The Book of Signs

April 28th, 2019

Easter 2

Thomas believed in God. Thomas believed in Jesus; he even believed or wanted to believe Jesus was worth dying for (John 11:16). Thomas believed in resurrection, for he had seen two resurrections—the raising of the widow’s son at Nain and the raising of Lazarus at Bethany. Thomas believed in a great many things because he had the evidence to believe in them. It is also probable that Thomas believed a great many things without any evidence whatsoever—the parting of the Red Sea, the fire that answered the prayer of Elijah, the words of the prophets that spoke of a coming Messiah. And, like most human beings, Thomas probably believed numerous things he had no good reason to believe and should not have believed. Nevertheless, Thomas did not believe, despite the reports and his own previous experience, that Jesus had risen from the dead: “But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’” (John 20:24-25). Thomas did not say, “Unless I see the Lord…”; he said, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side…I will not believe”. One might praise Thomas for anticipating the rationalism of William Langdon Clifford, who once wrote: “"It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." (*The Ethics of Belief* 1879; [1877]). Sadly, Clifford could not live up to or die with this beautiful and noble maxim because his epitaph reads: “I was not, and was conceived. I loved and did a little work. I am not and grieve not.” Assuming he penned his own epitaph in the present tense before he died, one might say he was a bit presumptuous in commenting on his existential and emotional state in a future time beyond the grave; one could even say it was wrong of him to believe that, for he had no evidence. The question, however, that both Thomas and Clifford raise is: *what is sufficient evidence?* It could not be a mere number—Thomas had seen miracle after miracle. How many miracles make belief? It could not be a question of quality of evidence—for Thomas, if the gospels are accurate, saw miracles of the highest quality with his own eyes and spent three years with the person to whom they were attributed, which is a fairly long assignment for a journalist or investigator, and probably sufficient time to figure out if Jesus were an impostor or not. Not quantitative, not qualitative—what then? Miracles are less about evidence and nature than we would like to think. As C.S. Lewis once wrote: “There is no security against Miracle to be found by the study of Nature. She is not the whole of reality but only a part; for all we know she might be a small part. If that which is outside her wishes to invade her, she has, so far as we can see, no defences. But of course many who disbelieve in Miracles would admit all this. Their objection comes from the other side. They think that the Supernatural would not invade: they accuse those who say that it has done so of having a childish and unworthy notion of the Supernatural. They therefore reject all forms of Supernaturalism which assert such interference and invasions: and specially the form called Christianity, for in it the Miracles, or at least some Miracles, are more closely bound up with the fabric of the whole belief than any other…All the essentials of Hinduism would, I think, remain unimpaired if you subtracted the miraculous, and the same is almost true of Mohammedanism. But you cannot do that with Christianity. It is precisely the story of a great Miracle. A naturalistic Christianity leaves out all that is specifically Christian” (C.S. Lewis, *Miracles.* New York: HarperOne, 2000. 107-108). I have no idea why Thomas proposed his particular condition for belief in the resurrection. I could assume it reflected his state of mind, his sorrow and shock, his envy of the other apostles who saw the empty tomb and the risen Jesus when he had not. It could have been rage and shame. The one who had disappointed him so much, humiliating his belief and loyalty by dying a miserable death on the cross, would have to make amends by giving him assurances, physical and unquestionable assurances, that his belief had not been misguided or misplaced. Thomas was just broken.

Last year, I spoke of the “last beatitude” or the “forgotten beatitude” when Jesus says: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29). It is a strange beatitude for Jesus to pronounce, given that he just allowed Thomas an intimate post-mortem, post-resurrectionem handling of the body of evidence. It is also strange because John concludes this narrative section by pointing to the very evidence, the eyewitness reports, saying, “These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah” (John 20:31). A careless reading would make it seem as if Jesus and his evangelist were gaslighting Thomas and the reader. Which is it, Lord? Should we handle the evidence or not? What do you want? A closer reading might suggest that John has already introduced the theme of seeing and blindness in the sign performed at Siloam, when Jesus healed the man born blind, who said: “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25). Later, in that same account, we read the summation: “Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see’, your sin remains” (John 9:39-41). A lawyer or scientist may be given a report written in a foreign language, but if he does not read that foreign language, he does not understand the report and cannot say anything good or bad about it. For the lawyer or scientist to make a pronouncement on the report would be the height of absurdity and immorality. Likewise, a celebrated, conscientious doctor can present x-rays, ultrasounds, bloodwork, and numerous other kinds of evidence to try to convince a patient that he is sick and needs a right course of treatment, but all to no avail, if the patient has no faith in the doctor and thinks he knows better than a trained scientist or the evidence he presents. It is the same for divine things. What right have we, who are not divine, who cannot read the divine language, to dictate the terms of divine revelation? And when we do, we are no longer speaking about God at all, and therefore, not about love or truth, either. The moment we substitute anything for God, for faith, or for humility before revelation, we have lost God. The story of Thomas is not about data. It is about the real heart and the real mind that is either open to God or not: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe’” (John 20:29).

Our beliefs are not merely manufactured by evidence or interpretation or even experience. Otherwise, Thomas would not have doubted, trials would be considerably shorter, monographs would be easier to read, and relationships would be much simpler. What we see is a partially a reflection of the light that is within us. Jesus said: “‘The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!’” (Matthew 6:22-23). If you do not understand why somebody believes something, you should not merely consider the motivations that person has for his or her belief—you should also honestly consider your own motivations for denying that belief. Moreover, if you agree with something somebody believes, consider the same—is this agreement a good thing? Have our thoughts come from above, the above from which we claim to be born? (John 3). Beliefs are not born in a vacuum—they are related to the light within us and the wholeness of our eyes—which are not always whole. And the apostle Paul affirms this, when he says that humanity, in our ingratitude, exchanged the truth for a lie and worshipped decay instead of the living Creator—the result of which was that our reason was darkened: “For though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools” (Romans 1:21-22). As Paul would also say, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.’” (Romans 1:17); “For we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). It is not reason that builds faith; it is godly faith that builds reason. The world has never understood this and continues to resist this thought today, but it resists in vain: “The life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:4-5). To summarize, the heart that is right with God sees God. The heart that is not right with God will never see God. The heart that is not right with God, however, can ask God for help and be healed, and then that heart will see God. And that heart will see everything in the world in a new light, for Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12).

The resurrection gives light to the world because of *who* has risen, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God. Seeing comes from the glory of the One and Only, full of grace and truth (John 1). John Wesley once wrote the following: “When one is born of God, born of the Spirit, how the manner of his existence is changed! His whole soul is now sensible of God, and he can say, by sure experience, ‘You are about my bed and about my path.’ The Spirit or breath of God is immediately breathed into the newborn soul. The same *breath* that comes from God also returns to God. As it is continually received by faith, so it is continually rendered back by love, prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. Love, prayer, and praise are the breath of every soul that is truly born of God. By these, spiritual life is not only sustained but increased day by day. The *eyes* of his understanding are now open, seeing the One who is invisible. He clearly perceives the pardoning love of God toward him and all His exceeding great and precious promises. His *ears* are now opened, and the voice of God no longer calls in vain. He knows the voice of his Shepherd—he hears and obeys the heavenly calling. All his spiritual senses being now awakened, he has a clear communication with the invisible world. He now knows that the peace of God is: joy in the Holy Spirit and the love of God that is poured out in the hearts of those who believe. The veil is removed; there is nothing between the soul and the light, the knowledge and the love of God” (John Wesley, *How to Pray: The Best of John Wesley on Prayer*. Barbour Publishing, 2007. 56).

Thomas believed in the resurrection. Thomas believed in the resurrection the moment “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you” (John 20:26). Nevertheless, Jesus still invites Thomas to place his hands in the wounds: “‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’” (John 20:27). Maybe Jesus, symbolically, still makes this invitation today. This is no longer visual or forensic. It is kinesthetic, relational, and spiritual. This is a mystery. This is a different sermon altogether. This is the sermon I actually wanted to write and preach—but I was unable to because I do not understand it! *Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness* (Timothy 3:16). I do not understand it enough to say much about it. What does it mean to put your hands into the wounds of the Risen Christ? For a moment, set aside all of your experience, your knowledge, your status, your issues, your objections, your grievances, the world and its chaos and great debates and controversies. Abandon everything you feel and know. Close your eyes. And now ask yourself: what does it mean to put my hands into the wounds in the hands and feet and side of the crucified and risen Jesus? Maybe it is a terrible, awesome, frightful and humbling thing to come Jesus personally. Maybe it is the most terrible thing to encounter on earth and in your life. There is no greater sign on earth than to see and feel the hands and feet that poured out the blood of the Redeemer. And there is no greater moment than the moment, which becomes your whole life, when you say: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28); “We have seen the Lord” (John 20:25). Maybe the signs of sorrow must be read before our mourning turns to joy and our blindness to sight: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31). The book of signs and the book of glory in John can only be read through these wounds—not just the wounds of the cross, but also the wounds retained in the resurrection body. They are its alphabet. All the gospels end with the resurrection because all the gospels, the gospel itself, began with the resurrection, because our true lives begin and end in the resurrection of our Lord and our God.