

DOES GOD EXIST?

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT PAUL'S BORONIA, ON 11TH APRIL 2010

The question I would like us to consider today is this:

Is God real? Is God real?

There's a couple of ways to answer this.

Is God real? Yes, God is real. No, God is not real.

Or another way to answer it is – What do you mean by *real*?

Perhaps you are not surprised to hear that at least one of the answers to this question is Yes. Yes, God is real. Because, after all, we are sitting today as a church, which, among other things, itself exists to worship God. So, of course, since we are all rational people here today, we'd expect someone who stands where I am standing would believe in the reality of God. It would seem a natural pre-requisite, wouldn't it?

So, Yes, God is real. I want to affirm that. But the more intriguing question I would like to think about this morning is WHY. Why do I say God is real? What is the basis for my assertion that God is real?

First off, let's look at this fellow Thomas about whom we heard in today's Bible reading. I want to look at Thomas, because here is one character in the Bible who seemed to have trouble believing what others around him had no trouble believing.

Who is Thomas?

Well, Thomas is one of the followers of Jesus. He has been travelling around Palestine for the last three years, listening to Jesus, seeing the amazing things Jesus has done and said. In the end, he stood on the sidelines as Jesus was arrested, and put to death. The soldiers took Jesus' body down from the Cross, and placed it in a tomb.

There are four different accounts in the Bible about what happened next. In some matters they agree, and in other matters they disagree. They all agree on one central idea. Namely that Jesus died, came back to life and appeared to some of his followers in the days following his death.

On other matters there is less agreement. For example, none of the writers appears to have been too concerned on the timing of events. And that's because life in the culture of Palestine didn't follow a schedule, like our lives today.

Especially in the Western world we are addicted to scheduling. We have clocks everywhere. Not only on our walls and on our wrists, but on our phones, on the dashboards of our cars, on the front or tops of buildings, announced on the radio between every song, on the bottom right hand corner of our computers. Unless you have a Mac. It's in the top right hand corner on a Mac. Unless you moved it.

If you try to put the schedule of the four accounts of Jesus death and coming back to life together, you've got to have Jesus dying on Thursday, so he can rise on Sunday. Personally, I think we should point this out to the Government so we can get one more day added to the holidays. But I think the point here is that the timing of events is not important to the writers of the Bible. They lived in a society quite unlike our own in that respect.

We find it hard to think about a culture in which time is something in the background. I know I find it hard to think of such a culture. I'm from that old school that was taught that punctuality is a virtue. I reckon the great advantage of a mobile phone is that I can ring and explain why I'll be five minutes late.

Of course, when I arrive at the meeting five minutes late, I'm still earlier than half the attendees. Most of whom drift in during the next twenty minutes without any apparent conscious awareness that they've done anything wrong. And, of course, that's my point. In their understanding they have NOT done anything wrong. This idea of strictly adhering to a schedule is NOT a problem for them. It's a problem for ME.

When we lived in Hong Kong I learnt a very useful Cantonese phrase—*gam seung ha*. It's a bit like *ish* in English. When I would ask a Chinese friend or colleague when we should meet, they would often offer a time and add *gamseungha*. So 12 o'clock became twelve-ish. About 12.

In time, of course, I got used to me being the first to arrive everywhere. The simple truth seemed to be that my Chinese friends placed a different value on time compared to me and my Western ways.

I'm belabouring this point because I think we shall understand this character Thomas a bit better if we try to see how he would have been understood by the people around him.

So what happens?

Well, according to John, the writer of the 4th version of this event and the version read to us today, Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene and second, to all the disciples, except for Thomas. Thomas is somewhere else.

Jesus shows the disciples his wounds, in his hands and side. And then he says "Just as the Father sent me, I send you."

I think there's a connection between Jesus showing them his wounds, and this phrase "Just as the Father sent me, I send you." How does the Father send Jesus? He sends him to be wounded. The Father sends Jesus to take sides with those who are unjustly treated. He sends Jesus to be a victim of injustice. He sends Jesus to be a scapegoat. But a victim who is not destroyed by injustice.

There's much that could be said about this, but I want to move onto this character Thomas and his reaction when he hears the news.

Because, during the next week, the disciples bump into Thomas and tell him they have seen Jesus.

Now, Thomas, does not believe them. He says "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

And in that phrase, Thomas expresses **our** modern dilemma. Thomas wants evidence. He wants facts. He wants proof.

It's like Thomas has been spirited Back from the Future. Because isn't that what we hear all around us today?

I won't believe in God until I have proof. I want evidence. Show me the facts that prove God exists, and then I'll believe. Until then, I am an atheist.

There is a logical flaw in this position, by the way. The atheist who says that God does not exist because there is no evidence, cannot show the evidence that God does not exist.

Are you still with me?

You cannot find facts to prove God exists. That is correct. But also, you cannot find facts that prove God does not exist. That is also correct. *I believe God exists* is a statement of faith. And *I believe God does not exist* is also a statement of faith. Lacking the evidence one way or the other, people say what they believe to be true. Because neither statement can be scientifically demonstrated to be true.

And so we come to Thomas. Why do I say he is "Back from the Future?" No he doesn't arrive in a DeLorean with a flux capacitor in the back.

But Thomas, more than anyone else in this story, says what most of us living in the Western world in the modern 21st century would probably say. "Show me the evidence. Then I'll believe it."

Well, just in case you missed it in this morning's Bible reading, the week after Jesus appears to the first lot, he appears again. The story says Jesus "came through the locked doors."

How cool is that!

Thomas, of course, knows that dead people don't come through locked doors. And yet he apparently has pretty compelling evidence that his belief system might have a few holes in it.

Jesus, who I reckon was the master of many things, including irony, says to Thomas, "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe."

At this, Thomas does not do what I expect him to do. If he is the rational, scientifically-minded, evidence-based kind of guy he puts himself out to be, he will do what Jesus suggests, won't he? He'll take hold of Jesus' hands. He'll inspect the holes where the nails went in. He'll look for the rope burns on his wrists. He'll do as Jesus suggests. Stick his hand in his side.

But Thomas does not do what we expect.

He simply says "My Master! My God!"

It's pretty clear that in this moment, Thomas realises that his way of understanding the world is not sufficient. Whether he inspects Jesus' wounds or not, there is no way to explain in logical, factual terms, what is happening right now.

A dead man has walked through doors. It just doesn't make sense. But he cannot deny his experience. Something has happened here beyond logic. Something outside his understanding of the world. It makes no sense. Yet it is his experience.

Is God real?

Yes. God is real in the experience of millions of people down through history. Before and after Jesus.

One might even say that the most compelling *evidence* for the reality of God is the never-ending search by human beings for an understanding of what God is.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, written a bit over 2,000 years ago, the writer observes that God has “set eternity in the hearts of men.”

In the 18th century, the French philosopher, Blaise Pascal put it a little differently. He wrote “There is a God-shaped hole in the heart of every man.”

And in the 20th Century the French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre revised the saying to reflect how much had changed in less than 200 years. Sartre’s version was “There is a God-shaped hole in the heart of man where the divine used to be.”

Some would suggest that this continuous awareness of the need for God, is itself *evidence* for God.

But in using the idea of *evidence* we can easily fall in to the world’s trap.

Because, if God is real, God must be something quite beyond evidence.

And that’s why, in answer to the question, Is God real? I might answer with another question. What do you mean by real?

God does not exist in any way that we can think of *existence*.

You see, the evidentiary road to understanding God, the attempts to understand God by looking for evidence will always lead us down roads limited by our own understandings. In other words, we shall create God in ways that are limited by our own limited understandings. To put it yet another way, we create God in our own likeness. And it is not a God that we create, it is an idol.

As surprised as I was to find myself agreeing last week with one of Australia’s most conservative churchmen, I found myself agreeing with the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney. In his Easter address, Dr Peter Jensen described atheism as “a form of idolatry in which we worship ourselves.” A bit harsh maybe, but it got him into the news. I’d hope to say it a bit more kindly. That is, if we have only an idea of God that is limited by what we can explain, then we are worshipping something of our own making. And that, a god of our own making, is the definition of an idol.

So, no, God does not exist in any way that we can explain with our limited understanding. Of course, we try to describe God as best we can. We have many names and adjectives for God, but we need to agree that none of them is in any way adequate.

Now, I’m sure some of us, schooled as we are in post-Enlightenment rationality are saying but Philip, you’re suggesting we just make a mindless irrational commitment to something that is nothing.

Well, no. I am suggesting that, in the absence of conclusive evidence one way or another, each one of us has a decision to make.

We can choose to be atheist. We can say, in the absence of conclusive evidence one way or another, I choose to believe that God does not exist.

OR we can choose to believe. We can equally say, in the absence of conclusive evidence one way or another, I choose to believe that God does exist.

And maybe you will say that, since I am a rational thinking human being, I will always adopt the first position, that I will not believe things for which there is no conclusive evidence.

Well, if you want to take that position you will be out of step with most of the world's scientists. You see, we all begin with statements of belief, before they are proven by conclusive evidence.

Take one of the great theories of the 20th Century. One aspect of Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity is that a rotating body warps and twists the "fabric" that combines the three dimensions of space and the fourth dimension of time.

Now this theory, that space-time is bent by the rotation of the earth, was not proven by conclusive evidence until 2004. NASA scientists measured two satellites orbiting the earth and found that they did shift as the planet pulled on space. They needed instruments that could measure the orbits of the satellites with an accuracy of millimetres. Such instruments only existed in the last couple of decades.

So from 1915, when Einstein first proposed his General Theory of Relativity, until 2004, scientists the world over BELIEVED in the theory without conclusive evidence. One hundred years of simple belief without conclusive evidence.

Someone asked me years ago, why I believed in God. My answer wasn't well thought out, but it turned out to be the most accurate thing I could say. Even today.

I said, "I find it easier to believe in God, than not to believe."

Maybe it's because there's a God-shaped hole in my heart that only a belief in God can fill.

Maybe it's because there are so many wonderful coincidences in my life that it is easier to believe in a Divine purpose than in coincidence.

Maybe it's because there seems to me to be something beyond the natural and human in the way I've experienced and seen love and grace in action.

Maybe it is because I find it easier to have faith in a life of meaning, than a life of meaninglessness.

Maybe it is because I find it easier to believe we are put here for a purpose, and not merely to be born, live pointless lives, and disappear after we die.

There is so much in our world that makes no sense, and about which I have doubts and uncertainties. Richard Dawkins might call me a fool for thinking some of this could be God at work, but I think I'm no less of a fool than the one who thinks it is not God at work.

But back to Thomas. We tend to think that Thomas's problem was that he had doubts. I think that is to misunderstand him. I think that Thomas's problem was that he was a 21st century man living in a 1st century world. Like so many of us today, we say we cannot believe in the things we cannot see. Even though we are blind to the fact that we live every day taking for granted a whole range of things we can neither see nor sense.

I reckon that in that moment that Jesus appeared, Thomas's world view changed for ever. Not because he had some new facts, but because his experience in that moment was something beyond belief. At least, beyond belief as he had experienced it up until then.

Thomas had an experience that transcended his reality. It was an out of this world experience. It was an ecstatic experience. You know what the word ecstatic means? Yes, it means really happy, or amazingly joyful. But I mean etymologically, where does the word ecstatic come from?

It comes from a Greek word meaning to “stand outside yourself.”

And that is what, I believe, happened to Thomas. He had an understanding of himself and his world that was shaken apart by the experience of Jesus returning as if from the dead. It caused him to stand outside himself, or at least his understanding of the world and how it works.

You see, Thomas’s response is not to go over and check out the facts. He does not put his fingers in Jesus’ wounds. He simply stands there and says “My Master! My God!”

Some may suggest that Jesus walking through doors somehow proves he must be God. And, if only Jesus would suddenly appear in the middle aisle today, we would all believe he is God.

But that is just being impressed by signs and wonders. Let’s be impressed for sure. Just like we are impressed by the way magicians make things appear and disappear. But this kind of belief is not the same as faith.

I just read a book called “The Case for God” written by Karen Armstrong. She said something about faith that I found really helpful. And I saw it quoted in an article in last Tuesday’s Age.

She said, belief is a commitment not a proposition; faith, as in “I have faith in you”, is an expression of confidence, not an assertion of the existence of something. Belief in God is a truth which cannot easily be put into words and which can only be fully understood through long experience - rather like the love of a parent for their child growing into adulthood.

Can you prove the existence of love? Or beauty? Or compassion? Or grace?

You may be able to see the RESULTS of love, but love itself is something outside of scientific rationality.

The other terrific insight in Karen Armstrong’s statement lies in her statement that faith is a truth which can only be fully understood through long experience. Long experience.

And here, I think, is the real reason that many people in the world are unsure about the reality of God. They haven’t had much experience of God. They may have had some idea of God at some time in their lives. They may have believed in God as a child. But they don’t have any “long experience” of God.

And faith takes practice.

When I was at school I was rather fond of debating. We had regular competitions with other schools. We would practise our arguments during lunch times and after school. The more we debated, the better we got. Practice made perfect. Well almost. I think we got beaten once by Brisbane Grammar.

I was at Brisbane Boys’ College. Debating was optional for the boys. Rugby union was not. Everyone in the school was required to wear the striped football jersey and play rugby union. This meant that there were 8 teams in the senior school. I was in the Eights.

Now the thing about the Eights was that only one other school in the competition, namely Nudgee College, had eight teams. And that meant we only played one game for the whole year. Brisbane Boys’ College versus Nudgee College.

Now despite the lack of competition, the boys in the Nudgee College Eights practised for the whole season. They would have practice matches against their higher teams every week.

The match between Brisbane Boys College Eights and the Nudgee College Eights was the second last fixture of the season. It was to be played on a Wednesday afternoon at Nudgee.

The Brisbane Boys College Eights practised together as a team for the first time on the Monday before the Wednesday match day. We practised again on the Tuesday before the Wednesday match day.

Armed with all the benefits of two hours of practice, we confronted the Nudgee College Eights who had been practising all season. The score was 75 points to nil. We were nil.

We realised that to be good at Rugby Union, we had to practise Rugby Union.

Well, faith is just like that. It's a gift. It's a gift given to everyone. There is a God-shaped hole in everyone's heart.

But if you want to use this gift, I think you have to exercise it.

In 1910, G.K. Chesterton wrote a book called "What's Wrong With The World?" which included perhaps his most famous quote. He said ""The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

Faith is a choice. It's a choice I made as a child to express confidence in God. It's been a choice to practise that faith or confidence as days and years go by.

And just as our muscles grow stronger the more we exercise them, our faith grows stronger, the more we practise it.

And it's true, whether our faith is in the reality of God, or our faith is in the idea that God is not real. Practising either form of faith will make that faith stronger.

In other words, if we spend our whole life practising to be an atheist, we'll probably get pretty good at it. Not as good as Richard Dawkins perhaps, but good enough to proudly boast about our atheism.

Or, if we spend our whole life practising faith in God, we might start to get more and more confident of the reality of God.

Finally, there is a post-script to the story of Thomas. Let me read from a 1953 edition of TIME magazine:

"When 16th century European priests arrived in southern India to introduce Christianity, they were told that a more famed Christian missionary had been there first. In the districts of Travancore and Cochin, there was already a community of Indian Christians with a tradition of loose communion with the Roman Catholic Church. The man who first converted them, the Indians said, was none other than St. Thomas the Apostle (the "Doubting Thomas"), who arrived in India aboard a Roman trading vessel in 52 A.D.

"Whether St. Thomas actually preached under the palm trees of Travancore and Cochin is a point that historians have neither proved nor disproved. But nowadays (in 1953) there were 2,357,000 Indian Christians in the area."

Here's another thing no-one can prove, one way or the other. We have only the evidence of legend.

But what a lovely legend.

If Thomas had doubts about Jesus, he did not have them for long. Thomas exercised his faith in the best way one can. By living it out. A life of practising his faith.

Thomas made the choice. He chose faith in God.

Each of us has the same choice.

There's a God-shaped hole in our hearts. What's your filled with?