

# On doubt

A sermon preached by Geoff Oates at Choral Evensong on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> May

*'When they saw him, the disciples worshipped him, even though some of them doubted.'*  
Matt 28 v17

Matthew brings his Gospel to a rapid end after the story of Easter morning. The risen Jesus sends the two Marys to the Disciples with a message that they are to go to Galilee, where they too will see him. Jesus duly appears to them, and before he gives them what we call the Great Commission, the commandment to go and make believers of all peoples, the Disciples worship him. Even though some of them doubted.

Little comments like this convince me that our Gospels are reliable accounts of the life of Jesus. Here is clear evidence of the honesty of our scriptures. Even now, as the Apostles stand face to face with their risen Lord, some of them doubted. How easy it would have been for Matthew to discreetly brush that little detail away, to save the big names of the early Church from any embarrassment.

I wonder which ones doubted? How did Matthew find out? Exactly what did they doubt? Was it that they just couldn't believe their own eyes? Did they think they were seeing a ghost? Did they doubt their own sanity? I don't think so, because they worshipped Him anyway.

Perhaps it was a different, a more subtle kind of doubt. A doubt that says 'yes, this is real, but there is nothing in all my past experience and learning that enables me to make sense of this or gives me any idea why I am doing this or where all this is leading'.

Historically, the established Christian church has had a bit of a downer on doubt. It likes certainties. We have long wordy Creeds that tell us just what it is we believe. We get away with the shorter Apostles Creed at Evensong, so we don't need to worry about whether Jesus was co-eternal with the Father or not, and

whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

We used to have a neat, tidy catechism for teaching youngsters and new followers just what it is all about. And we have tended to sell it as an all or nothing package – believe it all, and you're in; if you don't believe it all, stay out.

We've allowed a dreadful heresy to slip into the back of our minds - Salvation by Correct Doctrine. If you believe all the right things about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and all the things it says in the Bible, then you'll be happy, Jesus will love you, your prayers will be answered and one day you can go to Heaven!

But the first Disciples had no creed, no doctrines, no canon of authoritative scripture. When they encountered the risen Jesus, they had no idea what it was all about, no idea where it was all heading – they just had an overwhelming sense of wonder, love and trust.



It is easy to assume that faith and doubt are opposites. I don't think that's true. It is truer to say that faith and certainty are opposites. Christian faith is not about knowing where we are going, but rather about trusting that, if we follow the teachings of Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, however best we can understand them, we will arrive in the end at the place we are meant to be. God doesn't want us to be 'certain'; He wants us to be open to hear and follow new directions for a new day. I don't think it helps him if we've already decided what He's allowed to tell us.

## All Saints Alive

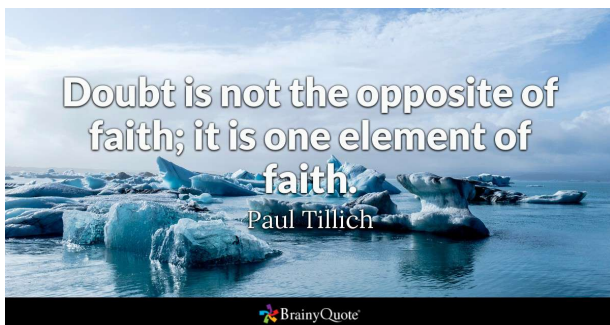
Let me share three short sharp quotes from the many you can find on this topic:

From a fellow Lay Reader who has gone through a long phase of doubt: *'I felt I had lost my faith completely, until I seemed to hear the voice of God saying: "Actually Kathleen, I don't mind whether you believe in me or not". And I realised that God was not some kind of insecure narcissist who somehow needed my faith and my worship. He just wanted me to know His love.'*

I heard this from Adrian Plass, but I think he was quoting somebody else: *'If you've never had a crisis of faith, something is probably missing in your life. Not the crisis: the faith.'*

Austin Fisher, an America pastor: *'People don't abandon faith because they have doubts. People abandon faith because they are made to think they're not allowed to have doubts.'*

That is when Christianity is at its weakest - when honest questions and uncertainties are met with fear, with condemnation, or rejection.



Don't be afraid of doubt. Not of your own doubts or of the doubts of others. God can cope with them. They are a natural part of faith, and He will not hold them against us. He's a patient God. If we can't see today the path he wants to guide us along, we may get fretful, but He won't. He'll wait until tomorrow and try to show us again.

And in the meantime, doubt need never be a barrier to worship. Bring your uncertainties with you, and lay them at His altar with your praises. That's what the Apostles did. 'Some of them had doubts - but they worshipped Him anyway'.