

SERMON 8 APRIL 2018

Today's Gospel reading is the culmination of all the previous chapters of the Gospel of John. Thomas, who doubted Jesus resurrection, sees the risen Lord and acknowledges Jesus as God.

But before trying to analyse this passage let me draw attention to the gap between logical analysis of faith and living the faith.

"...The intellect has been created so that a servant might know how to act. Without an intellect man would not know how to act correctly. It was not given for him to know God, the most exalted Lord, by analogically reasoning, for the intellect, even though it be an accurate means of weighing things, nevertheless a mountain cannot be weighed on a bankers scale! Hence it is said:

A servant needs an intellect to know what to do;
You need a soul to acknowledge the Lord...."

(Maneri's Second Collection of Letters, Letter 49 Paul Jackson SJ)

The words of a Muslim Sufi Saint but applicable to all.

So, with this qualification in the background, let us first consider the genesis of John's Gospel

Who wrote this Gospel? Where? And Why?

As to "who", we do not know. It was probably written in edited stages and John 21, the final chapter, just after today's reading, seems to have been added at a later stage.

"Where"? Well by popular tradition it was written in Ephesus. This city was the home of the pre-Socratic "weeping" philosopher Heraclitus who lived about 500 years before Christ's ministry and who first articulated the concept of the "Logos" or the "Word" with which the writer of John associated Jesus.

The "why" is easy and is spelled out in John 20.30

"...but these are written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.."

The Gospel of John begins with the sonorous identification of Christ as the divine Logos. The Word made flesh to dwell among us. Jesus identified alongside God.

By "God" Heraclitus did not mean the Judeo-Christian version of a single God as the first mover (primum movens) of all things, God, instead, as the divine as opposed to human; the immortal as opposed to the mortal, the cyclical as opposed to the transient.

Of course, Heraclitus' views on the Logos were interpreted and reinterpreted over the many years between his life and teaching and the end of the first century AD, when John was written. Culminating in the works of contemporary Hellenised philosophers such as Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish middle Platonist philosopher who lived in the mid First Century AD and who took a syncretic approach to Classical Greek thought and the Torah.

Remember, Ephesus at the time of Christ was the second largest city in the Roman Empire and one of the most ethnically diverse. Yet the author of John chose to identify the Logos with Jesus.

What can we infer from this? Well I guess that a proportion of the potential readership were either Gentiles or Hellenised Jews, comfortable with the concepts of Greek philosophical thought. And

that they were capable of identifying God and Logos as described by Heraclitus and subsequently interpreted by generations of disciples, with the one creator God as understood by the Jews.

So we can see the identification of Jesus as Logos inextricably tied early Christian theology into preexisting Greek philosophical thought.

Yet John has very Jewish elements which would best have been understood and were probably directed at a Jewish background audience. Three elements of particular note in today's reading alone are the use of Jewish number symbolism, Thomas' reaction to the presence of the risen Lord; and Jesus' response to Thomas.

Number symbolism is used throughout John. Even in this passage, we have the use of the number one, the first day of the week, when the disciples first gather and the number of Yahweh. Two, Thomas Didymus. (Thomas is twin in Aramaic and Didymus twin in Greek). Two appearances of Jesus to the disciples. Of course, the Mosaic law required two witnesses to testify to the truth. Then, of course, Jesus' appearances to the disciples a second time with Thomas present on the eighth day, where eight is the number of resurrection, seven days plus one.

Now the point here is not the exact meaning of the symbolism of the various numbers but that these numbers are used at all. The audience which would best have understood these number references would have been a Jewish origin audience.

Thomas' reaction to the risen Lord is to exclaim "my Lord and my God". This is surprisingly congruent with the Hebrew "Adonai Elohim", the words used in the Jewish Shema prayer "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is God...". In fact, there are considerable sensitivities in conventional Judaism regarding the use of the name of God. So the point here is, perhaps, more compelling to a Jew than to a latter day Christian.

Finally, Jesus' response to Thomas is to state "...have you believed because you have seen me, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.." (John 20.29). This statement is in two parts and in a form of logic used many times in the New Testament. This type of logical construction was codified by the Sage Hillel as one of the "Seven Rules of Hillel". The rules were widely used by Jewish scholars in interpreting the Torah.

So the structure of this passage betrays a Jewish origin and suggests a Jewish audience. In any event, Jesus is proclaimed as God both at the beginning of the Gospel of John and at its logical culmination. At the beginning, perhaps, for a Gentile or Hellenised Jewish context and at the end in a Jewish context.

So we can see who the original audience might have been and why this passage was written. But what, exactly, was it saying to them? After all, the incident is only recorded in John - not in the Synoptic Gospels.

The two themes of this passage are "authority" and "belief". Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on the disciples and commissions them. Establishing firmly the principle of Apostolic succession. Thomas expresses his doubts at Jesus' resurrection to the disciples who saw the risen Lord and is left in no doubt to the point he acclaims Jesus as God.

Not just as resurrected.

Remember, Thomas's doubts centred on the idea of resurrection; not divinity

So what compelled the Gospel writer to make this scene, and its two themes, the culmination of the Gospel.

The answer may well be emerging heresy.

Two contemporaneous heresies of particular interest here were Gnosticism and Docetism.

The first of these, Gnosticism, was already established by the time John's Gospel was written. This would have seen Jesus not as God but as a teacher showing his disciples the path to God through Gnosis or knowledge

Gnosticism infiltrated the cult of John the Baptist, establishing it as a dualist movement which is with us today as Mandaeism. The same fate could have overtaken the early Christian movement in the second century but for strong leadership based on apostolic succession, the writing of Church fathers and strong opponents of the Gnostic heresy such as St Irenaeus of Lyon.

Docetism is also a likely factor driving the composition of this passage. As a heresy, it promoted a view that Jesus' human form was a mere semblance without any true reality. It may have arisen from theological considerations concerning the true meaning of John's statement that Jesus was the "Word" made flesh.

So John 20, 24-29 shows a risen Jesus appearing to the disciples twice. Close enough to breathe on them. Showing the wounds of Cross and Lance close up. A physical human presence. Apostolic authority is confirmed and all doubts as to Jesus living presence are removed for Thomas, the disciples, the early readers and ourselves when Thomas acknowledges Jesus as God.

Certainty to counter heresy!

So how does all this play out for us today? What are the lessons, if any, which we can learn and which can inform our faith?

As far as we are concerned, the concept of "doubt" is very important when considering matters of faith. Now, doubt is an inevitable aspect of our personal journey to faith. Without the ability to doubt, we would not be free to choose faith: And we must personally choose to walk the path of faith.

We are not computers which can be programmed to accept faith with the correct program running. Our faith, by definition, transcends logic. But logic is merely a tool which we use to understand and relate to the world around us. Even science has to deal with nonlinear logic in concepts such as quantum entanglement and the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. And who can seriously make sense of the illogicality of Shrodinger's Cat!

Faith is not a static quality. Like a tree, our faith is constantly being pruned to prepare it for growth. Constructive doubt, generating a reexamination of our own personal faith, can help drive this process of growth.

But Thomas demonstrates near toxic doubt. He rejects Jesus resurrection altogether and then receives a miracle. A personal epiphany with the presence of the risen Christ. For his lack of faith he is mildly reprimanded by Jesus "...have you believed because you have seen me, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.." (John 20.29).

Toxic doubt can destroy faith for Thomas and for ourselves.

But consider this, Jesus pronounces a blessing on only two occasions in John's Gospel.

The first blessing occurs when Jesus blesses the Apostles conditionally having washed their feet. "... If you know these things (the need to serve) blessed are you if you do them..."(John 13.17).

The second blessing in John 20.29 is where we, not the disciples, are blessed if we believe in the resurrection of Jesus in the absence of physical evidence of the resurrected Christ.

Blessed in Hebrew and Aramaic, translates as "baruch" and "berikh". These latter words are etymologically related to the Hebrew word for "knee" (Hebrew "berach"). So the image conveyed here is we, ourselves, not Thomas or the disciples, on our knees before Jesus being blessed by him as a father blesses a child - because we believe having not seen the risen Lord as did the disciples.

This is a very powerful image and one which we must always remember when doubts arise in our spiritual lives.

Finally, if John 21, which follows this passage is, indeed, a later addition to the Gospel, Jesus' blessing here represents his last words recorded in the original John's Gospel. The entire Gospel up to this point converges to these last words - emphasising their importance.

The liturgy of our Second Order of Holy Communion reflects this structure of the Gospel of John in that its penultimate act is also a blessing. Given to us by the presiding priest

"...The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you always. Amen...."

So when we participate in this liturgy of worship and receive the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, let us never, ever forget the great blessing we are given by Jesus and which we receive at all times as a result of the spiritual doubts of Thomas. The twin. The witness to the risen Christ. The disciple. The martyr. The doubter.

And our brother in Christ

Almighty God

Thank you for the blessing we have been given by Jesus in the presence of Thomas and the disciples.

Soothe our doubts when they arise

Strengthen our faith

Show us the way we must walk

Help us remain your faithful servants from this day till our life's end

Amen