be? What other theological acceptances could I entertain?

Conscious of my deepening involvement with this church, I thought I would examine the differences in theological background of my own church of confirmation, the Methodist Church, with that of the URC and its historical forebears. I read many thousands of words, both in books and on the internet, discovering the differences between the thinking of John Calvin and Joseph Arminius, John Wesley and many others. It wasn't long before I realised that, as one writer put it 'Much ink has been spilt over the difference between Calvinism and Arminianism, but the argument is one that can never be proven'. (Incidentally, I also learnt that on one occasion a duel was held to see which one was considered to be correct!) But I found myself having to make up my mind over the matter of whether God has mapped out the course of our lives, or whether we have been given free will in order to live our lives accordingly. One sentence that kept coming up during my research was: 'God chooses us; we do not choose God'. That sentence is one that repeatedly appeared as I typed my questions into the search engines, and it was extraordinary (a word I have chosen deliberately) how many times I was led back to the URC's website.

By now I realised that I was getting into very deep theological waters. All sorts of questions now flooded into my mind and I read and searched, searched and read, and I was led into the world of science. Darwin featured a great deal, as I considered the beauty of creation, and I have been

interested in science and religion for a long time. So I was thrilled, but not surprised when I found myself sitting on a sofa in a friend's house, with one of the greatest scientists on the planet, Sir Bernard Lovell. Long story, but suffice it for me to say that Sir Bernard is my wife's uncle, and so I have met him several times. Despite being 91 years old, his mind is razor sharp. I tried my best, but struggled to keep up as he informed me of all the latest scientific theories. The way in the Large Hadron Collider will tell us much about the origins of the universe; the string theory; entangled photons; the theory of ten dimensions and so on. I asked him about his own personal faith. He thought for a moment and then, in his characteristic Bristolian accent, replied: "Well, I still believe what I said in my Reith Lecture of 1959, that there are some things that have no answers. Let's remember that we do not understand 95% of matter'. That certainly made me stop and think! It was interesting to hear him say, too, that what the world is waiting for is 'another moment of genius' in order to take humanity forward to the next stage: an Einstein or a Newton will open up new windows on our world.

So as you can see, I had come a very long way and found that God had spoken to me in many different ways during my Lenten project. I was reassured on Maunday Thursday that what I had been doing was meaningful, as I read the words of William Barclay: "There is more ultimate faith in the man who insists on being sure than the man who glibly repeats things which he has never thought out, and which he does not really believe. Thomas doubted in order to become sure, and when he did become sure, his surrender to certainty was complete."

All of this, though, all of my research, questioning and conclusions, will have been of little value if it remains as nothing more than what it has been: self-examination and an attempt to remove doubt. On Good Friday, I read the wise words of Archbishop John Sentamu:

"The reality of faith is the reality of love. You can't hear, touch, smell or taste love, but you can see its effects in the acts born from it, in the relationships built upon it, the art inspired by it and the lives transformed by its goodness. So it is with faith. The reality of faith is visible in those millions of daily acts of kindness and love that are born in it."

Which led me back to the URC website. There, on its homepage, is the evidence of Christian love in action: all manner of acts of kindness, compassion and generosity, being carried out in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, just as it is here, within our own church. And we celebrate our Risen Lord through his Resurrection, in the knowledge that he is always with us; that he died for us and that he is with us always, until the end of the world. All the theological thinking in the world can help us only up to a point, and yes, it is indeed exhilarating to be able to do exactly that. But as Christian ambassadors our faith is futile unless we take it out into the world and live the Christian life. We know that we live and die: we know, too, that Christ died – and lives.

Amen