

Faithful Thomas – doubt and mission

The way a Christian community responds to doubt is central to its effectiveness in mission

The Mullers, 4/8/2024

The Apostle Thomas isn't mentioned after Acts 1, but there's good (though not completely conclusive) evidence that he brought the gospel to India, founding a denomination (the St Thomas Christians) that still exists today. According to some traditions, he was martyred in Chennai, killed by a spear.

Most people think Christianity in South Asia is the result of missionaries from England and other mostly European countries. There's some truth in that, but in fact Christianity in India predates Christianity in England, probably by several hundred years.

He's often called 'doubting Thomas', but the legacy he leaves behind is not the fruit of a life defined by doubt. Here we reflect on how Thomas's response to his doubts may have contributed to his ability to declare God's glory among the nations later in life, and also how this relates to the way the Bible talks about doubt more generally.

Note: There are way more discussion questions here than you'll realistically get through in one session. This is so leaders can pick the questions they think will be most helpful for their group.

Read Psalm 73

This was written by Asaph, one of the senior temple musicians under King David (see 1 Chron 16:4-6) – or in modern terms, a worship leader. It's the first Psalm in Book 3, in which Asaph is the main songwriter (David wrote most of Books 1 and 2).

In summary, the first half of the Psalm (v2-14) is a raw, no-filter account of Asaph's struggles with doubt, specifically doubting God's justice. The remainder shares how he resolved his doubts, and where this process led him.

Discussion questions:

- a) Would you consider this Psalm a 'worship song'? Why or why not?
- b) What fears or concerns might Asaph have had about writing and performing this song?
How might others have reacted when they first heard it? (see v 15)
- c) How are the doubts expressed by Asaph similar or different to those commonly faced by believers today, or to common objections to faith from non-Christians?
- d) What can we learn from the fact that Psalm 73 and similar texts (e.g. 1 Kings 19, Job 19, Jonah 4, and lots of other Psalms) are in the Bible?

- e) Is open discussion of doubt more or less common and accepted in Christian communities today than in the Bible?
- f) What was the end result of Asaph wrestling with and resolving his doubts? (see v 28)

Read John 20:19-29 (or if enough time, read from the start of chapter 20 for context and because it's awesome)

There's no question that doubt is an important part of Thomas's story. Discussion of this passage tends to focus on what Thomas did wrong (and Jesus does gently rebuke him in v 29). However, it's important not to forget what Thomas does right – I believe these things contributed to him going on to be so effective in mission in India.

1. **Don't bottle it – Thomas openly expresses his doubts** - v 25

The way he chooses to express them may not be kind or helpful, but at least he's honest about what he's thinking, and this creates the context in which he's able to resolve his doubts.

2. **Stay connected – Thomas remains in community (and remains welcome in community)** - v 26

Despite the massive differences in how Thomas understood the events of that first Easter weekend compared to the other disciples, he's still with them when Jesus returns the following week.

3. **Don't shift the goalposts – Thomas takes new evidence on its merits** – v 27-28

When Jesus appears and presents Thomas with the exact evidence he asked for, Thomas doesn't make excuses or ask for further information. He draws the only conclusion that's reasonable from the evidence in front of him.

And here's something Thomas **failed** to do that I don't think gets talked about often enough.

4. **Doubt your doubts**

A doubt is not just a neutral question with no context, it's a fragment of another world view that's vying for your attention. It's allowed to do that, but you should subject it to the same scrutiny that you gave your existing worldview before you adopted it. The important question is not 'can I answer every question/objection about Christianity?' (though I believe there are answers, if we're willing to look patiently and carefully for them). The question we should be asking ourselves is "which worldview provides the best explanation for the world around me?"

Related to this, we also need to be wary of the idea in wider culture that 'seeing is believing'. Almost everything we know is based on the witness of others, and learning from

others is the foundation of science, culture, business and just about everything else worthwhile about our culture. Of course, we need to be careful to discern which witnesses are reliable, but, as Jesus himself says, “blessed are those who believe without seeing.”

Discussion questions:

- a) What is similar and different about Thomas and Asaph’s journeys to resolve their doubts? (there are at least two similarities – compare Ps 73:17 with John 20:26, and Ps 73:28 with what we know of Thomas’s life after what’s recorded in the Bible)
- b) Has there been a time in your own journey of faith when you felt you had to see something for yourself to believe it (like Thomas in v25)? Looking back, was this a reasonable or logical position to take, or should you have placed more weight on information from others?
- c) Think about a time when you’ve struggled with doubt. In what ways did you handle them better than Thomas did? In what ways could you learn from his example?
- d) Do you view your own doubts as threats, or opportunities to grow in your knowledge of God and the Bible?
- e) How easy would you find it to remain gracious and welcoming to a seeker/believer who expressed their doubts in a similar tone to Thomas in v25?
- f) How welcome do you think they would feel in your presence and/or in your church?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-10

Note: 1 Corinthians was written in approx. 53/54 AD (i.e. about 20 years after the events Paul is describing). As he says, many of the people he refers to are still alive at the time of writing, and it’s almost certain that people in the room in Corinth when the letter was first read would have known some of those named/referred to personally.

Discussion questions:

- a) What is the basis for Paul’s claims about the resurrection?
- b) What would have happened to the early church if Paul’s claims hadn’t been backed up by the people he referred to?
- c) What have you personally witnessed that gives you confidence in the existence and goodness of God, and the Christian story generally?
- d) What can we learn from all of this about how to most effectively share our faith with others?