

BELIEVING IS SEEING
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ISAIAH 26: 2-9, 19
I JOHN 5: 1-6
JOHN 20: 19-31

Christians are often tempted, particularly in this time called modern, to say more than we know. We are so tempted because we fear we do not believe what we say we believe. So we try to assure ourselves that we believe what we say we believe by convincing those who do not believe what we believe that they really believe what we believe once what we believe is properly explained. As a result we end up saying more than we know because what we believe, or better what we do, cannot be explained but only shown. The word we have been given for such a showing is "witness."

Our penchant, however, for explanation means we are continually frustrated by the Scripture. We think if the Gospels provided more fulsome accounts, newspaper-like accounts that could be checked by reputable historians, this business of belief might make more sense. Therefore when John tells us "now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book," we cannot help but think, "That was surely a mistake." We need all the signs we can get. In particular we think we need to know more because we have been made aware that the Bible may not be reliable. We are desperate, therefore, to know "what really happened."

Signs are, of course, the heart of the Gospel of John. For example, to name just a few John does include: Jesus turns water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana (2: 1-11); he heals the son of the royal official (4: 46-54); he restores sight to a man born blind (9: 1-41); he raises Lazarus from the dead (11: 1-44); and Jesus is resurrected (20: 1-10). For John, however, signs are not irrefutable evidence that Jesus really is who he says he is. For example, most of us think if we had been there

when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead we would have been impressed by this miracle. John, however, tells us some who had seen what Jesus had done "believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done." (11: 45-46) Signs, it seems, are just as likely to create doubt and opposition as they are to make believers.

Two thousand years after the resurrection we, like Thomas, desire a sign to calm our doubts. For we live in a culture that has taught us to demand evidence for what we believe. We are taught not to trust what we see or hear and it is a lesson we have well learned. Accordingly, we not only do not trust what we hear from others but we do not trust what we say to ourselves. And because we do not trust ourselves, we distrust what we hear as well as what we see. Ask any lawyer if they trust eye-witness testimony. So like Thomas we want to put our finger in his nail-pierced hands and touch his wounded side. Not able to trust what we hear or what we see, we need to touch that which we fear may be an illusion.

Trust is the heart of the matter. Thus Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, makes trust the central motif in his exploration of the Apostles and Nicene Creeds in his book *Tokens of Trust*. Williams observes that mistrust is the result of our sense that too often we feel we are at the mercy of someone else's agenda. In particular, we do not trust God because we think God has purposes we cannot fathom. We think of God as "the management" who is, if possible, to be outmaneuvered. As a result our attempt to "be religious" can ironically turn out to be a strategy to avoid God by outwitting him.

We are wounded by our mistrust of ourselves and God. We do not trust ourselves because we fear we have become "the management" possessed by agendas we cannot fathom. Wounded by our mistrust we seek to hide the wound from ourselves and others. We fear the wounds of others threatening as they do to expose our vulnerability. That Thomas would ask to touch Jesus' wounds

and Jesus would invite him to do, therefore, is no small thing.

A week after Jesus had appeared to the disciples in the closed chamber he appears again and this time Thomas is present. Jesus greets the disciples with the now familiar declaration, "Peace be with you." Jesus had previously bestowed his peace by breathing on the disciples, but he now offers Thomas his very body: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

We should like to think Thomas touches Jesus' wounds. Artists have often depicted Thomas touching Jesus. Yet the text does not give any indication Thomas in fact touched the wounds in Jesus' hands or his side. Instead we are told he confesses, "My Lord and my God!" What an extraordinary thing for Thomas to say. If he was like us, that is, looking for evidence to confirm that Jesus had returned from the dead, you would think he might have said, "Oh! You're really back." But he says, "My Lord and my God!"

This confession is not one that can be elicited by seeing or touching, but rather comes through the peace bestowed by the Holy Spirit who alone can heal the wound of our mistrust. Jesus acknowledges Thomas' faith but comments, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Thomas has seen Jesus, but his confession makes clear that he has been able to see because he now believes that this Jesus is Lord and God; that is, Jesus alone is the One who has the authority to bestow the Spirit of forgiveness. The Lord who offers us his very body is not a God we can manage,.

We say "seeing is believing," but it seems in matters having to do with God "believing is seeing." But believing does not mean we must accept twenty-three improbable propositions before breakfast. Rather believing means being made participants in a way of life unintelligible if Jesus is not our Lord and our God. To so live is not to try to make the world conform to our wishes and

fantasies, but rather to see truthfully the way the world is. But we do not see the way the world is just by looking. We must be transformed, we must be freed from the mistrust created by our ill-formed desires, if we are to see that this crucified one is very God and very man. Moreover he has come not to condemn the world, rather he has come that we might see the world through the eyes of its Creator and so be saved through him.

This may help us understand why John does not report on the "many other signs" Jesus did in the presence of his disciples. John does not tell us more because he believes he has given us all we need in order to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that in so believing we may have life in his name. For it turns out that the Gospels are not information about which we get to make up our minds. Rather, as we are told in the Sixth Article of Religion in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation." We are not asked to believe that the Scripture is without error, but rather that the Scripture provides everything necessary for our salvation.

Ironically Christians who are determined to maintain the scripture is without error, as well as Christians who think we need more historical evidence in order to accept Jesus is who he says, replicate in a modern form, to be sure a very different form, the ancient heresy of Gnosticism. They want Jesus to be a knowledge they can accept or reject, but they do not want their lives transformed by having to acknowledge "My Lord and my God!" They want to be able to understand Jesus in terms set by the world, but John, as do all the Gospels, refuses to give us more than we need for our salvation. For to confess "My Lord and my God" is, as philosophers like to say, a language transforming proposal requiring that we be transformed in the light of Jesus' crucifixion and

resurrection.

Our salvation, the transformation that makes possible our trust in God, is not knowledge about which we get to make up our minds. Our salvation is flesh, crucified and resurrected flesh, wounded flesh. Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche where those not mentally disabled learn to live with those who are, observes in his [Commentary on the Gospel of John](#),

...we can contemplate the risen body of Jesus,
a body that reveals the wounds inflicted upon him...

These wounds are there for all ages and time,
to reveal the humble and forgiving love of Jesus
who accepted to go to the utter end of love.

The risen Jesus does not appear as the powerful one,
but as the wounded and forgiving one.

These wounds become his glory.

From the wound in his side flowed the waters that vivify
and heal us.

Through his wounds we are healed.

Jesus invites each one of us, through Thomas,
to touch not only his wounds,
but the wounds in others and in ourselves,
wounds that can make us hate others and ourselves
and can be a sign of separation and division.

These wounds will be transformed into a sign of forgiveness
through the love of Jesus
and will bring people together in love.

These wounds reveal that we need each other.

These wounds become the place of mutual compassion,
of indwelling
and of thanksgiving.

We, too, will show our wounds
when we are with him in the kingdom,
revealing our brokenness
and the healing power of Jesus.

Jesus is the wound of the Father's love which we share through the gift of the Spirit. Let us confess we would prefer a savior not wounded, not wanting our wounds exposed. Then let us recognize that such wounds are necessary for seeing the world and ourselves truthfully. To be so wounded by the Spirit is what it means to be blessed, to be among those who have not seen but who have come to believe. Indeed the Church is constituted by those who have come to believe what we have not seen by trusting in what we have been told. Through the work of the Spirit, our wounds of mistrust have been healed and are continually mended by the ongoing renewal of trust reenacted through the bread and wine, which is the body and blood of our Savior.

We are able to see this miracle not because we've acquired more knowledge than others, but because we have been made participants in the Kingdom of forgiveness, a kingdom of peace,

making possible a life otherwise unimaginable. Accordingly Jesus not only invites us to touch his wounds, but to come and taste the goodness of his life. What extraordinary good news--we can trust what we hear, we can trust what we see, we can trust what we touch, we can trust what we taste—because we have been given all we need to confess, "My Lord and my God!" Alleluia, he is risen, he is risen indeed. Alleluia.