



Sermon: - 8th April 2018

Weighing up the Evidence

Acts 4: 32 - 35; John 20: 19 – 31

It's not fair! I wish I had a pound for every time I heard one or other of my children utter these words over the years when they were growing up! And I'm sure that the parents among you, as well as the grandparents, will have heard these words time without number.

It's not fair!

Of course, usually whatever it is that has made them complain is not in the slightest unfair. It seems to be a given of childhood that children think that they are being more harshly treated than their siblings. Each thinks that they are the one who is hard done to, unjustly treated. We know, as parents and adults, that we are being perfectly fair, but children don't see it from our perspective, and so children the world over, and throughout history, repeat this litany, It's not fair!

It is the natural complaint of a child. It's not fair!

However, if the apostle Thomas were to cry, "*It's not fair!*" then I would have some sympathy for him.

That Jesus chose to appear to the disciples in the Upper Room on the evening of that first Easter Day when Thomas alone was absent does seem

a bit unfair. Poor Thomas!

But the next week, when Jesus appeared again, he was there. He saw for himself the truth of what the others had already seen and experienced, and so he too believes!

And yet he is dubbed "**Doubting Thomas**", and that label sticks forevermore.

Thomas would have every reason to feel that this is not fair! It is not fair that the church has remembered him for his doubts. Because, the fact is that Thomas is not any more of a doubter than the rest of the disciples. They all doubted before they were presented with the evidence. Thomas was one of the doubting eleven, no worse than the rest of them, and possibly even more

courageous, since he was out and about when they were sitting in a locked room. It's not fair! No, Thomas; it is not!

Rather, I suspect the experience of the other ten disciples would be similar to Thomas's; all of them would tell of initial fear and doubt and then the reality of the risen Christ breaking through. Their experience of the risen Christ as a transformative presence, bringing them from sorrow to joy, from fear to faith. When we hear Thomas's story this morning, it is actually a picture of the other disciples' stories, and it could also be your story and my story.

John tells us that the disciples were behind locked doors because of their fear. But, as we see in our Bible reading this morning, the Risen Jesus comes into the fear and anxiety of the disciples, and of Thomas, and speaks his word of peace. 'Peace be with you' he says to them. Twice! And peace be with you, he says to you too.

We all have doubts, don't we? Not just Thomas, but all the disciples. Not just the disciples but you and me too!

We all have fears, don't we? Not just Thomas, but all the disciples. Not just the disciples but you and me too!

We all have anxieties, don't we? Not just Thomas, but all the disciples. Not just the disciples but you and me too!

But in his graciousness, our Risen Lord enters into our doubt, our fears and our anxieties and offers us the experience of his risen presence. '*Do not doubt but believe*' he says to us.

Jesus invites us to choose faith... to choose to believe... not blind faith, but faith based on the evidence before us and the experience of his presence. The faith that affirms 'Christ is Risen'! Faith that, with Thomas cries out, '*My Lord, and my God*'!

But let us be clear – and realistic! This is faith in the face and in the midst of doubt. The evidence of the resurrection is not proof positive.

There are some who claim that the evidence that Jesus rose from the dead is unquestionable and conclusive and beyond all possible doubt. But it can't be. We know that because in today's Gospel reading even those who had the evidence of their own eyes and ears and hands were still a mixture of faith and doubt.

And, indeed, those who claim to be able to explain exactly how Jesus rose or the nature of his Risen body are claiming far more than we can deduce from the biblical evidence. Jesus calls us to believe, but it is a real mistake to think that faith in the resurrection of Jesus means that that faith is based on certain unquestionable facts about this event.

Faith in the resurrection of Jesus is not about being certain about any specific facts regarding nature of the resurrection. Rather it is about having our own encounter with him, being transformed by him, trusting him and following him. Like Thomas, and indeed all the disciples, many of those who encounter him and follow him today struggle with all sorts of unresolved intellectual doubts about the historical content or precise nature of the resurrection of Jesus. But the doubts are not the issue. Clearly, in the story about Thomas, his doubts were not an issue for Jesus. And I don't think today that our doubts are an issue for Jesus.

But there are two equal and opposite dangers here. On the one hand, we cannot honestly claim that the evidence of Jesus' resurrection is unquestionably conclusive, nor that we know exactly what happened or how it happened on that first Easter Sunday. On the other hand, neither is it possible for us to pretend (as some do) that there is no evidence at all. For there is a great deal of circumstantial evidence... in the strange but compelling accounts of the empty tomb. If it was not empty, why did the authorities not just produce the body and put an end to all this before it began? The number of records regarding the appearances of and encounters with the Risen Jesus. The otherwise inexplicable transformation in the disciples. And, as Sherlock Holmes said, "when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?" I made a brief reference last week to the evidence for the resurrection being in changed lives. For me that is the most compelling evidence.

As we said last week, they may have been uneducated fishermen, but they knew that dead people didn't come back to life. They were terrified of the Romans, as we saw in Peter's denial, as we heard in the reading this morning where they are cowering behind closed doors for fear of the Jews. Yet these same terrified disciples emerged from behind their closed doors to go out and transform their world! And we saw more evidence in our reading from the Acts this morning. Surely, only a bone deep conviction that Jesus had risen would have persuaded people to share their worldly goods with one another! Why else would people give away their money and their possessions than that they had an unshakeable belief in the reality of the resurrection, and the conviction that this risen Jesus would have wanted them to behave this way. This group of people

changed the habits of a lifetime in response to what had happened to them that Easter, surely the only explanation is an unshakeable conviction of the resurrection of their Lord. The evidence of changed lives.

None of this may tell us exactly what happened that first Easter day, nor how we should understand the empty tomb or the risen appearances of Jesus. To return to a sermon of a couple of weeks ago, God's thought are not our thoughts, neither are his ways our ways. Of course we can't understand! But if our ability to fully understand is limited and if the evidence may not be conclusive, it seems to me that it is compelling and persuasive. I would suggest that at the very least there is enough evidence for us to join with Thomas in having faith and belief.

As we read the accounts, as we listen to the testimony of those who met with him, and as we weigh up the evidence – even if we still have doubts, even if we still have our fears, even if we remain uncertain about the precise events of that first Easter Day - yet the evidence invites us to humbly acknowledge that we may not be able to answer every question the Resurrection poses nor explain exactly what happened or how.

However, there is one thing that is of significant importance here. In the final analysis, having weighed up the evidence we still have to choose. Faith is not something that happens to us, it is not something we have no control over, it is something we can choose. We choose to believe. And today I suggest, on the basis of the evidence, we can reasonably choose faith and allow the Risen Jesus to encounter us behind the locked doors of our fear, our grief, our doubt, our anxiety. And, just as for Thomas, it is in choosing faith that we will encounter the Risen Christ, and, just as for Thomas, it is this encounter that convinces; this encounter which transforms.

Jesus said to Thomas '*Do not doubt, but believe*'. Thomas answers him '*My Lord, and my God*'

Jesus says to us, do not doubt, but believe. How do we answer him?