
After the Death of the Pope: Doubting Thomas and Competent Witnesses

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Second Sunday of Easter

(This is the complete text of Sam Candler's sermon for 3 April 2005. Some sections were omitted during the actual Sunday deliveries at 8:45 a.m., 11:15 a.m., and 7:00 p.m.)

*Jesus finally said to Thomas, and to the other disciples,
"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."
John 20.29*

I have spent much of my priestly life trying to explain to folks that the Anglican Church, the Anglican branch of Christianity, and the Episcopal Church, is not the Roman Catholic Church.

We do not have a pope. The Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church accept the marriage of priests. We ordain women to the priesthood and to the episcopate. During theological debates or moral disputes or church hierarchy discussions, we note all sorts of other differences.

But not today. Today reminds us of a great truth of Christianity. Today, we mourn the death of Pope John Paul II. The Cathedral of St. Philip and the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church join our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters in remembering a holy man and a life well lived.

Today, we are Christians together. Today, it is worth remembering what the Christian Church holds dear and what we hold in common. We believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting!

Today, the week after Easter Day, is still Easter in the Christian Church. Today, with Christians around the world, we still celebrate the Feast of the Resurrection. Every Sunday we celebrate resurrection together.

We celebrate resurrection even when we have disagreements in our families. Even when we cannot agree about extraordinary measures to keep people alive. Even when we are puzzled. Even when we are mourning the loss of such a tremendous man as Pope John Paul II, we celebrate resurrection.

This is the belief that holds Christianity together. This is the belief that makes us brothers and sisters today. This mourning and this celebration is our communion together.

On this Second Sunday of Easter, the Christian Church always hears the gospel of Doubting Thomas. We hear how Thomas missed the first meeting of the disciples, and he did not see the risen Christ. Thus, he cannot believe as soon as the other disciples. He declares the memorable words, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later, Thomas does see Jesus. Thomas touches Jesus and proclaims, "My Lord and my God." Jesus replies, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet who believe."

Of course, after the Pope died yesterday, I have changed the opening remarks of this sermon. But the gist of my remarks is the same.

Consider the old childhood puzzle, "If a tree falls in the forest, and there is no one around to hear it, does it make a noise?" "If there is no one around to hear a sound, is there a sound?"

Pope John Paul II, who was a student of philosophy, knew the angles to that old puzzle. One side answers the riddle this way: "No. Sound is only sound when there is a receiver. There must be an ear, or a recording device, which can pick up the sound waves. If there is nothing to register the sound, then there must be no sound."

The more theologically-minded among us, from young to old, have always answered the problem this way. "It doesn't matter," they say, "whether there is a person around in the woods or not. It doesn't matter because God is always around. God is the ultimate and universal Observer. Since God is always present, there is always someone there to see or to hear."

Thus, the answer is yes. A tree falling in the forest does make a sound, because God is there to hear and witness it.

The great double-limerick by Ronald Knox sets out the theological nature of the puzzle this way:

There was a young man who said, "God
Must think it exceedingly odd
If he finds that this tree
Continues to be
When there's no one about in the Quad."

REPLY

Dear Sir:
Your astonishment's odd:
I am always about in the Quad.
And that's why this tree
Will continue to be,
Since observed by
Yours faithfully,
GOD.

Many of us, however, don't take God's word for it, do we? We don't take God's word for it. We are the descendants of the great Doubting Thomas. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Some of us have admired Doubting Thomas over the years, because he had the courage to say out loud what all of us are thinking internally. No matter how faithful I am, no matter how much I want to believe, I admit that I really will not believe unless I see for myself.

But it is impossible, it is impossible for each of us to be in every forest, at every moment of the day, and to hear every tree fall. That means we have to trust some other witness. Most of us have to trust someone else who has heard the news.

This is true, of course, not just about trees falling in the forest. This is true of the major pieces of life. Most of us have to trust someone else.

Who can we trust? Who do you trust in life?

This past week, I had a deep conversation with some good friends. We were talking about relationships, all kinds of relationships, from the most intimate to the most casual.

"What is it," we asked, "that we most value in relationships?" One answer was this: What most of us need in relationships is a "competent witness." Competent witness. This is a term used in legal circles, of course; but it is valuable in other circles, too -from the circle of those who enjoyed the movie, "Shall we Dance?" to the most intimate of religious circles, too..

In relationships, we want -deep down-- to be with someone who tells the truth about us, and whom we value and trust to tell the truth. They don't hide anything from us, and yet we love and trust and value them even when their witness does not seem immediately to flatter us.

Between two people, a healthy spiritual relationship exists when one person can tell the truth about the other and to the other, without shame or embarrassment or chagrin. And the other can hear the truth without getting defensive. What a gift those relationships are!

Most of us probably do not have those relationships. We may from time to time. We fall in love with someone so much that it doesn't matter what they tell us. We love them for it. But then, hard times come, hard rains fall, and we no longer want to hear what our partners say about us. Those are the tough times.

Doubting Thomas is such a tough biblical figure because he's so lonely. He did not have a partner he trusted. It's not just that he had not seen Jesus with his own eyes and touched Jesus with his own hands.

He had also missed the meeting with the rest of the disciples. He had fallen out of relationship. He could no longer trust their witness, their witness to the risen Christ.

Every single one of us, if we are to be spiritually healthy, must have relationships with other disciples who tell us the spiritual truth. In fact, the same thing is true about being merely human. If we are to be healthy people in general, we need to be in relationships which witness to the truth about us.

We need lovers who tell us the truth about ourselves, and whom we then believe. We need them in order to understand ourselves better! It's as if we don't really know the truth about ourselves until we have someone who can mirror that truth back to us.

And each of us needs spiritual advisors in the same way: priests, bishops, popes; wives, husbands, children, parents; teachers, mentors. We need fellow spiritual disciples, folks who can tell us the truth about God without our taking offense.

We need someone who has heard the tree fall in the forest, someone who has heard the news, who tells us about it, and who we then trust. We need someone who has experienced the resurrection of Christ, and who we then trust.

This is the great witness of the Christian Church, whether we are Roman Catholic or Episcopal. This is the common witness of every Christian, whether we are a pope or a newly baptized child.

Yes, we join our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters today in mourning the death of the pope, but we also join them in our common witness to the resurrection.

And we also learn three things from the story of Doubting Thomas.

One: In order to believe in God, we will have to trust someone. That is the first step, and it is always the first step in believing in God. We have to trust someone other than ourselves. Can you do it?

Two: The only way God can be known today is through you. You have to be a competent witness. Can you do it? Can you provide non-judgmental truth about another person? Can you be a non-judging witness to your partner?

Three: Can you provide non-judging witness to God? Can you witness to God in a way that does not put others on the defensive? I hope you can. I hope I can. We are the witnesses to God in the world today. We are the witnesses to the resurrection. In fact, we are all God has in the world. We are the arms and hands and legs of Jesus Christ today.

We are the way God makes truth known in the world. God uses competent witnesses, loving partners, devoted disciples, to speak the truth in love.

"Blessed are those who have not seen," said Jesus, "and yet who believe."

AMEN.

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