Thomas said, “Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

Well, that’s okay. It’s Thomas. We’ve come to expect that kind of brashness and questioning from him. After all, it’s the same “Doubting Thomas” we read about a couple of weeks ago in the episode that won him that title in the popular mind.

But there’s a more subtle kind of doubt at work just a little later in today’s episode. And this time it’s not Thomas. It’s Philip, another one of the original twelve.

Philip doesn’t say, “I don’t believe” or “I won’t believe,” like Thomas. After Jesus has talked about his relationship with the Father, Philip just seems to think aloud: “So show us the Father, then, and we’ll be satisfied. Our hearts won’t be troubled then.”

Jesus goes on at some length to say that the Father is speaking through him and working miracles through him, and that should be sufficient.

Jesus can’t show them the Father. Maybe the Son can’t order the Father around. Maybe that’s just not how it is with the Supreme Being; he doesn’t do tricks. Maybe because he, Jesus, is a man just like these men who are his faithful, if annoying and challenging, followers. Maybe because that’s his own code of conduct as the divine presence in incarnate, human, form.

Whatever the reason, there’s no back-and-forth here, no debate, no apparent inner struggle for Jesus. He doesn’t even say no. He just says you either believe ore you don’t, and there’s plenty of reason for you to believe.

That sent me on my inevitable foray into Bible and internet: the juncture of belief, knowledge, faith, doubt, trust. I’m always intrigued by it; it always seems to be roiling around inside me.

In our English version of the Bible I found 19 instances of “belief” (including unbelief) and a whopping 557 of “faith.”

Poking around online, putting the words “belief, doubt, faith, trust, knowledge” in the search bar, I wound up inside a high school textbook. Actually, a guide to the Theory of Knowledge course in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program.

Without getting too lost in the weeds, I’ll just say that this theory identifies eight ways of knowing: language, sense perception, emotion, reason, imagination, faith, intuition, and memory. I had access to the ten pages on faith. It’s a fair and even-handed approach, acknowledging four definition threads:

1. Faith as trust (I’ve spoken about that *ad nauseum*, I know)
2. Faith as loyalty and keeping promises (as in marriage vows)
3. Faith as in “taking things on faith” without further questioning for the moment
4. Faith as a subjective matter, as in a belief that rejects the need for justification, or a justification based on other justifications

This brief investigation, however arid and sterile-sounding, left me feeling, again, that I am among kindred spirits in the company of Thomas, Philip, the wayward Israelites in their Exodus, and the author of the line, “I believe. Help my unbelief.”

The speaker is the unnamed father of a boy demon-possessed or epileptic (take your pick). He had asked Jesus to help him, if he could. Jesus told him, “All things are possible for the one who believes.” The father’s response? “I do believe. [And, *soto voce* in my imagining it:] Help my unbelief.”

Talk about honesty and courage . . . and trust. It’s as if the man were thinking, “I’ve got to say I believe, and I want to believe, but there’s no way I can just lie to this rabbi; he’ll know the truth anyway,” so he said exactly what was in his heart and mind. And his son was healed.

I know: all this from Philip’s simple unguarded statement, “Show us the Father, and we’ll be satisfied.”

This is a question of faith and trust, not of proof and verification.

Philip, Thomas, the desperate father, *et al*, shore up my belief that all of us experience doubt, even moments when we question our faith. *Most* of us—how’s that, in case you’ve never had the experience—go through times in our lives we might see as testing our faith.

For some this whole era of pandemic might be such a time. Not, I can say with some gratitude, for me. I have heard it said that God is testing our faith with this. I do not believe that. The God in whom I believe doesn’t stoop to such tactics, doesn’t try to catch us out in doing or saying the wrong thing. Quite the opposite: God is right there with us whenever we falter, take a misstep, or just flat-out sin, and does everything possible to bring us back into his embrace. God wants us to succeed in difficult times, to live abundant lives, in the words of last Sunday’s Gospel.

It’s in our nature to want certainty—plain, unadorned, bookable proof. But in the questions that endure, the tough ones about meaning and purpose, we have to rely upon faith, to trust that we have always been and always will be in the concern and care of perfect love. And we are, right now, in the hands of the loving God who created all that is, including ourselves.

My friend Russ Archibald, whom I mentioned last Sunday, died, either while we were in our virtual coffee hour or shortly after.

One of the many people who offered expressions of love and concern for his family shared a quotation you might know. The author was an Anglican priest, Henry Scott Holland, Canon of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London. It comes from his sermon following the death of King Edward VII in May 1910.

I hope you can hear the truth among these words, almost hiding behind the images. I hope you can see how this eloquent expression of faith can be applied to any time in our lives, not only at the time of death, and especially in our present time:

Death is nothing at all. It does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room. Nothing has happened. Everything remains exactly as it was. I am I, and you are you, and the old life that we lived so fondly together is untouched, unchanged. Whatever we were to each other, that we are still. Call me by the old familiar name. Speak of me in the easy way which you always used. Put no difference into your tone. Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes that we enjoyed together. Play, smile, think of me, pray for me. Let my name be ever the household word that it always was. Let it be spoken without an effort, without the ghost of a shadow upon it. Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was. There is absolute and unbroken continuity. What is this death but a negligible accident? Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight? I am but waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near, just round the corner. All is well. Nothing is hurt; nothing is lost. One brief moment and all will be as it was before. How we shall laugh at the trouble of parting when we meet again!

He ends the sermon with these words, which might well be a response to Philip’s request to see the Father: “Only, you will somehow become aware of what it might mean to become more and more alike to the Lord Jesus Whom you adore, as more and more in the infinite amazement of an ever-growing surprise you learn to see Him as He really is.”

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