

**A Word in Season:
Doubt.
John 20:19 - 29**

Every week when I prepare for Sunday I try and get a sense of what the Spirit is saying to St Paul's church.

And at the start of the year I try and get a sense of what the Lord wants to speak into this church for the year ahead.

So this morning I want to begin a series that will hopefully feed into the year ahead.

And each week we'll be working with one word - hopefully a word in season.

(Further to that, as I began my main prep time for today, I had this little niggle to change course.

So by the time it came around to the main sermon writing I had this sense that what I'd prepared could wait for another Sunday).

So this morning's reading is about who?

It's about Jesus and... Thomas.

Thomas the... Doubter - which is a bit harsh.

People forget verse 28 - you know Thomas was the person to call Jesus "God".

I think he should be called Thomas the Confessor.

But he had his doubts.

He doubted that the others had seen Jesus.

He doubted that Jesus could have possibly have risen.

In fact he puts it on the line; only seeing Jesus wound will budge him.

And that's completely understandable.

So as we head into 2021, that's what we're going to explore this morning - doubt.

With that in mind, my first question is this:

"Is having doubts wrong?"

Tell the person next to you.

On one level, no.

For one, we do live in an age that is hostile to faith, especially where the Christian faith is increasingly at odds with cultural norms.

Doubt is encouraged; and at best there is indifference and at worst it is aggressively mocked and misrepresented.

And for some people it is tough when they find themselves isolated by family, friends or workmates and are portrayed as being abnormal.

So it's not surprising then that doubts may crop up.

All of this is not new.

The first believers encountered hostility and persecution but remained resolute. We should take heart from their stories.

By 'doubt' some people mean having and asking questions, even tough questions. Doubt is not having questions.

Questions are good.

Just let me say that questions are welcome here at St Paul's.

These are perfectly normal.

Asking why, lamenting, crying out to God and shouting at the heavens is not doubt; it's actually lamenting.

And lament is expression of faith in God.

However for some, doubts go to the core: "*Does God even exist???*"

For others it's doubts about God's goodness, power and presence.

For a lot, these doubts are only momentary.

For others these doubts are debilitating and destructive.

And this can go on for an extended time, like a winter time for the soul.

Where before God and faith might have seem clear cut, now God and faith are like riddle.

Doubt like this can turn sour.

It can curdle on us.

Doubt can become toxic for our faith and relationship with God.

It can change us into certain kinds of people - it turns the doubter in one of three kinds of people (I've shared these before so you may recognise them)

- a skeptic, a cynic or a rebel.

Skeptic

A skeptic wants to believe but struggles to believe.

In their heart of hearts they want to trust God but struggle to.

It's like they have unsettled faith, it's like they're always wrestling, always questioning.

He or she does not want to be wrong, get hurt or look like a fool.

And what is at the core of a skeptic is that "I just don't want to be disappointed by God again."

They want to believe –the really do – but the risk of disappointment is too much of a risk to take.

So they will stand on the sidelines and become interested observers who won't take the risk of trusting.

They keep coming to church, will join in the singing, listen to the sermon but won't give themselves over to anything else but they're afraid of being hurt.

Cynic

The cynic is indifferent to belief on the one hand and distrustful on the other.

In its passive form their saying is, "Nah, whatever."

We've been here before; here we go again.

Been there; done that.

In its aggressive form a cynic will pick holes, disparage and even mock.

Nothing about their faith is left unquestioned.

Give a skeptic a hug and she will doubt you really mean it.

Give a cynic a hug, and he will check his wallet to see if you've picked his pocket.

At heart the cynic is often a wounded idealist.

They've championed doing great things for God but somewhere along the way God didn't show up as they hoped.

Rebel

After a crisis of faith some people can become cynics, some become sceptics and others can become rebels.

At heart the rebel is angry with God.

God let them down so they are going to defy God.

Their saying is not "Thy will be done" but "My will be done."

They have areas of their lives that they won't cede to anyone.

They still come to church but every now and then there are issues where they won't budge.

And a rebel will often know in their heart of hearts that the area of disobedience is wrong, but they won't budge.

So all is these is when doubt goes bad.

I don't know about you but as a Christian and as pastor, I have meet people like this; people of once vibrant faith and love of Jesus who are skeptical, cynical or rebellious.

And don't say that as a judgement.

Jude counsels us to be merciful to those who doubt.¹

So my next question is this:

"How do you deal with doubt gone bad?"

How do we deal with doubt that caused has caused someone to become sceptical, cynical or rebellious?

Tell the person next to you.

Well, for starters, some don't.

It sits there, sometimes for long as years or even decades.

And so they become even more skeptical, cynical or rebellious.

What's more, often doubt is not the core of the problem.

Here's where I'm up to: when you dig into people's stories about doubt what you often discover is a deep disappointment.

I came across this story this last week in preparation for this moring.
It's a true story about Joey.

Joey became a Christian as an adult. He was 34-years old.

Christianity was a stark contrast from his upbringing.

It was fresh, clean, loving, and hope-filled. Each time they opened the church doors, he was there. Whenever there was an event, he was part of it.

He loved God's Word and was not shy about sharing it with others. His life began to make sense. He was soon baptized and doing whatever he could for the church.

Whenever there was a need, Joey volunteered.

The first couple years went well.

¹ Jude 22

Joey felt loved by the church leadership, and he believed there was a purpose for his life.

Then one day, for seemingly inexplicable reasons, he had a misunderstanding with his pastor.

It was a trivial matter but it got out of hand.

It blew up! They went hammer and tongs at each other.

They said things that they both would later regret.

Though Joey was a Christian, he still had a hot temper, especially when things did not make sense or were not going his way. Not only that but the pastor - who should have been much more mature - was similar, and when they disagreed, things went wrong quickly.

To compound things they were both too stubborn to reconcile.

Joey did not know how to deal with his hurt.

After the conflict had simmered, he left the church.

He poured himself into his landscaping business and became successful at it.

That event was not the first hurt or disappointment in his life; it was the biggest because of the unexpected nature of it.

Joey was not mature enough to know that being a Christian does not insulate you from disappointment.

Even as a Christians, disappointments still come and often it's in the form of a crisis.

Infertility - As I said last week, we have some of the highest infertility rates in the developed world - one in four couples.

(And it's interesting that underlying issues are equally split between men and women).

Divorce

Job loss - Someone becomes a Christian and they have good job that they like or even love and then they're made redundant.

A serious accident - It could be a car crash or even an accident around the home.

Death of a close or family member

A cancer diagnosis or serious illness

A bad experience with churches or Christians - This is so common.

Betrayal - Someone who you trust turns on you. It could be at work or a family member or close friend.

A shattered dream - Often a big God dream. They've stepped out in faith... and it's like God didn't show up.

A wayward child - You did your best for your child but they've gone off the rails.

A desire to be married that never happens - We underestimate this for single people in our churches.

Can you relate to one on that list?

And for Thomas there was a massive disappointment in his life.

Crucifixions were horrifying, intended to terrorise and sicken not only the victim but those looking on.

For starters the victim was stripped naked to shame them.

And then nails were driven into wrist and ankles to hold them place.

Then normally the victim would linger for days on a cross, moaning and crying out in pain.

And the Romans, they were adept this.

No one survived death on a Roman cross.

And Jesus didn't survive his crucifixion.

So what do we do with the disappointments?

What did Jesus do?

Well the risen Jesus meets with Thomas but he doesn't berate Thomas for his doubts.

And in the church sometimes we can be so quick to condemn and shut the questions down.

Jesus also doesn't say, "Just hang in there."

Jesus doesn't say, "She'll be right. Just give it time."

He doesn't say, "You'll snap out of it."

Nor does Jesus enter into intellectual dialog.

Jesus speaks to the very place where Thomas' hurt and doubt resides.

Jesus saw through his doubts to the real issue.

Jesus addressed Thomas' doubt by speaking to his *disappointment*.
And speaking to his disappointment, Jesus healed his doubt.

To deal with doubt gone bad, we need to speak to our disappointments.

So for you this morning; where are you up with doubt?

If you're honest, is there an area for you where doubt has gone bad?
You know, once there was a vibrant faith but now it's a memory.

Some disappointment inserted itself into your life and faith took a hit.
That could have been a year ago, a decade ago or twenty years back.
You used to be so passionate but now you're pedestrian.

If that's you, you can't do it alone.

Jesus didn't come to Thomas as an apparition but in fully resurrected physical person.

Just as Jesus came to Thomas as a flesh and blood person, we need those people too.

He has made us to be His Body.

You need to talk to someone.

You need to talk to someone about the doubt and disappointment.

I might be that person.

It might be another person here.

You need to find someone who will listen to you and walk with you through your disappointment and pray with and for you.