

Haberdasher's Golden Lecture 2017

The Right Revd Peter Maurice

Doubt – a true mark of Faith

The Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai writes

'From the place where we are right flowers will never grow in the Spring.

The place where we are right is hard and trampled like a yard

But doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, like a plough and a whisper will be heard in the place where the ruined house once stood.'

Two or three miles from here as the crow flies lies the fictional parish of St Saviour in the Marsh where Adam Smallbone, otherwise known as Rev, is the Vicar. Adam is an Anglican priest who has recently arrived from a small rural parish to the 'socially disunited' parish of St Saviour in the Marsh Hackney. Having myself been Vicar of Holy Trinity Surrey Docks for nearly 12 years in the 80's and 90's, Rev was the only fictional priest with whom I ever had any real resonance and I have no shame in revealing that the extraordinary accuracy with which he was portrayed often had me in tears.

The episode which has a particular connection with the title of this lecture began with a visit from the officious and results driven Archdeacon Robert who famously travelled his patch in the back of a black cab! He has arrived at the vicarage to alert Adam to the new Christian website, God slot.com which sends anonymous worshippers to review services and to mark sermons out of 10. Adam has high hopes of at least an 8, hopes that are dashed at the revelation that he has only managed a minus 1. 'A sermon, says the reviewer that consisted of 2 minutes that was 3 minutes too long.'

Adam's ever perceptive wife senses the disappointment and doubt that is etched on his face. 'Is this one of your little wobbles, she enquires gently. No, says Adam, this is a big wobble.'

A day that had started rather badly only gets worse when Adam goes to take the weekly primary school assembly.

'Can anyone tell me who came down the mountain with the 10 commandments – *there is a long pause* – 'Was it baby Jesus Sir. No it wasn't baby Jesus. Anyone else – *another*

long pause – It was Moses wasn't it. Are you sure it wasn't baby Jesus? Yes, I am sure it wasn't baby Jesus, it was Moses. But I thought the answer was always Jesus sir. Adam's response reveals both his irritation and something of his inner turmoil. 'No, Jesus isn't always the answer!'

His meltdown continues for the rest of the day and his behaviour becomes ever more erratic when he gets into an altercation with some local youngsters. When the blue flashing light appears from around the corner, Adam is convinced he will be arrested, but having established that Adam is the local Vicar, the police officer then takes him to a rather bleak block of flats on the estate to one of his parishioners who has asked for him because she is dying.

He stands on the balcony trying to compose himself and recalls some words from the reluctant prophet Isaiah which he recites to himself: '*I heard the Lord saying, whom shall I send, who will go for us and I said, here I am, send me.*' The camera pans to the woman's bedside and to Adam anointing her and preparing her for her death. In the midst of all his doubt and turmoil he discovers that the call from God has not gone away. Indeed I am left with a real sense that it is in the midst of that doubt and struggle that he rediscovers his calling. How does the hymn writer put it, 'through the night of doubt and sorrow onward goes the pilgrim band.' It would be my contention that it is not doubt that threatens faith so much as certainty.

When our daughter was diagnosed with bowel cancer nearly 10 years ago, from which she has now thankfully recovered, I too had something of a big wobble – doubt and fear and questioning were never far from my thoughts. Like Thomas, often affectionately known as the patron saint of doubters, my landscape had shifted – what had seemed so certain just days earlier now seemed so precarious and my faith was stretched to breaking point, BUT, and it is a very important BUT, in facing up to those feelings and in confronting God with my doubts and questions, I never felt abandoned.

The psalmist describes it so very well. 'In quiet ways you hold the world together, chaos contained by your compassionate power. When the seas hurl their pounding waves, when the hurricane howls across the ocean, when the tornadoes tear through the farmland and when the rivers rip through the city streets, still do you set a limit to their power so that they may not overwhelm us forever.'

So I am with Paul Tillich who asserts that doubt is not the opposite of faith, but is one element of faith and in my view a crucial element because as Miguel de Unamuno, the Spanish poet, playwright and philosopher, contends, 'faith which does not doubt is dead faith.' Consequently I do not find myself attracted either to a theology of certainty nor indeed a culture of certainty. 'From the place where we are right, flowers will never grow in the spring.'

The church does itself no favours when it adopts a theology of certainty and I fear that the current culture of the church is moving more and more in that direction. I simply do not believe that the Christian faith is or ever has been a set of rules and regulations that we are instructed to obey. It is rather an invitation to adopt a way of living that is based on the firm and sure hope that meekness, humility and forgiveness is the way of God; that righteousness, peace and justice will finally prevail and that God's future will be a time of mercy and love, not cruelty.

Although I couldn't claim any empirical evidence for what I am about to say, nevertheless I do sense that those who are drawn to a theology of certainty do so from a position of insecurity about their own faith. Perhaps it is an over exaggeration, but I have considerable sympathy for the position that Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh, takes on this issue in his book 'Doubts and Loves.'

He offers this reflection. 'We become anxious about believing the wrong things or holding the wrong views and sound doctrine becomes a life or death affair. Religious anxiety of this sort always hates the devil more than it loves God. It creates churches that are exclusive in their self understanding and proclaim that there is no salvation outside their walls.

And the irony, as I observe it, is that those who are prone to large wobbles in their faith have the courage to trust and to risk precisely because their faith is not based on the ability to accept a whole set of propositions and doctrinal statements, but on their deep and real sense that they are truly loved and accepted by God for who they are.

If we live in a world of certainty there is little room for the light of compassion, forgiveness and hope – the hallmarks of the gospel – to find a place, and yet it seems to me more crucial than ever that we both develop and live a theology that is inclusive, that is generous and that is hospitable. Only then will we have anything to say to a world that is increasingly fractured and turbulent.

'The place where we are right is hard and trampled like a yard. But doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, like a plough and a whisper will be heard in the place where the ruined house once stood.'

And yet, having said all that, it would be true to say that doubters can have their disadvantages. They can approach everything with a deeply critical attitude and suck all the creativity out of what Holloway refers to as 'life's crazy and unpredictable joys', and if they get to the top of an institution they can ram the cork tight in the bottle and keep it firmly shut, resisting all attempts at change – 'we've tried that before and it will never work' (how often have I heard that and not just in church circles either!)

But that's not a description of doubt that is a true mark of faith. The doubt that is a true mark of faith is not afraid to take risks; it is not afraid to push the boundaries; the doubt which is a true mark of faith has a rightful scepticism towards those who hold the power and is unafraid to ask the difficult and awkward questions and hold people to account; the doubt that is a true mark of faith is open to exploring new ideas and fresh insights; alive to new thinking, relishing the possibility of discovering truth in unexpected places.

A few weeks ago the General Synod debated the Bishop's report on sexuality. I was one of several retired bishops who signed a letter which was critical of what had been presented. As those of you who may have followed this story will know, the report had been preceded by three years of 'shared conversations' which had encouraged and enabled LGBTI people of faith to share their stories within a confidential setting.

The implication behind the conversations carried a real hope for a number of people that by the sharing of stories there might be the possibility of effecting some kind of change around the canons and doctrinal statements about sexuality as well as the liturgical practice. That has not been realised in the report. Yes, once again a change in tone is called for and further exploration, prayer and study about the issue promised, but in essence a restatement of doctrinal certainty and liturgical practice based on a conservative interpretation of scripture has prevailed.

Apparently there is no doubt about what scripture says; there is nothing more to discover; no new insight to be uncovered that science and psychology might have unearthed; no possibility that the scripture that was written at a particular time and within a particular context might not be the whole truth. Really?

Simon Parke, a Christian writer, made this observation in his blog

'I'd like it if Christianity offered the religion OF Jesus rather than a religion ABOUT Jesus – a religion of things like, oh I don't know, trust, awareness, rage, courage, compassion, prayer and the validity of love instead of some list of do's and don't's, a list of tick box right and wrong doctrines because it beats growing up! But we won't do that. Doctrines are easier, requiring no self reflection – they protect me from personal growth as I hide behind God's utterly favourite pastime – doctrine! The religion OF Jesus, not a religion ABOUT Jesus. I'd go to that church, I'd live that creed.'

The American theologian and Pastor Brian McLaren in his most recent book, 'The Great Spiritual Migration' reinforces the point. 'Founders are typically generous, visionary, bold and creative, but the religions that ostensibly carry on their work often become the opposite; constricted, change-averse, nostalgic, fearful, and obsessed with boundary maintenance. Instead of greeting the world with open arms as their founders did, their successors stand guard with clenched fists. Instead of empowering others as their founders did, they hoard power. Instead of defying tradition and unleashing moral imagination as their founders did, they impose tradition and refuse to think outside the lines.'

"From the place where we are right flowers will never grow in the spring, but doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, like a plough and whispers will be heard in in the place where the ruined house once stood."

And in case we thought it was just the church that falls prey to the rather disturbing culture of certainty which leaves precious room for doubt and question, just look across the pond at the new President of the USA. There is no room for doubt in his version of reality and any questions about his policies are greeted with the embattled cry, 'fake news!' We have every right to be worried – even his fellow republicans are worried. John McCain spoke out in defence of the free press after one of the President's more bizarre press conferences a few weeks ago reminding his hearers that referring to the press as an enemy of the people was how dictators got started. Doubt and questioning is not only a true mark of faith it's a sign of a healthy democracy.

So I am with Adam Smallbone; I am with Rev, in believing that there is nothing wrong with a little wobble as I seek to live out my Christian faith. Indeed, as I hinted earlier, 'Faith which does not doubt is dead faith.' If I go back to the disciples and reflect a little on the

life and witness of those first followers, I am not struck by the certainty of their beliefs- they were frequently riddled with doubt; they were often left confused, and they were rarely without questions-but that's because right beliefs were never at the heart of what Jesus was about. In this child born in an outhouse, crucified on a cross, and raised from death, there is the power of God to bring light into our darkness, to make us whole, to give purpose and meaning to our lives.

That is what attracted those first disciples to him. In him they experienced a new kind of life in which both suffering and joy were immeasurably deepened, a new kind of life in which little by little they grew in love and compassion for their enemies as well as their friends. It's the faith of Jesus and not a religion about Jesus that was their experience and that same experience is what is on offer to those who would seek to follow Him today and certainty of belief is NOT a condition of entry.

But how do we know it's true? As I conclude this reflection, I can offer nothing better than words from the American Pastor and preacher, Frederick Beuchner.

'Come all you who would like to be faithful if only you could; all you who walk in darkness and hunger for light. Have faith enough, hope enough, despair enough, foolishness enough, at least to draw near to see for yourselves.'