

Doubt as the Companion of Faith

I never much cared for the term “doubting Thomas,” because it’s a really unfair label to give Saint Thomas, who is front and center in this week’s Gospel. He is not there when Jesus comes the first time; perhaps upset and troubled about what has happened and needing to take some time alone. The first time Jesus comes everyone present sees the wounds in His hands and side as He says “peace be with you.” When Thomas has this opportunity, he says “My Lord and My God,” one of the boldest proclamations of faith in the Bible. His eyes see a man; but he knows this is God. And Thomas will lay down his life for the faith.

As we go through life, as we all know there are frequently valleys that we go through. Like Thomas before coming to know the resurrection has happened, we can feel quite dejected at times. Obviously it goes without saying the last year has been incredibly challenging with the pandemic, and even though we have hopes now it is beginning to wane, there are still so many challenges for us all. We all face our own mortality. We can be hurt by others decisions. We make mistakes and let ourselves and others down. We see so much evil in the world that at times it can be overwhelming. But the question is what do we do when the doubts come at us about what is going on and will it ever get better and where God is in all this? How do we make peace with the doubts?

As a starter, we remember there’s a difference between doubt and despair. Despair is where we give up on God completely. Doubt is where we question. Thomas this week in the Gospel wasn’t present when Jesus came the first time. But remember, the others doubted too until they saw the wounds and heard the words “peace.” Thomas though then sees the wounds and touches the Lord and says “my Lord and my God.” His eyes see a man; his heart knows God is there. What a profession of faith. Jesus surely must have experienced doubts too in the garden before His death. But He and Thomas trusted. Thomas wasn’t there the first time Jesus came; maybe he left to ask God some questions in prayer. But he didn’t keep on walking. He went back to the room; Jesus left the garden and picked up His cross. We need to remember there is more to the story than meets the eye when things are going bad, and trust that God has a plan and better days are ahead.

Second, remember faith isn’t contingent upon feelings. Sometimes God feels very close. Think of holding your child for the first time if you’re a parent, or having a tea party with your 4 year old little girl and her stuffed animals. Then think about getting a door slammed in your face and that same child being enraged with you for saying no you can’t go to that party when they are 15. The point is the parent doesn’t stop loving their child, even if the love in one situation might seem like it’s not being returned. In our prayer life, sometimes God may feel far away. Or we may pray and not feel like we’ve gotten an answer. These feelings, or lack of them, can go on for a while. But in these moments, it’s important to keep trusting. Silence does not mean God is refusing to act.

Third, trust. We don’t know the big plan. And it can be hard to see past the short-term situation we may be in. I think of Saint Charles de Foucauld, the saint who ministered to the Muslims in Algeria. He once said something to the effect of it maybe just being his

job to till the soil when he hadn't gotten any converts to Christianity. God is working things out, and with God all things are possible. Sometimes His timeline and ours differ, but ultimately things work out because God is in control.

Fourth, believe in God but also in yourself. God has put you and me here for a reason, and when we discern our mission, we have to remember it's a marathon, not a sprint. Trusting that God has a plan, and discerning what that is, it can be tempting at times to give up when things aren't going well. But as I said, Thomas came back to the room, and ultimately he died for the faith. While I've had some challenges as a priest, I've never doubted that this is what God asked me to do with my life for my vocation. Inevitably we may doubt at times how we do as a parent, a spouse, a priest, or whatever our vocation is. We may look back at our shortcomings and be frustrated when we make a mistake again. But inside all of us, as we heard during the Easter vigil reflecting on Genesis and creation, is such good. God sees this, and we need to as well, knowing He'll see us through but also that He believes in us.

Fifth, have patience. Again, know you will fail at times in your vocation; you'll make mistakes and fall back into a sin; you'll let someone down. This patience though we also need to have with other people. It can be so hard when people make bad decisions, or we wonder why a person has seemingly lost their way. This patience is tempered by staying involved in their lives - note the first reading says the apostles "bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:33). We do this by lovingly meeting people where they are at and challenging them when they are doing something immoral or falling away from the faith, but it must always be done wisely; admonishing or shaming does not work. But a conversation in private or listening first before giving some advice can go a long way. However it takes time for the seeds to grow, and it can be frustrating when a person seems to "not get it" or we ourselves fall into a sin. God never gives up on us though. So let's strive to be patient, because eventually God's grace can do so much in a soul.

And lastly, look to others to help build your faith. Thomas was not alone in that room; the others were with him, and helped him complete his mission. Seek people out, especially if you are having doubts about God, the future, or yourself - people who will support but also listen to you, and help to run the marathon of life with you. Remember it was because of Mary of Magdala that Peter and John left the room the first time, and found the empty tomb. The same is true with others who lead us to Jesus when we are doubting and afraid.

Life can be so frustrating. So much is out of our control, we see evil around us day in and day out, and also deal with things like our health or things other people do to us that are out of our control. But let us remember, as we've just celebrated during Holy Week, God's answer to sin and evil was to confront it - and He is victorious. Now it's our job to follow the apostles out of the locked room and to be God's witnesses in this world, which has so much good in it. So too is there so much good in humanity, and in you - so believe in yourself and this world by living out the virtues of faith, hope and love.

Remember doubt is no sin. It means we have an engaged faith life, and are thinking. So make friends with the doubts and accept them, but don't let them take over. Because Jesus' victory is ours too, and He will lead us to the finish line even if that line can be hard to see.

God's blessings to you!
Fr. Paul