

The Nature of Christian Faith

You could hardly find a more hard-hearted scepticism than Thomas had. When the other disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, he declared, “Unless I see the marks of the nails in His hands and put my finger into the marks of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I shall certainly not believe.”

We should not doubt like Thomas, but we can be grateful to Thomas in one respect, because what he said reminds us in what area we should expect to find religious faith. Faith is not just a kind of feeling that people have that is completely unrelated to this real world. If you say, “I like ice-cream”, I can’t debate that with you and try to prove that you don’t. Some people want to treat the Christian faith as if it is in that area, which is beyond debate, hidden in the recesses of subjective preferences and particular choices, each as valid as all the rest, no matter how different. Yet that is what many people these days expect from religious faith. Each person chooses what is right for him, and, as with tastes, there can’t be any disputing about it! Some people believe in ghosts, some don’t, and so on. However, faith is not in that kind of area.

If you say, “Two and two are four” you are dealing with things that it would be a contradiction to try to deny. That is true in logic, without any reference to this real world. We could say that even if there weren’t anywhere in this world two things that could be added to two other things. However, the Christian faith is not like that, either. Though faith receives what is objective, and God-given, and in that sense beyond our ability to challenge, the Christian faith is related to events in this real world.

The Christian faith is fixed to real things that happened in this real world. Faith has real content. The things that the believer fastens his or her faith on are things that were open to being proved true or false. It is like that with everything empirical. If I say that there were clouds in the north yesterday evening, any who took a look at the sky yesterday evening is in a position to say that I am right or wrong. That is the kind of faith-claim that we make for the Christian faith. The reports of Jesus’ miracles in the Gospels are often connected to particular places and times. If they were not true, it was open to people who were still living who were present at those places and times to contradict the claims of the Gospels. The Christian faith stands or falls with the reality of Jesus’ death as the sacrifice for the sins of the world right here in this world at the time of Pontius Pilate, nearly two thousand years ago, and His resurrection from the dead on the third day, during the Jewish feast of Unleavened bread, and on a Sunday, and almost certainly in the year AD 33. We have to admit, with Paul, that if Jesus did not rise, the apostles were liars, their preaching was useless, our faith is useless, and our hope is useless.

Not everyone at the time saw Jesus after He rose from the dead. He showed Himself to chosen witnesses, and one of the chief qualifications for being an apostle was that the person must have seen the risen Lord. Thomas didn’t have a blind faith that was unrelated to the facts after He had seen Jesus. Jesus told Thomas, “Put your finger here, and look at My hands; and take your hand and put it into My side. And stop your unbelief, and believe!” When Thomas saw Jesus’ wounds in His hands and side, he confessed, “My Lord and my God!”

However, faith is not saving faith just when people are convinced that Jesus did really rise from the dead, although that conviction already goes a long way towards it. Faith takes its place in us alongside Thomas’ faith with when we, too, say, with certainty and deep gratitude, “My Lord and my God!” The Gospel according to John said very early, “The Word was God.” He was distinct from the Father (“with God), and He was also God. What the Father is, He is, God in the fullest sense. The last verse of the prologue, verse 18, gives a clear announcement of His deity, “The only Son, who is God, who is in the lap of the Father, has made Him known.”

What Jesus says about believing without seeing doesn’t contradict this at all. Thomas was an apostle, and another apostle, John, has written this event for us. The eyes, hands, and ears of those apostles, who saw, touched, and heard, the risen Lord, become our eyes, hands, and ears. That is how John begins his first Epistle: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at, and our hands have touched, concerning the Word of Life - And the Life has been revealed; and we have seen It and we testify to It, and we proclaim to you the eternal Life, which was with the Father and which has been revealed to us.”

That is also why, in the Gospel according to John, words like “witness” and “testimony” are such key words. We are challenged to investigate the witness of the apostles about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and invited to come to the same conclusion. Jesus asked Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Jesus is not asking us to close our minds to empirical evidence. Faith is nothing if it is not based on the Word of God, which also offers that empirical evidence. The Holy Spirit works faith through the Gospel, which teaches us, and offers, conveys, and seals to us

the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation that Jesus has won. This joyous message itself is the instrument through which the Holy Spirit generates faith. Jesus' words apply chiefly to future believers, including you and me. He wants us to have faith in Him, too, though we don't see Him now.

The Gospel for today ends with the verses in which John states his purpose in writing the Gospel. "Jesus also performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which have not been written in this book. But these things have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, believing, you may have life in His name." His purpose is that readers and hearers of what he has written may believe, and continue to believe, in Christ. "The Christ" is significant. Here it is not just a name, but a title. "The Christ" bears the same meaning as the Hebrew term, "The Messiah." Both mean, "The Anointed One." He is also the Son of God.

Christian faith is not blind. Nor does it justify a person because of any inherent quality in itself. Then it would be a work. The faith that justifies us before God, alone, without works, justifies because of what it grasps, namely, Jesus Christ, the Lord, and His completed work of atonement. The consequences of faith, according to this passage in the Gospel according to John, are forgiveness, peace, and life. Look at these verses. The risen Lord greets His disciples with the word "Peace." It is more than a greeting here. It means reconciliation with God for sinners. This peace brings us peace of conscience and is meant to still our fears about God's wrath and condemnation. Jesus breathes on His disciples and commits to them the task of forgiving and retaining sin. The risen Lord is full of forgiveness even though His disciples had shown up so poorly during His passion. In Gethsemane they had all forsaken Him. Peter had even denied Him. Yet the risen Lord tells the women near the tomb to tell His brothers to meet Him in Galilee. John also says that the purpose of his Gospel is that people may have life in His name, by believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

The greatest maladies for human beings are sin, and the death to which sin has made them subject, under the judgment of God. Faith grasps the risen Lord's remedy for these maladies. We can say, about these words of the Gospel, "If you believe them, you have what they offer."