

Hymns: 297 Christ is alive! Let Christians sing
 305 Low in the grave he lay
 314 This joyful Eastertide
 677 Christ is made the sure foundation
 313 Thine be the glory

Readings: Psalm 150
 Acts 5:27-32
 John 20:19-31

“THOMAS – DOUBTING, OR EVIDENCE BASED?”

On this Sunday, the second of Easter, we look beyond the story of the Resurrection Day to the way in which belief in Jesus spread. The Gospel reading we have just heard tells the familiar story of Doubting Thomas..... but just a minute, who calls him doubting? The Bible doesn't call him that, it was an invention, probably of the medieval church. This morning I want to redeem Thomas as a model for enquirers and people seeking a deeper faith in Jesus Christ and his Church. I want to claim that Thomas was not a doubter, but a person who looked for something that was evidence based. Something that enabled him to say 'My Lord and my God!' Not fantasy, not fiction, not guess-work, but evidence based faith.

We are all familiar to some extent with what goes on in a court of law. You may have watched TV programmes, you may well have served on a jury, you may have found yourself involved in a court case. Whatever the sort of court or sort of case, a court wants things that are evidence based. You may have heard a judge say, 'Members of the jury, on the evidence you have heard, you have to decide.....'

Put very simply a court case looks at four types of evidence.

First, there is Documentary evidence. It may be forensic evidence, paper documents, DNA evidence, evidence from CCTV cameras. It is evidence you can see. It is documentary evidence.

Second, there is the stated law that has to be applied, civil law or criminal law. There are the rules of the court, the role of the judge and jury. The case is heard based on the traditions of what the law says. And

a judge will guide a jury on how tradition is relevant in their judgement. There is tradition to guide us, what has gone before and proved to be trustworthy.

Third, there is the way in which both prosecution and defence try to put forward reasoned arguments, how they build up a case, or seek to pull it down by the application of reason. In a criminal case a jury has to be evidence based 'beyond reasonable doubt'. (In a civil case it is balance of probability). The decision of the court is based on the application of reason.

Lastly, there are eye witness accounts. 'I was there and I saw X or Y happen.' You listen to personal experience. Personal experience is very real and commands attention.

So a court reaches a verdict which is evidence based on four pillars, or I like to think of four legs of a chair. Documentary evidence, the Traditions of the law, the use of Reason and Personal Experience, You need them all, and the interplay between them to reach an evidence based decision.

Now some of you, particularly those who have theological education, will already be ahead of me, and have begun to work through what I am going to say next. These four pillars, or chair legs, for reaching an evidence based decision in a court of law are mirror images of the way in which Christians have argued and evangelised and presented the Christian faith. They are the basis of the faith that is within you.

1. Documentary evidence – what does the Bible say?
2. Traditional evidence – what has the church and fellow Christians said or done over the years?
3. How does our ability to Reason, think and argue help us reach convincing evidence?
4. What is the personal experience of other people and our own experience?

Each of these four 'pillars' or legs of faith have their own strengths and values to a Christian faith. An evidence based faith needs all of them, but recognises that no one of them is in itself sufficient. Each has its weaknesses. An evidence based faith holds all four of them in dialogue,

or I like the image that they all interrogate each other so that they can challenge, strengthen and support each other.

1. Let's start with the Bible. The foundation of our faith. It reveals to us the way in which God in Christ reveals Godself to us, and challenges us to respond. But it also raises problems for us. It has often been said, 'We know what the Bible says: the problem is to discover what the Bible means.' Many of the sayings of Jesus are not easy to understand or interpret. There are all sorts of gaps which would be helpful if they were filled. If you stick with the Bible alone you get into some very strange understandings. For example, the Bible has a very difficult understanding of the nature of marriage and family life. Can you find any satisfactory model of marriage in the Bible? And if you turn to the matter of slavery in the Bible, you will find it is justified, accepted and nowhere condemned. So an evidence based faith interrogates the Bible.
2. So what about Tradition? We live our Christian faith through tradition. We say the Creeds, we sing the hymns of the Church, we look to the wisdom of the early Church Fathers and the lives of saints and martyrs. We follow tradition in the ways we celebrate Baptism, and Holy Communion. We worship in traditional church buildings and exercise traditional forms of ministry. At the end of the Easter Season we will celebrate Trinity Sunday. Our understanding of the Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, One God, is a traditional development of the Biblical revelation, and still controversial.

And is something right just because we have said it or done it for years? Christian faith is often renewed when tradition is cast aside. A few years ago we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the beginnings of the Reformations, which rent apart the traditional faith of Europe and developed the Protestant Church of which we are part. Here at Wesley's Chapel we honour John and Charles Wesley, whose Methodist Movement was sundered from the traditions of the Church of England. And in many of our life-times we have seen the age's long tradition of all-male clergy come to an end in many churches as we rejoice in the equal ministry of women and men. So an evidence based faith interrogates the Tradition of the church.

3. So what about Reason, surely that can help. Of course it does. We have the God-given gifts of mind, intelligence and questioning. We live our lives on systems and values that are dictated by reason.

How often have we said or wanted to say to others, 'Oh for heaven's sake be reasonable!' But the Christian church has always had a problem with reason. One view has always been that, because we are fallen beings, sinners, our ability to reason is itself corrupt. Our reasoning process is flawed. If reason, applied to the Christian faith was a sure guide, why is so much of the world-wide church divided, for example, over the nature of human sexuality? Returning to the law, you only need to visit the Supreme Court, where some of the most brilliant brains in the land attempt to apply reason, and find they are often divided among themselves.

Reason itself is not a sure guide. So an evidence based faith interrogates our reliance on Reason.

4. So what about Personal Experience? It's at the heart of our Protestant faith. It's at the heart of our Methodist way and life. We follow in the footsteps of a man who felt his heart 'strangely warmed.' We talk about 'coming to faith', 'making a decision for Christ'. We sing hymns of personal experience, 'Blessed assurance Jesus is mine' or the more modern, 'Knowing you, Jesus, knowing you, there is no greater thing'.

Our faith is not something that is second-hand, passed on from one generation to another. But it is not sufficient in itself. We will all have come upon people who have found a personal faith, a personal experience of Christ, but it has not grown, it has withered away. This is because it has not been supported by Bible, Tradition and Reason. An evidence based faith interrogates the claims of Personal Experience.

Bible, Tradition, Reason and Personal Experience. The four pillars of legs of our faith. I like to look at them this way. You will all have seen or experienced at a fun-fair the roller-coaster. It takes you up and down in heart-stopping, stomach-churning movements which make you feel your life is at risk. But look beneath you. There is a strong steel lattice-work which holds and supports you and keeps you safe. Bible, Tradition, Reason and Personal Experience. The ups and downs of life and faith are supported by a sure lattice of support.

So, in conclusion, I return to the legal imagery with which I began. This is the moment when I don my invisible judge's wig and turn to you and say, 'Members of the jury.....'

I remember many years ago being deeply challenged by a preacher who asked us, 'If you found yourself in court charged with being a Christian, would the court be able to find sufficient evidence to convict you?' Are you the sort of Christian who wants, in the modern phrase, 'to move onto the next level'? If you do want to 'grow in grace' your evidence based faith has got to grow and develop with all four of these developing together. Your increasing understanding of the Bible; your valuing of the fruits of Tradition; your developing of your mind as a reasoning tool in the search for God; and your growth in Personal Experience of the ways of Christ.

If growth among them is uneven it is like trying to sit on a chair with four legs all of different length. They can tip you off. Or if you dismiss one or more of them, you are likely ever increasingly to wobble!

After he had seen the risen Christ, Thomas said, 'My Lord and my God'. If you want the evidence based faith of Thomas, look to the Bible, Tradition, Reason and Experience. And you will be able to say, 'My Lord and my God'.

Then there will be sufficient evidence to convict you.