

Doubt

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O Lord Jesus Christ,
who at your first coming sent your messenger,
to prepare your way before you;
grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries
may likewise so prepare and make ready your way,
by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just,
that at your second coming to judge the world
we may be found an acceptable people in your sight.

My text may be found in today's gospel from Matthew chapter 12 and verse 3:
'Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?'

Doubt can be positively negative. Self-doubt can be disabling. Doubting other people can lead to a destructive atmosphere of mistrust. To doubt is to call into question certainties that enable us to function as human beings.

Yet doubt for the French philosopher, René Descartes, was the start of his search for certainty. He doubted in order to establish what was the truth, what was incontrovertibly certain in this life. A rationalist, Descartes came to the conclusion that he had to exist because he was thinking. His famous phrase in Latin is 'cogito ergo sum'; in French, 'je pense donc je suis'; in English, 'I think

therefore I am'. In a way, we might rephrase his famous dictum: 'I doubt therefore I am'.

John the Baptist was the forerunner predicted by Isaiah who was, as we saw last week, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness;

"Prepare the way of the Lord

Make his paths straight.'" (Matthew 3 v3)

Even while a foetus in his mother's womb, John had recognised Jesus' presence when he heard the voice of the Blessed Virgin Mary, newly pregnant, come to visit John's own heavily pregnant mother, Elizabeth. John's vocation had been predicted by his father, Zechariah, and he had fulfilled his mission by calling the people to repent and thereby to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Though reluctant to baptise his cousin, Jesus, because John was conscious of his own unworthiness to do so - in his own words he admitted, 'I am not worthy to untie his sandals' - John had done so. John was present as Jesus emerged from the water when the Holy Spirit had descended from heaven to alight on his head and the voice from heaven had said, 'This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased' (Matthew 3 v17).

So John knew Jesus was the Messiah. John knew in his heart and he saw with his own eyes and he heard with his own ears the truth that Jesus was indeed the

Christ. So why have we this extraordinary question which is my text today, 'Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?'

John was in prison. He had been thrown into prison for daring to criticise Herod Antipas, then ruler of Galilee, for marrying his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. Being in prison is not a good place for someone to be who had lived his life in the open air of the Judean wilderness. The incarceration began to have a bad effect on John. In the darkness of the prison, his mind wrestled with the awful thought that Jesus was not whom John had thought he was. Possibly his train of thought went something like this: 'If Jesus is whom I thought he is, the Messiah who has come to establish the Kingdom of God, then why hasn't he done so yet? Why is Jesus allowing me to languish here in prison, the prisoner of a corrupt, unworthy king? In such darkness, you can see how dark John's mind might become. Poor John now doubted what he had known to be true. In similar circumstances who wouldn't?

So John does what he can – he sends some of his disciples to Jesus in order to resolve his doubts and on John's behalf, they put the question to Jesus, 'Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?' Interestingly, Jesus does not reply with a simple yes or no. Instead, he tells them to tell John what he is doing: 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame

walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them.’ This is objective truth; this is evidence. What Jesus is pointing to is the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy in chapter 35 and verses 5 and 6. Jesus leaves John the space to make up his own mind but he gives him the basis on which to do so. In this light, the Messiah has clearly come.

We don’t know how John received this answer. We do know he was to lose his head as a result of a foolish promise made by Herod to his step daughter, Salome. I’d like to think that his mind was at rest and that he went to his death confident that his part in God’s plan had been faithfully fulfilled. But the doubt John articulated remains today and it is a question we can all at one time or another ask of Jesus, ‘Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?’. I once asked some Jewish friends in Potters Bar why they doubted that Jesus was in fact our Messiah and they replied that he had not restored the promised Golden Age therefore could not have been. I guess that’s the essential difference between Christians and Jews: that Christians were the Jews who recognised Jesus as the Christ while present-day Jews are those who don’t.

Whether we doubt or not is crucial but as your priest, you will not be surprised to hear that I am confident that Jesus is Lord, the Son of God, our long-expected Messiah.

What do you think?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

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H: Sermon 23: Doubt

