28TH JUNE IRENEAUS OF LYONS

Irenaeus is often paired with Justin Martyr as the two major Christian apologists, although Justin belongs to the previous generation. The little of what we know about his life comes mainly from Eusebius of Caesarea, the first real historian of the church, who seems to have venerated him greatly.

Irenaeus was born in about 130, in or around Smyrna, and was educated in Rome, from whence he settled in Lyon as priest, becoming bishop in 177, following the death of his predecessor during a major persecution there, from which Irenaeus had been fortunately absent on an embassy.

Eusebius of Caesarea, in book 5 of his history of the church, gives an account of this persecution in Lyons, and at section 4 quotes verbatim a letter written to Rome by ‘the martyrs’ commending Irenaeus who was already a presbyter at the time.

‘We have entrusted this letter to our brother and companion Irenaeus to bring to you: we beg you to hold him in high regard, as one zealous for the covenant of Christ, for if he had thought that rank could confer righteousness upon anyone would first have recommended him as a presbyter of the church, which he is in fact.’

We also obtain some information that makes it clear that the gifts and charisms of the Holy Spirit continued for some generations after the passing of the apostles, although there seem to have been no reliable reports after the end of the second century: Irenaeus writes:

‘But if they claim that the Lord has done these things in appearance only, I will show from the prophetic writings that all these things had been foretold about him, and that they really happened and that He alone is the son of God. His true disciples in return, having received grace from him use it in his name to benefit others according to the gifts each has received from him. Some truly expel demons; so that those cleansed from evil spirits believe and join the church; others have foreknowledge of the future and prophetic speech; still others heal the sick by the laying-on of hands and restore them to health, and even the dead have been raised, as I said and lived on with us for many years. It is not possible to number the gifts the church has received throughout the world from God … and uses daily for the benefit of the heathen, deceiving none and profiting from none. Having freely received from God it freely ministers.’

Irenaeus it is who quotes the story regarding the production of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, commissioned by Ptolemy for his library in Alexandria: that 70 of the finest scholars were dispatched from Jerusalem for the purpose and that Ptolemy had them separated to guard against falsehoods, and ordered them to do their work in total isolation. When the 70 were brought together it transpired that every word of each translator’s work matched, so it was concluded that the text must have been inspired.

Unfortunately, this story has been the cause of far more mischief between Jews and Christians than either Irenaeus or Ptolemy could possibly have imagined. If the 70 manuscripts were, indeed, identical, so were many of their mistranslations from Hebrew and Aramaic, which the vast majority of New Testament writers relied on when occasionally misquoting and often misinterpreting the prophets. For a full survey into all this it is worth reading Amy-Jill Levine’s excellent book: ‘The Bible with and without Jesus,’ which covers these important issues exhaustively.

As a young man Irenaeus had heard Polycarp preaching, who in turn, knew John the Apostle, so that he is seen as a connection between the first and second centuries, and between the apostolic and early church. He could trace all seven bishops of Rome back to Peter, and recorded some valuable information about the Gospels:

‘Matthew composed a written Gospel for the Hebrews in their own language, while Peter and Paul were preaching in Rome and founding the church there. After their deaths Mark, too, a disciple and interpreter of Peter, handed onto us in writing the things proclaimed by Peter. Luke, the follower of Paul, wrote down in a book the Gospel preached by John, the disciple of the Lord who had rested on his breast, produced a Gospel while living in Ephesus in Asia.’

Irenaeus is honoured as the first catholic theologian, contrasting Judaism with Christianity, the Jewish people having been chosen by the one God to carry his promises and blessings into the world, and the latter a bridge, by means of Jesus Christ, to make God’s redeeming love available to all nations. In order to authenticate these principles Irenaeus affirms that the message of Jesus was given clearly to his disciples, and from them, new leaders were carefully chosen to carry Jesus’ truths down the generations through the universal church; its branches, and into the world at large. …

BACKGROUND

Believers in what we would nowadays regard as the mainstream of Christianity – Catholics, Orthodox and ‘moderate’ Protestants, who take our underlying unity in diversity for granted, may find it difficult to imagine the struggle in the Early Church to establish its truth amid the fierce opposition with which it had to contend from so many and varied opposing forces: The word ‘Catholic’ at this time did not refer to Rome, neither did ‘Orthodox’ denote the eastern church: ‘Catholic’ simply meant ‘the church with orthodox worship and beliefs.’ The difficulty was that this orthodoxy was not established, according to what we now regard as mainstream [in the west] for another 300 years, taking the Council of Chalcedon, in 451 as its benchmark.

If we think of the parable of the sewer as a broad analogy, we can understand that, not only did a minority of seed produce its crop, but that the weeds that choked the rest were of many different kinds. Some scholars have, in fact, suggested that Jesus’ original parable in Mark ch4 may have been expanded by a later hand to reflect some of these vicissitudes.

Where, then, did the major forces of opposition come from?

Tom Wright has always maintained that there was no such thing as ‘the early church;’ only ‘churches,’ just as there were various contending forces within the Jewish religion of Jesus’ time: the Jesus movement was simply viewed as another of these until a formal break occurred in the 80’s. The book of Acts deals with differences among Christians who wished to retain their Jewish heritage and the gentile majority who won out.

The book of Acts also recounts the episode, in ch8, of Simon Magus who offered money to purchase the charisms of the Holy Spirit, but whom subsequent Christian generations regarded as the father of Gnosticism within Christianity. Another vector of opposition occurs in Revelations, when the author refers to the Nicholaeitans, who seem to have been followers of one of the original seven deacons who went his own way. Two of the churches are reproved for keeping on them some of these ‘heretics.’ Whilst Paul was contending much of the time with those believers of Jewish heritage who wish to impose their religious customs on gentile converts, he is also dealing with teachers of Gnostic beliefs, while anybody who has read commentaries on the Gospel of John will have come across Gnosticism, so what was it?

There was no such thing as Gnosticism but only a variety of Gnostic sects: they existed within paganism, within Judaism and so found their way inevitably into the church, and sometimes in ways that made it difficult for church leaders to identify and extirpate it. By their nature Gnostic beliefs were, and probably still are, eclectic, taking ideas from both religion and philosophy, but most have in common the trope that the real ‘truth’ – the ‘low-down’ – had been given to a small number of chosen people who were wise enough and generous enough to pass it onto others, usually at a price.

Space does not permit further explanations, but the first book of Irenaeus’ ‘Against Heresies’ lists the major Gnostic schemes of his time and sets out what he understands as the basis of their individual beliefs, and it is probably safe to read this first book for details. If you are positively bursting with curiosity, ‘The Lost Books of the Bible’ by Joseph E Lumpkin which includes the pseudepigrapha, the Hebrew Apocalypses and the Gnostic Gospels, has a long and detailed chapter on Gnosticism in general. Suffice it to say here that in the later book Irenaeus demolishes and satirises most of the major Gnostic heresies with clear-eyed gusto.

What is a heresy? The church has always taken upon itself to define and fight heresy, and, needless to say, not always along the principles of pure justice or mercy. It is much easier to sympathise with the struggles of Justin and Irenaeus than it is to whole-heartedly endorse policies and conduct of church leaders after the time of Emperor Constantine when legal sanctions and armies became available to its leaders as means of enforcement.

The matters at issue in determining what is a heresy are not always purely about theological wrangling, although some of the Greek fathers ran into new implied heresies in their wish to avoid old ones, and when power politics got in the way opponents took advantage of one another’s wording to press charges, as did Cyril of Alexandria.

It is probably safer and more compassionate to think of heresy in spiritual terms; as any belief or practice that tends to complicate, conceal or prevent free access to God’s redeeming and sustaining love by whatever means, be they of persuasion or coercion.

The actual word ‘Heresy’ comes from a Greek word meaning ‘choice,’ implying that the heretic has chosen to depart from the church’s beliefs, hence it is the church, in whatever form, that defines heresy. Another aspect of this definition is that the heretic is obstinately unwilling to return to the fold so that a lack of ‘Christian’ humility becomes an added ingredient. What this means for us is that if we happen to hold opinions that the church regards as unorthodox what saves us from heresy is our willingness to open our minds and accept guidance from appropriate sources, and to remain willing to learn.

Who were Irenaeus’ major targets?

Marcion is best known for his rather drastic reduction of the Bible to seven of Paul’s authentic letters, and those parts of Luke’s Gospel that did not imply that Jesus was divine: out went the whole of ‘The Old Testament,’ a consequence of his own brand of Gnosticism: Irenaeus demolishes his arguments, but the real danger was that Marcion was very rich and powerful. He was born in Pontus at some time in the 80’s and became a shipping magnate; member of an ultra-elite cadre with exalted socio-economic status within Rome, where he arrived in about 140 and joined the church, endowing it with 200,000 sesterces, a huge sum which the church returned once his true beliefs were discovered. Marcion had a gift for organisation, and by the time Irenaeus was writing there existed a Marcionite ‘church’ in parallel with the Christian. Like many other pedlars of religion, Marcion also had his ideas set to music, and his sailors very soon spread them round the Mediterranean ports.

Irenaeus’ chief target, however, was Valentinus, who had undergone a top-class education mainly in Plato’s philosophy, and had joined the church in Rome around 130, and, according to his enemies, had left the church when another and doubtless more suitable candidate had been chosen as bishop. Valentinus’ tactics were to insinuate himself and his followers into a church community and pick off the richest and most senior members, many of whom converted to his Gnostic beliefs. This was particularly dangerous because while others were gathering converts from outside the church Valentinus and the Valentinians were parasites on the church itself. …

Irenaeus’ treatise ‘Against Heresies’ is in five books, the first of which sets out his opponents’ cosmologies with fair-mindedness, before going on in later books to ridicule, satirise and demolish them, often with a logical bent that displays his own considerable learning. In book 3, and in a separate treatise entitled ‘On the Apostolic Teaching,’ Irenaeus sets out the Christian faith clearly and informatively, and, like Justin before him, in a manner that has helped subsequent generations in our understanding of early church history.

Here are some quotes to illustrate Irenaeus at his best:

As those who see light stand within its compass and share its brilliancy, so those who see God are in God and share his splendour.

The Son has revealed the Father from the beginning. He was with the Father in the beginning. He revealed God to the human race through the visions of the prophets, through various gifts, through his own ministry and the glory of the Father, at appropriate times, and in order, for our benefit.

This is why the Word became the disposer of the Father’s grace, for the benefit of humankind, and for our sake made these generous arrangements, revealing God to us, and raising us to God. In raising us to God, he shields the Father from human sight, lest we ever undervalue God through familiarity, and also so that we always have something to strive after. On the other hand, he revealed God to us that we would not fall away, and as a result, cease to exist; FOR THE GLORY OF GOD IS A HUMAN BEING FULLY ALIVE, and the life of humanity consists in the vision of God. Thus, if the revelation of God in this world gives life to every living thing, how much more will the revelation of the Father by the Word give life to those who see God.

God is the glory of humankind. We are the vessels which receive god’s action, his wisdom and power.

From the beginning the Son is present to creation, reveals the Father to all, to those the Father chooses, when the Father chooses, and as the Father chooses.

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PRAYER

Almighty God who upheld your servant Irenaeus to maintain the truth against every blast of vain doctrine, keep us, we pray, steadfast in your true religion, that in constancy and peace we may walk in the way that leads to eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, …

This week let’s take time to think through the whole meaning and intention of this prayer: what is true religion, and what is peace, and how we live in tension between the two.

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29TH JUNE PETER & PAUL

PETER & PAUL, the church’s celebration of Peter & Paul, is often known as Peter-tide, and is the time at which a lot of ordinations take place: we could say, then, that it’s an opportunity to make special prayers, not only for those to be ordained, but to reflect on the whole institution of ordained priesthood within the church, vis-à-vis other equally essential spheres of leadership and administration.

The nearest thing to ordination in the Bible, apart from Jesus’ special commission to Peter, is his bestowal of charismatic powers first when he commissions the twelve, and, later the 72, to go out and proclaim the Kingdom. At John ch20, on the risen Lord’s appearance to the disciples, he bestows the Spirit by breathing on them.

The laying on of hands as an outward sign of the bestowal of the Holy Spirit on those individuals so commissioned occurs in Acts ch13, when Barnabas and Paul are sent off from Antioch to do the Spirit’s work among the gentiles. At Acts ch10, when Peter meets the Roman God-fearer Cornelius, the Holy Spirit ‘falls,’ which is why the episode is known as the Gentile Pentecost: Peter doesn’t ordain anybody.

In the early church bishops seem to have been elected, presumably for their leadership qualities but, principally for their perceived holiness of life, but some of the earliest had not even been ordained as priests beforehand! Such elections would, for the most part, have given congregations the sense of having a stake in their own church communities. By the time Constantine institutionalised the church, far from being the prime target in a persecution, the office of bishop now became one of privilege - part of the system of patronage.

It’s been understood for generations that an apostolic succession from Peter cannot be validated historically, so why do we, in a church whose head is the monarch, insist on linking ordination with Peter; let alone Paul?

The answer, surely, is that leadership in the church is not the exclusive preserve of ordained ministers. In a sermon, St Augustine concedes that whilst the keys to the Kingdom were given to Peter, the Holy Spirit was bestowed on the entirety of the church. One of Luther’s radical ideas, formulated in reaction to a heavily top-down version of church, was that epitomised as ‘The priesthood of all believers.’ What this actually means is; The totality of all believing Christians forms a priesthood in the world.’ It is not intended to abolish the calling or the role of the priest; but, perhaps, to remind us that priesthood is one calling among many in the church, which, when ended, restores the bearer of these vital responsibilities to one among the many.

There will surely come a time when the celebration of Peter and Paul will become one of all the ministries in the church which are, at present, subordinated to that of the priesthood. The apostles very soon came to realise that the work of administering to the poor had to be delegated to deacons, and the recent debacle over the co-op’s finances has shown, albeit negatively, the value of a wise treasurer with financial probity. The work of a parish secretary is vital, as is that of church wardens, part of whose office is to supervise the parish priest.

Conversely, it is becoming clearer, not only through the experience of the ordinary parishioner, but through the work, for example, of a former boss of Westminster Pastoral Foundation, Dr Tom Leary, that far too many pressures both moral and administrative, are placed on clergy and their families.

Peter and Paul, however, together form as satisfactory a microcosm of church leadership on earth as any: they complement each other in so many ways. We might ask: ‘What about John, wasn’t he equally important?’ This week we also celebrate Thomas the Apostle, who stands in for all subsequent ’believers’ [and questioners!] Viewed carefully, Peter & Paul together model the whole dynamic of God’s church, not least because their violent quarrels were ultimately subsumed in their martyrdoms during the Neronic persecution of 64.

Just as we understand that whilst remaining eternal, the Trinity is dynamic within, so, while God’s church may be one entity throughout eternity, the differences, and even the disputes, between Peter & Paul represent the same dynamic of continuous exchange and movement within the church, although impeded by human sin and our inability to grasp the whole of God’s truth or meaning.

There have been, of course, many other dynamics at work in the church over the centuries; time, place; language, culture and economics. Another important tension exists between revelations of the Spirit to chosen prophets and mystics, and their containment within the essential boundaries of church order. Peter and Paul were endowed both with prophetic and mystical charisma, but both, too, had to struggle with issues of church order. While Jesus speaks of new wine in old skins, the example of the Pharisee Gamaliel stands as a model for those in authority who have been sufficiently grounded both in faith and prayer to attempt to mediate between the these two potent forces and tentatively re-define boundaries.

Another vitally important dynamic that peter and Paul shared, and which pervades the church as a whole, is brokenness. This may seem almost heretical for those who expect perfection from church leaders of every stripe, but it does seem that, for whatever reason beyond our comprehension, God uses our brokenness as an opportunity to impart us with new strength, which often results in renewal in both individual lives and institutions.

Peter had practical skills; an earthy piety and, as skipper of his boat, there was a potential for leadership that Jesus saw more clearly than anybody else. Nowadays people are often encouraged to say the second thing that comes into their minds, but nobody had yet thought to suggest this to Peter. His impulsiveness frequently got him into a fix, but never as badly as when he swore to Jesus that he’d never forsake him come what may. There are all kinds of literary and musical attempts to represent Peter’s self-loathing following his three denials, but how can they begin to approach what he must have felt! The three reaffirmations of his love for Jesus near the end of John’s Gospel do not stand for anything Jesus needed from Peter, but for his own and our reassurance of his forgiveness and re-instatement as chief of the apostles: Jesus’ commission to Peter to ‘feed my sheep’ has a far deeper and richer biblical and theological resonance than the image of the ‘rock’ which has more institutional connotations. In this way every believer receives a stake-holding in the leadership of the church on Earth.

Paul’s brokenness is of a different nature: the third chapter of Philippians has the broader picture; that, as a well-born and privileged Roman citizen; a Pharisee with the additional suit of a Hellenistic education, Paul was set up for a life of distinction. Gamaliel, his equally distinguished and well reputed teacher, would, doubtless, somehow have furnished Paul with an ability to see matters from both sides, but such moderation had been relegated to somewhere in Paul’s sub-conscious by the time he left Jerusalem and went after these Christian ‘sectaries’ an enterprise which, by the way, may not have even been sanctioned legally or by tradition: so he was already content to break existing boundaries, and the rest we know.

Whether Paul – Saul – actually went blind is a question that could be answered at two levels: yes, he might have, but there’s also a profound image of a lost and broken soul. What becomes apparent from a close reading of the New Testament is that he had a monstrous ego, and that he understood that one way and another God needed to keep him ‘right size.’

An interesting speculation is whether his famous ‘thorn in the flesh’ might have been a visual impairment: ‘See what large letters I write…’ This was someone with an education in rhetoric, but he admits that he was no orator: lack of eye contact is a major handicap for somebody trying to hold the attention of a crowd, something else Paul acknowledges of himself. If, in reality, Paul had lost his sight following his conversion, we read that it was restored by Ananias in Damascus; but remember the blind man Jesus healed only partially at first: ‘I see men as trees.’ If Paul received only a partial restoration of his sight, there is enough spiritual allegory in there to keep theologians busy for centuries!

This brokenness had fractured the church long before Peter and Paul fell out over protocol for gentile converts. It’s really a dynamic the church inherits from its Jewish roots, where passionately held beliefs engender fierce controversies, often poisoned with power politics and vituperative personal abuse and hatred. It is important to understand that these sins that so often tarnish and contaminate even the lives of the saints, are usually perversions of a passionate love and a conscientious search for justice and truth.

Tom Wright informs his readers that’ There was never one Christian church; only Christian churches; but, of course, he’s referring to the church here on Earth.

St Augustine also maintained that the role of a priest is valid, regardless of his ‘worthiness;’ in other words, that it is primarily the office, rather than the individual human, that is engraced. Given that we have established that brokenness is an essential manifestation of Church, is it realistic or mature to expect our priests to be more’ saintly’ than the saints themselves, and if you continue reading the lives of these saints it becomes easy to understand Desmond Tutu’s dictum that: ‘God has very high standards, but very low expectations.’

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1ST JULY JOHN & HENRY VENN

JOHN & HENRY VENN were important figures both in the anti-slavery campaign and in the Church Missionary Society. At a time when we are emphasising that ‘black lives matter’ the importance of their work can hardly be over-estimated.

John Venn was born in 1754 and became Rector of Holy Trinity Clapham in 1792, when Clapham was a village south of London, surrounded by rich villas. Many of the men and women who became members of the ‘Clapham Sect’ lived in the area and attended Holy Trinity; John died in 1813: his son Henry, born in 1796, became, in 1846, the Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, and remained its administrative and organising genius for the next 32 years until his death in 1878.

The Clapham Sect was an extraordinary group of well-healed philanthropists all of whom were Evangelical Christians, who earned the nickname of ‘the saints,’ through their consistent efforts to put an end to the slave trade; to make slavery itself illegal in Britain, and to campaign to have slavery abolished world-wide. They were also keen to bring about penal reform and to improve morality in general. By their instigation, the colony of Sierra Leone was established for freed slaves to live, and another of the Clapham Sect’s members founded Freetown and became its first governor.

By the middle of the 19th century the group had grown to include anything up to a third of all Anglican clergy, though no longer known as the ‘Sect,’ it is suggested that their campaigns and their work set the bar for early Victorian morality. They were not single issue campaigners; working wherever possible to improve life, even to the extent of campaigning against cock-fighting and bear-baiting, and their support of the Factory Act improved the lot of workers.

One of the leading lights in the group was William Wilberforce, the MP and socialite who became a convert to the Evangelical church at the age of 26, and thought to resign his seat until John Newton, author of ‘Amazing Grace,’ encouraged him to remain, thinking of the good he could potentially accomplish by doing so. He was a friend of the Prime Minister, Pitt the Younger, who supported his campaign and helped Wilberforce present the Abolition Bill time after time until it finally passed into law. Incidentally, William Hague wrote an excellent biography of Wilberforce which is highly recommended.

Among other members of the original sect were the banker, Henry Thornton; Granville Sharp, a lawyer who had already won a decision that slavery was illegal in England. Lord Teignmouth, sometime governor of India; Charles Grant, a powerful member of the East India Council; Zachary Macauley, an estate manager and businessman; James Steven, who sat in court; and literary celebrity and writer on religious affairs, Hannah Moore.

They combined their efforts to influence public opinion, and to exert pressure on the government, by means of a journal, pamphlets and speaking. They were fortunate in having the support of the Bishop of London, and, eventually, of the Evangelical Archbishop of Canterbury.

What makes this group extra special is the extent of their individual sacrifices to further their cause: Macauley, for example, lost night after night of sleep at his tasks, and neglected his business to the extent that he lost much of his fortune. The banker Henry Thornton contributed up to 80% of his income to charity: another member of the sect was hounded to death by malicious rumours, while Wilberforce himself suffered a break-down and had to be physically defended from death threats by another MP, pistol in hand!

In 1807, however, 18 years after the Abolition Bill was first presented in Parliament, it passed; and finally, in 1833, months before Wilberforce died, the Emancipation Bill was passed following defeat after defeat.

Henry Venn had what would have been considered extraordinarily enlightened views on mission for his time: if you recall the article on Ini Korpuria, missionary to the Solomon Islands, he was encouraged by his bishop to grow his own native church communities, as opposed to Sundar Singh’s bishop, whose narrow-mindedness about wearing clerical garb and singing English hymns forced Sundar to leave college and strike out on his own.

Henry Venn was determined to provide preaching in vernacular languages in Africa, and to produce Bibles as soon as practicable. He was keen to set up a church led and supported by Africans, and told his African staff to disregard every European custom and taste except the Gospel values. They were undeterred by failure, supposing that, just because circumstances didn’t seem favourable, this was no excuse for waiting. Henry Venn was fully aware of the tendency among white missionaries to impair their ministry by high-handedness and the sense of superiority that many other missionaries brought to their work, almost without conscious awareness.

One thing that seems to characterise the Clapham sect, with its distinguished achievements, is their mutual love and care, meeting, as they did, in their own houses, and supporting one another through failures, and being content to accept with grace any small concession they were able to win. Perhaps some single-issue campaigners in our own time could achieve more and keep the public onside if they could only learn that lesson!

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5TH JULY THOMAS THE APOSTLE

THOMAS the APOSTLE is our friend and mentor. Those of previous generations who exhorted children and others not to be a ‘doubting Thomas’ either didn’t read the Gospels carefully enough, or failed to understand the distinction between faith as trust and belief, on the one hand, and faith as loyalty on the other. The former might be characterised as passive faith; the latter as active.

Thomas is mentioned in all four Gospels, but principally in John. At John ch11 v16 where he encourages the rest of the disciples to join him in following, Jesus to Jerusalem, [let us die with him] even while, at the same time, perhaps demonstrating something less than undiluted trust in the future!

He is better known, as is Phillip, at ch14, for having questioned Jesus as to where he might be going … He’s what we might call a sceptic, and what a philosopher would term an empiricist; ‘unless I can see/experience Jesus’ resurrection I can’t [not won’t] believe.

There is a difference between scepticism, which is healthy, on the whole, and cynicism, which is a stubborn determination to stay pessimistic and so to constrain oneself to thinking the worst. It is love that generates his doubt: he simply won’t dare to believe.

In a sermon, Gregory the Great proclaims that this whole sequence of events was, in fact, part of God’s providence. Here in ch20, as in ch17, during Jesus’ beautiful prayers for present and future disciples, it is clear that Thomas stands in for you and me. We cannot experience the physical presence of the risen Christ, for all that this gift has very occasionally been bestowed on a mystic or a saint. Jesus affirms: ‘Blessed is [s]he who believes without the physical experience of his risen presence. It is the ecstasy of Thomas’s joy that prompts him to exclaim: ‘My Lord and my God!’

One shouldn’t undervalue Thomas’s courage in speaking out when others might judge him for doing so; ‘doubting Thomas’ is a judgement in itself. Those of us who have taken part in experiential group work learn that to speak out is often to voice the queries and doubts of those who have so far lacked the courage to express them: Thomas’s initiative at ch14 facilitates Phillip’s later request for Jesus to ‘show us the Kingdom …’

One intriguing aspect of Thomas that doesn’t get mentioned is that he is a twin, and one might wonder where the other twin might be. A good deal of work has been undertaken around the psychology of twins, and the loss or absence of one can leave a deep emotional need to attach to somebody else.

So much for Psychology. Fortunately, another Thomas, Thomas Merton, wrote very reassuringly of the actual necessity for people with faith to hold it in tension with a certain amount of healthy doubt. Without doubt, after all, faith becomes certainty, and we know from experience what dangerous places we arrive at when armed with certainty! We are, after all, at base, nothing more than theological and spiritual speculators! The experience of prayer and meditation can, hopefully, at times feel like a rock of certainty, but how we interpret and build on those experiences requires self-understanding, reflection and the healthy realism that comes from doubt.

Just as broken bones set more strongly than before, so broken or bruised relationships can heal more strongly: when we pray: ‘’Lord, I believe: help my unbelief…’ God does, so often, answer that prayer, when made sincerely, with a gift of strength and reassurance. …… …… …… … …

PRAYER

‘Lord I believe: help my unbelief.’

Spend a while reflecting on your faith journey, and try to recall times when your faith has been seriously tested.