

## MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 19 April 2009, Clachan / Chleit

*1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Easter*

*preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff*

*hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)*

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### Welcome & Intimations

**Opening Hymn** : 'At dawn the women made their way' (CH 408)

**Children's Talk**

**Children's Hymn** : 'Come, children, join and sing' (CH 185)

### Prayer & Lord's Prayer

**Readings** : Isaiah 26:1-10 & John 20:24-29 (*in a new, colometric translation*)

*[Isaiah 26:]*

- 1 On that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:  
  
    'A strong city we have,  
    deliverance he sets around her, like inner and outer walls.
- 2 Open the gates,  
so that a righteous nation may enter,  
    one that keeps faith.
- 3 A steadfast mind you keep in lasting peace,  
because it trusts in you.
- 4 Trust in the ONE again and again,  
for the ONE God is a rock for all time.
- 5 For he has brought down who dwell up high,  
    the city set on high;  
he humbles it, he humbles it to the ground,  
    he levels it with the dust;
- 6 to be trampled underfoot  
by the feet of the poor,  
    by the steps of the needy.'
- 7 The path of the righteous is level,  
O upright One, you straighten the way of the righteous.
- 8 Yes, in the path of your judgements, O Eternal ONE, we wait for you;  
your name and your remembrance are the soul's yearning.
- 9 With my soul I yearn for you at night,  
    yes, with my spirit within me I eagerly seek you;  
for when your judgements come to the earth,  
    they learn righteousness, who dwell in the world.
- 10 If favour is shown to the wicked, without him learning righteousness,

in a land of honesty he will do wrong  
and not even see the majesty of the Eternal ONE.

*[John 20:]*

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas, one of the Twelve, who was called Didymus – *Twin*,  
was not with them when Jesus came.

<sup>25</sup> So the other disciples said to him,  
'We have seen the Lord!' –  
but he spoke to them,  
'Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails  
and put my finger on the mark of the nails,  
and put my hand on his ribs,  
I will not believe.'

<sup>26</sup> And after eight days the disciples again were inside  
and Thomas with them.

Jesus came after the doors had been shut,  
and he stood in their midst and spoke,  
'Peace be with you.'

<sup>27</sup> Next he says to Thomas,  
'Bring your finger here and see my hands,  
and bring your hand and put it on my ribs –  
and do not become unbelieving but believing.'

<sup>28</sup> Thomas answered and spoke to him,  
'My Lord and my God.'

<sup>29</sup> Jesus says to him:  
'Because you have seen me you have believed;  
happy are those who do not see and yet believe.'

**Hymn** : 'How often we like Thomas' (CH 432)

### **Sermon**

Let me tell you a story from the small country behind the dykes, we have all heard so much about. (You may have heard it before.)

Many years ago in the wide and open polder behind the old sea dyke there was this devout and righteous man. One horrible night, when the storm was raging, the church bell rang in great alarm. The neighbours shouted, 'Run for your life, the dyke is breaching!' But the man said he relied on God – and stayed in his house. The water came flooding in and he had to go upstairs. A boat came rowing to his bedroom window to pick him up. But he persisted he would rely on God – and the boat left him behind. The water kept rising and rising and the man ended up sitting on top of his roof amidst the roaring waves. A helicopter came to rescue him. But he refused, saying he relied on God – and thus he drowned. When he came to heaven he was pretty angry. 'I relied on you, God! Why didn't you save me?' 'Well,' God answered, 'first I sent your neighbours, then a boat and finally a helicopter. I think I certainly did my best.'

Faith, no faith, little faith. That's what the Bible readings are about today. And about the things we cannot see – things that appear to be essential for faithful people. How to make chocolate out of that?

What is faith? Quite often people think faith is about accepting a set of beliefs. Something like this. There is a God in heaven, who rules the earth; human beings are unable to do much – if any – good, since they are sinners; Jesus was human, but without sin, and he became God; if we believe in Jesus, we will go to heaven to live eternally. In this set of beliefs most is about things we cannot see – God, heaven, Jesus, eternal life – while the things we can see – human beings and their behaviour – are pictured pretty grim. Yet, often this is the kind of summary of christian faith as people see it.

It is rather useless to have discussions about this, because these tend to end in either accepting this set of beliefs as 'true', or rejecting it as 'nonsense'. In the first case you will be called 'a christian', in the second case you are 'a non-believer'.

It is quite easy to simply reject all of these christian beliefs as nonsense. Many who call themselves 'new atheists' do. To them all of these beliefs lack any rational evidence, are even unthinkable and a God interfering in our natural world is simply a concept that cannot be taken serious. For new atheists unbelief is the only reasonable answer to religion in general and christian faith in particular. Once people come to their senses, they know better – that's how they see it.

However, this 'new atheism' seems quite shallow to me. There is a kind of – excuse the pun – religious zeal behind it.<sup>1</sup> An open conversation about it is impossible, since religion just *is* nonsense. In a way these kind of atheists *believe* that they cannot believe.

Most people, however, are more realistic. They cannot help their disbelief about many of the ingredients of christian religion and they ask themselves questions about the truth of it. Is there a God? Are we only bad people and sinners? Would that kingdom of God ever come? Should we believe in miracles, heaven, redemption through Jesus? Disbelief is not something terribly bad, really. It simply shows that people use their senses, while at the same time they also want to listen to their heart and soul. We are not made of 'thinking tissues' only, are we? So, most people are somehow in the business of having little faith, to put it in Biblical wordings.

As I said, discussions about whether or not particular christian beliefs are true or false, or whether christians should just accept them or not, are pretty useless. They only keep to the surface and do not reach any deeper. Although we are strongly invited to think clearly, in the end we are not just thinking apes.

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting take on this subject from an unexpected, i.e. atheist, point of view is given by Julian Baggini in this week's Guardian (link retrieved from the website on 13/04/2009): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/13/atheists-christianity-religion-dawkins-bunting>

Faith truly is about the things we cannot see. But that is not the same as supernatural or magic events. And it is certainly not about any kind of evidence or proof for these things. As Isaiah said, faith is about trust in God and doing justice on earth. Being righteous is the fine art of practising and balancing both: trust in God and doing justice.

The letter to the Hebrews says: *faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*<sup>2</sup> (In the old King James Bible the word 'evidence' was used, but that is only confusing for us: between 1611 and today the revolutions of science and technology have deeply coloured the meaning of that word – so we should not use it any more.)

These *things not seen* are the things that feed our hope. That is not something outwith this world. In our daily reality there are more than enough things we cannot see. There is hope, love, faith – sure enough, but you cannot see them. Yet, you will sorely miss them when they are gone, and on the other hand you will certainly see their fruits and effects if they are at work. Wherever people find courage, think constructive or act positive, they draw from their sources of hope. Wherever people care for each other, build healthy relationships, show compassion, or are open to teaching and learning, they draw from their sources of love. Wherever people accept they are part of a much bigger total than the sum of their individual input, or perceive life as given to them and holy by its nature, they draw from their sources of faith.

None of these three, faith, hope and love, can be seen. But you really don't need to be religious to know them. (Unless, of course, you choose to reduce it all to 'biological processes' or chains of individual interests and purposes.)

Now the most important, and also the most difficult, thing is to distinguish between what is true and worth trusting, and what is false or selfish or just useless if it comes down to having faith, acting with love and living in hope. This does not require higher education or deep philosophy. The good Lord gave us three simple tools for it: a head to think, a heart to feel, and our guts to listen.

Thinking is not at all in opposition with faith. At least, it is not if you are open-minded enough to accept the limitations of our thinking. It is absolutely necessary to think well about our own and other people's intentions.

Is that family honestly supporting my lonely uncle, who is slowly losing his fight with the bottle? Or are they actually after his money? We should ask these questions and draw conclusions. (Disgracefully enough they were after my uncle's money, and the family was too late.)

When I was a nurse we had to reflect on our own actions. One observation was that we – the ward's male nurses – reacted at least twice as fast to any call from that interesting young woman who just had her appendix removed, than we did to calls from that grumpy old man who found it hard to accept losing his leg. It was a bit

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<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 11:1 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

embarrassing to observe, but it revealed that some of our motives for 'helping people' were quite selfish. It's nicer to get a lovely smile than to hear another growl, although in fact the man needed our help much more. Clear thinking can help us to distinguish between truth and selfishness.

But the world is not rational, really. We certainly need to listen to our heart as well. There is not much rational logic in running into a burning house to save a little child. In the wee town where I was born, it was the notorious smuggler and poacher who just followed his heart and got the child out in time, while the rest of the village was watching and obviously calculating their risk.

The same goes for gut feeling. It is not something I am particularly good in. I tend to suspect my guts, thinking I will be deceiving myself. But especially over the past few years in Scotland I had to learn how important it is to listen to my instinct. Once you dare to, you can see through people's false pretensions. You always have to check you gut feeling with rational thinking and your feelings – at least I have to – but then you will learn that instincts are special capabilities, deeply rooted in the evolutionary oldest parts of our nervous system. (Well. the choice to come to Kintyre was actually a matter of gut feeling – my brains are still questioning it, but my heart is at ease about our choice...)

These three things, head, heart and guts, are the basic tools to learn what faith is. This is how we find faith while at the same time we value our honest disbelief.

So what about Thomas? Is he a doubter, someone with little faith (or even less)? That is how he is usually seen. A poor example. I don't think that is fair. Thomas is giving us a perfect example of what we all should be doing. Thomas is the most realistic disciple. He doesn't take any miraculous event or heavenly vision for granted. He questions it all in a critical way. What we usually call doubt is actually more of the critical attitude of a philosopher like Socrates.

The fact that Jesus obviously appears again, especially for Thomas, can also be seen as a kind of reward for his critical thinking. To him Jesus' presence among his disciples becomes so real he can almost touch it. Mind: the story does not tell us that Thomas really touched Jesus. Yet, his experience is so real, that all of his reasoning and criticism is useless.

Like Thomas we should be critical about any spiritual or religious revelation. They could very well be nonsense, or means to manipulate us into a certain behaviour. But more important than that, just like Thomas, we should dare to be open for the mystery that can come to us out of the blue: God being present on earth, Jesus teaching and leading us here and now. Without supernatural beliefs, beyond metaphysical constructions, and bypassing any dogmatic system that is something that – to loosely quote John Calvin – we rather experience than understand.<sup>3</sup> Head, heart and guts are

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<sup>3</sup> Ioannis Calvinus, *Institutio christianæ religionis* (1559), IV,xvii,32 [English translation: Jean Calvin, *Institutes Of The Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979)]. The quote comes from Calvin's lengthy survey on communion and is rather surprising for a man we usually take for an extremely rational

all needed.

True faith is a religious category, because it relates us to God's reality and presence. But the only way to learn to know it, is to experience and practice it in real life. Living with hope is about seeing and creating future, about trust in life. Living with love is about comforting and healing each other and ourselves. Living with faith is about taking up the challenges of today and committing ourselves to make it work. It is *not* about sitting and waiting for God to perform his miracle – like the man on the roof. In honest faith we should do better than that.

Amen.

**Hymn** : 'Christ's is the world' (CH 724:1 and 4)

**Offering brought forward**

**Prayer of Intercession**

**Closing Hymn** : 'Blest be the everlasting God' (CH 424) / 'Away with gloom, away with doubt' (CH 418)

**Blessing**

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person. Obviously he wasn't as much as we think...