

WHY CERTAINTY CAN BE A TRAP¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Second Sunday of Easter, 24 April 2022

Traditionally, today has been called Low Sunday, presumably because, after the high point of Easter Day, we have returned to more sedate liturgies. I don't like that traditional name because today has its own status. There's another misnomer as well today. That is the slur cast upon "Doubting Thomas". As the gospel text acknowledges, he is us. John anticipates the problems that we will face when, in the absence of the risen one, we will be challenged to believe what we have not seen.

I expect that, in our minds, we are somewhat relieved that Thomas responds as he does. What if he had acted otherwise? What if he had prejudged the report from his colleagues and not turned up that day? What if he had packed the whole thing in? Our relief is that we don't have to take his doubt too seriously. All is resolved.

That would be a mistake. Not only is doubt a necessary part of faith, its opposite, certainty, can often be a trap. You may have read my article in the latest *Connections*.² In it, I recounted some details of my Methodist ordination and how I got into trouble by saying that my theological education had reduced the number of things that I believed in but also had increased my commitment to the remaining beliefs. I had previously had too many certainties and too few doubts.

Some of you will have participated in the Lent study, *The Difficult Words of Jesus*, by Amy-Jill Levine. Those difficult words included texts about wealth, eternal damnation and slavery. I think that Levine frustrated some of us by not giving clear answers, directing us to what we should believe and increasing our certainty. Of course, if the answers were so clear, the words would be less difficult. At the end of her book, she says:

If we look at the Bible as a book that helps us ask the right questions rather than an answer sheet, we honour both the Bible and the traditions that hold it sacred.

A mature faith wrestles with [difficult] questions, and it wrestles with the texts that prompt the questions. The courageous move is to address our problematic texts rather than to ignore them. The pastoral move is to acknowledge that they have caused harm and can continue to do so, ... The theological move is to let the Holy Spirit guide our readings so that we can find life abundant, rather than fear and hatred.³

Levine was not worried that people found some texts hard but she was concerned "when people don't find anything in the Bible that is at all problematic; I am even more worried when they dismiss the questions that others raise".

Returning to Doubting Thomas, Rowan Williams says:

¹ Readings: Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 118:14-29; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

² 'Behold the Servant of the Lord: or, An Eye Single to the Glory of God', *St James' Parish Connections*, April/May 2022, pp. 14-17, [St-James-Connections-April-May-2022-WEB.pdf \(sjks.org.au\)](https://www.sjks.org.au/St-James-Connections-April-May-2022-WEB.pdf)

³ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Difficult words of Jesus*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2021, pp. 151-152

... what Thomas is being invited to believe in ... is *the riseness of the crucified Jesus*, and his renewed material contact with his friends. Thomas' failure is not in misunderstanding the nature of resurrection but in demanding a special, individual assurance of it: he wants a proof other than the testimony of the group of believers.

That is, Thomas demanded to be more certain than other believers, amongst whom we count ourselves. Why can certainty sometimes be a trap? We might be tempted to think that everything said in the Bible is self-interpreting, so that we can rely on its literal meanings. In the Preface to a series of theological commentaries on the Bible, the editors refer to the work of the second century bishop Irenaeus.⁴ In his work, *Against Heresies*,⁵ he likens the scriptures to

a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully coloured tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out.⁶

The Preface also refers to Origen who, quoting a Jewish scholar, said that

the whole divinely inspired scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open.⁷

These comments suggest that we should approach scripture and, as a result, our theological conclusions, with an open mind; that we should seek a word for our time, a word that might be different from that appropriate to times past. As Desmond Tutu is reported to have said:

There is no shaft of light that comes from heaven that says "Okay, my son or my daughter, you are right." You have to hold on to it by the skin of your teeth, and hope that there is going to be vindication on the other side.⁸

Just to be clear, I am not arguing against certainty. I am quite certain about our fundamental beliefs: the existence of God, the incarnation of Our Lord, his death and resurrection; the Trinity ... I could go on. For some of them, however, I have no satisfactory explanation. Like John Wesley, I believe in the doctrines, not the explanations for them. I am prepared to accept mystery.⁹

⁴ [Irenaeus - Wikipedia](#)

⁵ [CHURCH FATHERS: Against Heresies, I.8 \(St. Irenaeus\) \(newadvent.org\)](#)

⁶ Thomas Joseph White OP. *Exodus* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible), Baker Publishing Group.

⁷ [The Philocalia of Origen \(1911\) pp. 1-237. English translation \(tertullian.org\)](#)

⁸ [The Will of God: How to Know It? | Vance Morgan \(patheos.com\)](#)

⁹ John Wesley—Sermon 55—On the Trinity. There are three that bear record in heaven: And these three are One. I believe this fact also, (if I may use the expression,) that God is Three and One. But the manner how I do not comprehend and I do not believe it. Now in this, in the manner, lies the mystery; and so it may; I have no concern with it: It is no object of my faith: I believe just so much as God has revealed, and no more. But this, the manner, he has not revealed; therefore, I believe nothing about it. But would it not be absurd in me to deny the fact, because I do not understand the manner That is, to reject what God has revealed, because I do not

But, in our contemporary church environment, we are called upon to be certain about things that we might and should doubt. We are called upon to accept certain doctrines about women and what they can or cannot do in church. We are called upon to accept assertions about marriage that exclude some committed relationships from our acceptance, even though we have experienced their integrity and love.

How are we to resolve such questions? The first requirement is humility, accepting that we do not know everything and that we may be mistaken. That is the lesson that Thomas learnt when he was confronted by the person of the risen Christ.

As Simone Weil said:

The will of God. How to know it? If we make a quietness within ourselves, if we silence all desires and opinions and if with love, without formulating any words, we bind our whole soul to think 'Thy will be done', the thing which after that we feel sure we should do (even though in certain respects we may be mistaken) is the will of God. For if we ask him for bread he will not give us a stone.¹⁰

Humility leads us to prayer and contemplation, which, in turn, lead us to discernment, to an internal understanding of what we should do in concrete situations. Karl Barth is reported to have said, "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible."¹¹ Our discernment is part and parcel of our understanding of our world.

Above all, we must not imagine that we can capture God. Despite wanting to do exactly that, Thomas found that he was the one who was captured.

In the words of another Thomas, R S Thomas:

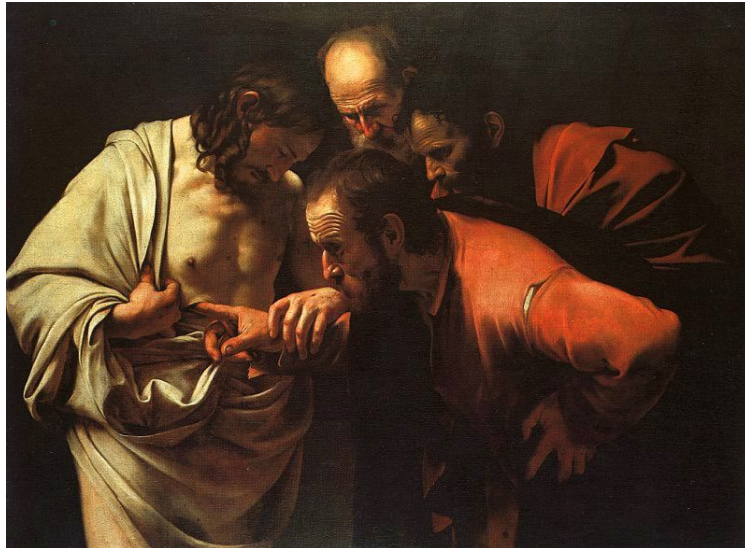
Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.¹²

comprehend what he has not revealed. (para. 15) [The Wesley Center Online: Sermon 55 - On The Trinity \(nnu.edu\)](#)

¹⁰ [simone weil – necessity and obedience | fleurmach](#)

¹¹ Time Magazine, May 1, 1966 [On Barth, the Bible and the Newspaper | sinibaldo.wordpress.com](#)

¹² [Via Negativa by R S Thomas - Famous poems, famous poets. - All Poetry](#)



The Incredulity of St Thomas (c1620)
Michelangelo Angelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610)
Sanssouci Picture Gallery, Potsdam