

# 19<sup>th</sup> April 2009 Sermon

## ‘Seeing is Believing...(?)’ [PART 1]

**Readings** 1 John 1:1-10  
John 20:19-31

*“Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.’”*

Compare this invitation to Thomas with Jesus’ correction to Mary, that we heard in our reading last week: *“Do not hold on to me...”*

Why is it that Mary is prohibited to touch, while Thomas, is invited to literally probe the wounds of the risen Jesus?

Although these events seem contradictory, both involve Jesus’ self-revelation to his followers.

I mentioned last week that Jesus’ words to Mary indicate that he is revealing to her his new bodyliness; now that he is risen, he is not available in the way he was. His availability is no longer limited to the normal personal, physical contact; his resurrection body is such that Jesus is available in a whole new way.

If that is the revelation necessary in Jesus’ relationship with Mary, what is the revelation Jesus gives to Thomas?

Poor Thomas is traditionally labelled ‘Doubting Thomas’. He had explicitly stated his refusal to accept the testimony of his fellow disciples about the appearance of the risen Jesus.

When Jesus appears again, this time with Thomas present, his invitation to examine his wounds is a revelation about consistency with his previous body.

Jesus revealed to Mary the **new nature** of his resurrection body.  
Jesus revealed to Thomas the **consistent nature** of his resurrection body.  
Jesus was not a ghostly spirit, he is recognised as the same one whom they knew, and whom they knew had been crucified (and has the scars to prove it).

The response of Thomas is one given for the first time in the NT: “*My Lord and my God!*” This response indicates not only Thomas’ belief that Jesus is risen from the dead, but that his appearance as such reveals Jesus’ identity. Because only the power of the Almighty can raise Jesus from the dead, Thomas grasps the true identity of Jesus: “*My Lord and my God!*”

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What about us? What about us?

It’s all very well for Thomas, old ‘doubting Thomas’ who has his scepticism directly addressed. But what about us?

We are left with a problem.

How can we believe without seeing what Thomas did?

How can we be expected to share in the response of belief “*My Lord and my God!*” ?

Jesus says “how blessed are those who do not see and yet believe”.

But do we not *yearn* to have the benefit of the first-hand examination that Thomas had?

Thomas didn’t have to live in a time so committed to empirical science as ours to know the advantage of examining something with your own eyes, touching something with your own hands, to establish its reality.

Can we reconcile this lack of first-hand experience? Is belief reasonable when we didn’t see all that Jesus’ contemporary disciples did?

As well as experiencing Jesus’ resurrection appearances, the disciples experienced Jesus’ conduct and teaching – surely beneficial elements toward belief in his true identity?

Those of us who were not ‘contemporaries’ of Jesus are surely at a disadvantage?

Christianity makes no bones (no pun intended!) about the fact that belief is predicated upon actual historical events. Rather than merely a philosophical belief, Christianity insists that the historical events of Jesus’ life on earth are decisive –they matter.

The particular events of his life, death and resurrection, as grounded in the specificity of human history are essential to faith in God who is

revealed in the human life of this figure. God is acting and promising something eternal – in the life of this person.

The truth of God is not a misty philosophy; the truth of God is a person. God has revealed himself, Christianity says, decisively in this person: Jesus of Nazareth.

If we could have seen the miracles Jesus performed,  
if we could have heard his teaching first-hand  
...wouldn't that be such a huge benefit for our own belief?

The Enlightenment philosopher, Gotthold Lessing, describes what he considers the benefit of being a contemporary of Jesus:

*“If I had lived at the time of Christ, then of course the prophecies fulfilled in his person would have made me pay great attention to him. If I had actually seen him do miracles; if I had no cause to doubt that these were true miracles...I would have gained so much confidence that I would willingly have submitted my intellect to his, and I would have believed him in all things in which indisputable experiences did not tell against him.”<sup>1</sup>*

Without being contemporaries with Jesus at that time is it necessary for us (in order to grasp the eternal truth of God; to believe in Jesus as our Lord and our God) to focus on the historical evidence about Jesus?  
Is that how we are to approach belief in Jesus?

In other words, to believe in Jesus do we need to become...historians?

The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, in his own day was aware of this problem, and that a lot of thought was being expended on establishing empirical grounding for a 'reasonable' belief in Jesus.

Kierkegaard knew that peoples' beliefs increasingly depended on this sort of first-hand experience. If such experiences couldn't be had directly, as in the case of belief in Jesus, then it was necessary to do all that is possible to establish credible historical evidence along these lines.

Kierkegaard saw many intelligent people take up this endeavour to try and approach belief vicariously through the contemporaries of Jesus; to try and establish confidence in the events told of Jesus, in order to believe in him.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Lessing, 'On the Proof of Spirit and of Power' *Theological Writings*, p.51ff.

However, Kierkegaard had serious problems with this approach.

In fact, Kierkegaard claimed that to be a contemporary of Jesus gives no meaningful advantage in believing in him. Jesus' own disciples had no greater benefit for their belief than us.

Here's why...

Even if we were able to establish all the historical facts about Jesus, are we necessarily moved to belief by historical facts?

Are we compelled by data to respond by trusting everything to Jesus?

Are we likely to dedicate all that we are and hope to be because of a comprehensive collection of historical facts?

Don't forget, there were those who experienced first-hand the actions and words of Jesus who remained unmoved. The NT is clear that many contemporaries of Jesus saw him and heard him and yet did not believe.

We might think (like Lessing) that if we had been there, if we had seen for ourselves, we would believe in Jesus. After all it's a common assumption that 'seeing is believing'.

But perhaps being a contemporary of Jesus would have been a disadvantage to belief. If we looked upon him with our own eyes what would we have seen? Would we have seen the Son of God, our Saviour, our Lord? Or would we have seen someone that looks very ordinary; a man like any other man.

The NT tells us that contemporaries of Jesus became incensed when they heard some of his claims about himself:

*"Is not this Joseph's son?"* (Lk 4:22)

*"Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?"* (Matt 13:55)

Kierkegaard insists that the Christian claims about Jesus' true identity will not be proven by historical fact.

Historical inquiry, which claims the virtues of 'detachment' and objectivity cannot recognise God's revelation as Christian faith does.

Let's take a silly example to flesh this out.

As it's shortly after Easter, let's think about the event of Jesus' resurrection –

perhaps one of the more difficult aspects for belief in Jesus. What sort of historical data would we require? What evidence would give us confidence?

Imagine if there had been a hidden video camera in the tomb where the body of Jesus had been laid.

Would the resulting video footage of what happened early on the Sunday morning give us what we want?

Surely footage of some change in the body of Jesus would give us conclusive proof of the resurrection and therefore the identity of Jesus...?

But would it?

Even that footage (whatever it showed) would be open to different interpretations. Some might say that after a lie-down for a couple of days, Jesus regained his strength.

Regardless of what might be considered irrefutable, no so-called 'evidence' (be it video footage, or an empty tomb) can establish the Christian claim that God is the agent of Jesus' resurrection.

Even if it were available, historical data does not have the capacity to establish belief in Jesus; the claims about Jesus identity lie beyond its reach.

It is a matter for faith.

Associate Prof. of Theology Murray Rae adds:

"It is not a matter of gritting one's teeth and believing what cannot be proven, but rather of being drawn into relation with God through the mediation of his Son and Spirit. In this sense the risen Christ is the agent of his own revelation. He is the one who in the power of the Spirit and sent by the Father, discloses himself to us as the risen one. This is precisely what happens in the [gospel accounts of the disciples' recognition] of the risen Christ."<sup>2</sup>

That is what Jesus is doing with Thomas; disclosing himself as the risen one. It is a matter of relationship. Interestingly, although the Caravaggio painting in the order of service shows Thomas (rather gruesomely) sticking his finger into Jesus' wound... the reading does not tell us if Thomas actually did this: "*Jesus said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'* Thomas answered him, '*My Lord and my God!*'"

Maybe Jesus' self-revelation didn't require the physical proof Thomas had demanded a week earlier.

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<sup>2</sup> M. Rae, *History and Hermeneutics* (2005), p.80.

Despite how helpful we think historical inquiry might be, it is extremely limited when it comes to believing the claims of Christianity. Historical inquiry may well produce **admiration** for Jesus, for the compassion he showed or the wisdom of his teaching, but it will not produce Christians. Historical inquiry, by its very nature, will leave unanswered the invitation to take up one's cross and follow him (Luke 14:27). And it is only in response to that invitation that people become Christians.

Kierkegaard says that we can actually be contemporaries of Jesus – where 'contemporary' means 'with in time'. To know Jesus means that he must know you. By the Spirit, Jesus gives us the relationship necessary to believe in him. It is the Spirit of Christ that is necessary for us to follow.

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Next week we will reflect on the story of the two on the road to Emmaus and how their belief in the risen Jesus was enabled.

By way of concluding these thoughts for today, I want to make a subtle but significant distinction. Belief in Jesus is not our initiative, but his initiative.

Like Thomas, our belief is a response, a response to the self-disclosure by Jesus.

We do not come to Jesus, saying: "I will follow you."  
Jesus comes to us, saying: "Follow me."

*"How blessed are those who do not see and yet believe".*

Amen.