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Sunday April 18th (Easter) 2021

Are you sure?

Habakkuk 2: 1-4 & Gospel of John 20: 19-29

We've just had the 2021 Census, the ten yearly analysis of so many aspects of British life. Since 2001, it has included a question about religion. In that first year about 72% of people said that their religion was Christianity. Ten years later it was 60%. This year it may be less than half of the population. Over these twenty years Islam has risen from under 3% to four and a half. Last time nearly 400 thousand people wrote in "Jedi"! But the most interesting category may be "No Religion", which rose from 16% to 26% and inevitably higher again when this year's results are announced. Humanists UK say that the figures show that we are no longer a Christian country, and even more so when many of those who tick "Christianity" admit that they do not believe much of what the Church teaches.

Now as with all statistics you can play around with such figures to make whatever point you wish. When in times past the overwhelming majority would have ticked "Christianity" what did they actually believe and how far did it influence how they behaved? Today there is other evidence to take into consideration, such as the 2017 YouGov poll in which less than 40% were prepared to say that they did not believe in either God or a higher spiritual power. And in the general population 42% say that they pray, and 20% claim to attend worship services at least once a month. And all the surveys show that people with religious faith are much more likely to be involved with caring and charitable activities.

We will see what effect the pandemic will have on these trends. Over a quarter of the population have taken part in online worship since the first Lockdown. Will they now start coming to church, or will the continued streaming of services reduce attendance even further? Will a much closer shave with the issues and the realities of life and death see an increase in faith? A survey this past week shows that COVID has made younger people between 18 and 25 more open to faith issues.

So the question I want to explore this morning is: what does it actually mean to believe? What is faith all about? Which brings us in this season of Easter to the story we read just now from John's Gospel, the story of poor old "Doubting Thomas". Some people spend their whole life characterised by just one incident – like a senior judge with a spider broch - or more sadly one unfortunate remark – like Prince Philip and "slitty eyes" or Mervyn Griffith-Jones and his "your wife or servants". And so also St Thomas. Forget that he was one of the first of Jesus' disciples, or that later on he may well have taken the Christian Gospel as far as South India. He is remembered for all time as the one who doubted that Jesus was alive. He wants proof. He wants evidence. In one sense he gets it. Not what he might have expected, for the Resurrection is not some cataclysmic event for everyone to witness so that there can be no doubt, so that they have no choice but to believe. But he sees enough. He meets the Jesus whose hands and feet still show the marks of the nails, the dreadful reality of the Cross. Although his joy is somewhat muted by the words of Jesus "Blessed are those who have not seen yet have come to believe".

The opposite of doubt is not certainty, but faith. At the end of a trial the judge tells the jury to ask themselves "Are you sure?" You were not there when the prosecution say this crime happened, so you can't be 100% certain, but does everything you've heard convince you that the defendant did it? There's an element of faith in that, but Christian Faith goes much further. It invites us on a

journey, to explore what we know and what we don't know, to probe what is real and unreal, to take risks and discover things which may not be comfortable, to check out our story alongside others whose journey has brought them to faith in God and an association with Jesus Christ.

Let me share with you three quite brief observations about this journey of faith. The first is from Rowan Williams, writing about the difference between good and bad religion:

One of the tests of actual faith, as opposed to bad religion, is whether it stops you ignoring things." Faith "is most fully itself and most fully life-giving when it opens your eyes and uncovers for you a world larger than you thought — and, of course, therefore, a world that is a bit more alarming than you ever thought.

The second is from Hans Kung, the radical Catholic theologian who died this last week. He remembered the time when as a young boy he came home from the swimming pool feeling "radiant" because he had swum on his own for the first time: "I can swim ... the water is supporting me." He wrote that for him, this experience illustrated the venture of faith, which cannot first be proved theoretically by a course on 'dry land' but simply has to be attempted: a quite rational venture, though the rationality only emerges in the act.

And third, T S Eliot in "The Cocktail Party" where Celia contemplates which road to take: the easy route of living on the surface, or the long and difficult journey of faith. She could give in, and live the kind of life which brings certainty and rather superficial answers to life's questions and problems. Or she can embrace "another way" which

... is unknown, and so requires faith —

The kind of faith that issues from despair.

The destination cannot be described;

You will know very little until you get there;
You will journey blind.

But the way leads towards possession
Of what you have sought for in the wrong place.

Are you sure? There are those who will tell you that religion is about certainty, uncritical acceptance, and believing a hundred things before breakfast. But faith is much more about journeying and exploring, swimming, sometimes against the tide, and trusting that the water hold you up.

I finish with this, somewhat apt for this weekend. 160 years ago, in 1861, Prince Albert, the beloved husband and consort of Queen Victoria died at Windsor Castle. They'd been married for 21 years, not the 73 years which our Queen and Prince Philip have enjoyed. Victoria found great comfort in the poem "In Memoriam" by Alfred Lord Tennyson. It's best remembered for the line

'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.

But its beginning is what draws me to it to end this sermon on doubt and faith

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove;

We have but faith: we cannot know;
For knowledge is of things we see
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam in darkness: let it grow.