

Sermon 19 January 2020

A Time To Doubt – Why It’s Okay To Be a Doubter

Readings: Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

FSHS

Introduction

The first part of my reflection will be about Epiphany, with a focus on our gospel reading for today.

The second part of my reflection will be about the place of Doubt in our Faith. And Why it’s okay to have doubts about our faith. This part of my reflection relies heavily on an article written by Philip Yancey, about Faith and Doubt. I hope you will find Yancey’s insights as useful as I have found them.

And I’m going to try and do all this in about ten minutes, without putting you to sleep.

Traditionally, on the second Sunday of Epiphany, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. The lectionary readings follow a logical sequence. The Birth of Christ is followed by the ‘revelation’, or the ‘epiphany’, of ‘who Jesus really is’.

The Wisemen saw Jesus as a new king, and they returned to their own lands to spread the stories of the hope they saw in the new-born baby Jesus.

At aged twelve, we catch another glimpse of Jesus in the Temple, a child prodigy among the learned doctors of the Jewish Faith. In this incident, Jesus refers to God as ‘My father’. Another revelation/epiphany about ‘who Jesus is’.

In our gospel reading today from John 1:29–42, ‘who Jesus is’, is again revealed through an epiphany experienced by John the Baptist. In John’s epiphany, John saw the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove and hovering over him. And John’s epiphany leads John to publicly declare that Jesus is none other than, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world’. Twice John calls Jesus, “The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”.

John the Baptist, despite his rugged appearance and his unusual outdoor ministry, was the son of Zechariah, a Temple priest. John grew up in the Temple environment. The sacrificial lamb was a familiar and essential part of the Temple worship for John and for his Jewish audience. When he declared Jesus to be the sacrificial lamb who takes away the sins of the world. The image of the sacrificial lamb would’ve resonated with his predominantly Jewish audience.

I know that the theory/doctrine of the Atonement has meant a lot to Christians ever since, from Paul, to Augustine, to Luther, to Calvin, to Billy Graham and many others.

But for many Moderns, the doctrine of the Atonement – Jesus dying as a kind of scapegoat for our sins – is anathema. A primitive expression of tribal religion that began long before Abraham, when human sacrifice to appease the gods, was a legitimate expression of faith.

Today, I think that most Christians and Jews, focus on the love of God, rather than seeing God as someone who needs to be appeased by our sacrifices. Sacrifice has come to mean, 'giving our best' to God. Loving God with everything we have. Physically and Spiritually: Body, soul, mind and spirit. This is the 'sacrifice' that love demands of us.

What strikes me most about the story of Jesus' baptism, and John's declarations (about who Jesus is), is 'the doubts' that John began to have about Jesus, towards the end of John's life.

You'll remember a few weeks ago we read the story of John in prison, sending some messengers to ask Jesus if he was in fact the One they had been waiting for, or whether they should be expecting someone else?

'Doubts about God' is a subject that not many preachers like to think about - let alone, preach about. But it's something we're all familiar with.

This week, (as I've said) I came across an article by Philip Yancey, that I found very helpful in my own thinking around the subject of 'Doubting God'. I've acknowledged the article, "A Time to Doubt", in my "Acknowledgements" at the end of the Order of service. And I recommend that you 'google' it and read it. Or I can give you a copy.

Philip Yancey is an American Christian writer, born in 1949 (70 yrs. old). Older and bolder. He was raised in the American South and describes himself as, 'A recovering Fundamentalist'. His books have sold more than 15 million copies in many languages. This morning USA Time, he is preaching at St Andrews Presbyterian Church, Newport Beach, California, according to his Facebook Page.

In his excellent article, "A Time To Doubt", Yancey very candidly and very honestly deals with the subject of 'Doubting God'.

Yancey talks about his own doubts, and about the stubborn power of Doubt that is acknowledged even in the Bible itself. The writers of Job, the Psalmist, Ecclesiastes, Habakkuk and Lamentations and all the Wisdom writers all struggled with the same arguments that the modern-day atheists struggle with when it comes to belief in God.

In the Old Testament, the children of Israel, even after their miraculous liberation, longed to go back to the security of slavery Egypt. They even fashioned pagan idols to worship, in place of the God who freed them.

In the gospels, the raising of Lazarus, and the healing of a man born blind, are met with criticism from the religious people of the time because they violate the sabbath. Religion suppressing belief rather than supporting it.

Even after the resurrection, some of the disciples could not bring themselves to believe. Thomas is often held up as the ultimate 'doubter', but he was not the only one, nor was he the last Doubter in the Church that grew out of Jesus' life and teachings.

Yancey refers to Martin Luther, the great reformer who wrote the hymn; 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God', who also wrote (in his medieval framework),: "For more than a week I was close to the gates of death and hell. I trembled in all my members. Christ was wholly lost". He later reflected, 'The content of the depressions was always the same, the loss of faith that God is good and that he is good to me.'

Yancey mentions that ten years after her death, "Mother Theresa made the news again, when a book recording her doubts was published, against her wishes. In the book, she spoke of the 'dryness', 'darkness, 'loneliness' and 'torture' she had undergone. "In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss – of God not wanting me – of God not being God – of God not really existing. Amazingly, apart from a few brief remissions she lived in a state of darkness for 60 years, the entire time she was serving the poor and dying."

Yancey comes to some conclusions about Faith and Doubting (that are worth noting, and worth sharing)

The first of his conclusions is:

1. Doubt is a normal part of the human condition.

All the great saints and all believers experience times when we are plagued by doubts, but faith has an equally stubborn power.

We can all remember moments in our lives when God has come to us in a special way, to give us the gift of faith. You will have your own story of the special moments in your life when God gave you the gift of faith – or a reminder of God's love for you.

2. A Sense of Aloneness Feeds Doubt.

Yancey suggests that at such times of Aloneness, we should seek out Doubt Companions. Compassionate listeners who will not judge us but walk beside us with their strength.

3. Doubt and Faith Coexist. Certainty, not Doubt, is faith's opposite.

The struggle between doubt and faith often leads to spiritual growth. There is a difference between doubt and unbelief. Quoting John Hammond, Yancey writes: "Doubt is can't believe; unbelief is won't believe; Doubt is honesty; unbelief is obstinacy. Doubt is looking for light; unbelief is content with darkness".

In dealing with Doubters, Jesus himself did not condemn them, or pile on the guilt, he gently accepted them as love accepts people. He accepted every Doubter with the same compassion, as though he was the Lamb of God, who could remove their sins, and the sins of the world.

Perhaps that is a good model for the church, to welcome the doubter, to be a good Doubt Companion. To live as though Doubt and Faith are twins – to say by our actions, that it's okay to have doubts. In fact it may lead to a new beginning.

FSHS Amen.

Acknowledgement:

Philip Yancey, January 2020 – Article "A Time to Doubt" in "Philip Yancey – Own Blog".