

The Kind of Truth in the Christian Faith

Thomas was hard headed. He would not believe unless he could put his finger in the nail marks in Jesus' wrists and thrust his hand into the hole in Jesus' side. There was a similar hard-headedness in the man who had been born blind. When the Jews questioned him a second time, he replied, "I do not know whether He is a sinner. One thing I know, that, though I was blind, now I see!" (John 9:25).

Although Jesus asked Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen Me?" and then said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." This does not mean that Christian faith hangs in the air without evidence. The apostles appealed to two major points when they asserted Jesus' resurrection, the prophecies in the Old Testament that the Messiah would rise, and that they, as eye-witnesses, had seen Him, talked with Him, touched Him, and eaten with Him after His resurrection. The report about Thomas involved the convincing of doubt and disbelief by incontrovertible facts. We have the report of Thomas' belief that Jesus is Lord and God on the testimony of the apostle John.

In our post-modern age many people suspect ulterior motives behind use of words. If a company strongly advertises a line of goods, people are likely to think, "If the products were good, the company would not have to advertise so persistently. The fact that they have to advertise so persistently suggests that the products cannot sell themselves."

Philosophers talk about statements that are necessarily true, like two and two are four. That would be true even if there were no real world where two things could be added to two other things. The Christian claims to truth are indeed based on the Word of God, which will not pass away even when heaven and earth pass away. However, the kind of truth in the Christian Gospel is not necessarily true in the way two and two are four are true. Some people come close to that false idea when they think that the Church's task is to make them feel good about what they have been doing wrong and that they can lightly continue to do wrong simply because it is the nature of God to forgive and the duty of the Church to make them comfortable about what they want.

There is another group of assertions that deal with people's choices and feelings. Some people enjoy salad dinners, and others do not. If I say that I enjoy them, you have no way of verifying my claim. I might be saying that just to please someone else. Many people think that the Christian faith is in the realm of poetry, entertaining fiction, and stories in the area of make-believe, which have no relation to the real world apart from interest and entertainment. When Keats said that beauty is truth and truth beauty, that was fine for an artist looking at a Grecian urn. However, many things are true that are not at all beautiful, but harsh, cruel, and unattractive. When the Scriptures say that all people are sinners and deserve God's wrath, that is not a beautiful thing or merely a subjective opinion. The scourging and the crucifixion that Jesus suffered were neither fiction nor lovely, but He truly suffered them.

The kinds of truth-claims that are basis to the Christian faith are the kind that are open to investigation. If I say, "It is raining", you can verify what I say by listening for the sound of the rain and looking outside to see rain, and you can call me wrong if there is none. When the Gospel writers reported miracles of Jesus, they often included the names of places and the times. People who were living at those places and times were able to challenge the reports if they were not true. Very often unbelievers did not try to challenge the facts of what had happened, but the unbelief rests different interpretations of the facts. The Jews could not deny that a man called Jesus had given the man who had been born blind his sight on a Sabbath day. They rejected Jesus as One sent by God on the grounds that He broke the Law of Moses on their interpretation of the Sabbath commandment, and refused to accept that He could be God's Messiah.

Thomas challenged the claims of the other disciples, and we should not deny anyone the right to challenge the facts on which the Christian faith rests. They were, and are, open to investigation. The great advantage of our basing our witness to the Gospel on the resurrection of Christ is that it challenges all people to look at the primary sources, the last chapter of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and the last two chapters of John. We should be very clean about the alternatives. If Jesus did not rise, He was a charlatan. If He rose, He is what He claimed, the Saviour of the world, and is alive now, as the Friend and High Priest of those who believe in Him, and the Lord and Christ who will judge all people when He comes again, on the basis of their relationship to Himself.

However, two more important things need to be said. Plenty of people believe that Jesus died. Of course, all people die. If He died, what does His death mean? What makes the Gospel the good news is that the words "for you" are added to the empirical facts about Jesus in this real world when God intervened decisively in the affairs of sinful people. Jesus Christ the Son of God, died for us, and rose for us. These are not mere cold facts

that have little to do with us personally. The facts are true, but there is also the personal dimension. This is not existentialism, as though our faith makes them true for us. Existentialists do not speak about the Word of God being true in itself, but becoming true for people in a subjective way. However, if people reject the Word of God, it has been true nevertheless, and will judge them for their rejection of it.

The other important thing to say involves the relationship of the Holy Spirit to faith. There are plenty of unbelievers who even accept the proposition that Jesus rose from the dead. Faith is more than a conviction that something is historically true on the basis of primary sources. Paul wrote, "An unspiritual person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know them because they are discerned spiritually" (1 Cor 2:14). When Peter confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus praised Him and said that flesh and blood had not revealed that to him, but His Father, who is in heaven. No one can by his own reason and strength believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and alive from the dead for his eternal salvation by his own reason and strength, even when his reason includes being convinced by the primary sources of the event as historical fact. The Holy Spirit convicts people of their sin and guilt, and shows them the crucified and risen Saviour as their only remedy and only source of eternal life.

Thomas was highly privileged in having his unbelief blown away by the actual presence of his risen Lord, who invited him to put his fingers in the nail marks and thrust his hand into His side. That does not mean that we are at a disadvantage. The apostles' ears, hands, and eyes become our ears, hands, and eyes. The most important organs of any Christian's body are his ears, to hear the Word, even when the Word goes counter to his reason. We believe the Gospel, which assures of us our forgiveness and hope of resurrection, when all we see around us are sin and death. We believe that baptism delivers from sin, death, and the devil, and confers the Holy Spirit as God's gift even when there is no dove in which the Spirit descends in bodily form. In the Lord's Supper our senses deceive us. All we see, touch, smell, taste, and hear (in the sense that the bread and wine can make sounds) tell us that there are only bread and wine present before us. However, our ears hear the Lord's Words, "This is My body", and "This is My blood." The person who believes Jesus' words, "given for you" and "shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins", also has what they say and express. They are there, and if they believe they are there for them, they have them.

Our faith rests on the Word of God, through which the Spirit works, and the testimony of the apostles to Jesus' words, works, and what He had done to Him, and the Spirit of God moves our sceptical hearts to believe that He is for us and for our salvation. That is the sense in which Jesus tells us, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." That is what Paul meant when he wrote, "we live by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7). That is what Paul meant when he wrote, "We do not look at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen. For the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor 4:18). Our not seeing does not make the truth fanciful. Finally we shall see the risen Lord as He is and be like Him (1 Jn 3:2).