

Unless I see...

a sermon preached on the

2nd Sunday of Easter

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Acts 5:12-16; Revelation 1:9-13,17-19; John 20:19-31

Why are we Christians so insecure? We claim to have the truth, the words and the means of salvation, direct and personal access to the Way, the Truth and the Life – and yet we are so anxiety-ridden, so defensive, so argumentative, so desperately insecure. Indeed, our insecurity seems to be the louder message, all but swamping our supposed confidence in the resurrection. Pronouncements at Eastertime are revealing in this regard - church leaders publicly attacking supposed atheists. What a waste of precious energies and resources! Not a single advance in the gospel is made by this way. Quite the opposite in fact – what 'outsiders' see is not a people who are actually confidently grounded in what they supposedly preach, but an insecure and defensive religious institution.

Why are we Christians so insecure and defensive? Especially at Eastertime! Why is our religious foundation, according to the texts, liturgies and doctrines so firm, actually so fragile and insecure? What is it that makes we Christians so defensive and shrill in trying to prove this and that? Oh yes, we posture a motivation to 'share good news'. But in truth we sound like any other propagandist. If we were honest we'd have to admit that this really a thinly-veiled cover for our own deep-seated insecurity – the unpalatable fact is that we ourselves are not at all sure about what we ostensibly believe, and which we impose upon others. Just as froth-at-the-mouth homophobes are most likely repressing their own latent homosexuality, so froth-at-the-mouth attacks on atheists are most likely an expression of deep-seated and very frightening latent atheism. Shock! Horror! Instead of honestly confronting our own unknown and unfathomable insecurity, we posture and parade our religious wares in increasingly-shrill tones. But our insecurity and defensiveness is bound to reveal itself, like the proverbial woman's 'slip'.

So why are we Christians so insecure and defensive? Well, without doubt the cumulative effect of the last 500 years or so is not to be underestimated. The 'Enlightenment', the 'Age of Reason', the rise and rise of science and technology and 'market forces', 'Modernism', and then 'Post-Modernism' together have forced religious truths to the very margins of Western culture. Without doubt, part of Christianity's insecurity and defensiveness is derived from this long, slow, incremental demise of the self-confidence of 'Christendom'. Who could fail to feel this marginalisation! But does this alone explain our insecurity?

After all, when we consider the declared content of the faith, surely the ultimate truths which are the heart of the resurrection proclamation would be of such immensity, such profundity, as to relativise any scientific or modernising claims? "Peace be with you... As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you... Receive the Holy Spirit."¹ If we were truly secure in this promise of the risen Christ, then surely nothing in all creation could possibly disturb us?

So why are we Christians so defensive and insecure? Well, in addition to the painful slow demise of Christianity's world dominance, the church's early writings do suggest that insecurity and defensiveness were there from the beginning. In the Acts of the Apostles - especially though by no means exclusively - the 'slip' of insecurity is surely revealed: "The numbers of men and women who came to believe in the Lord increased steadily... That very day about three thousand were added to their number... Many of those who listened to their message became believers, the total number of whom had now risen to something like five thousand."²

Sounds like pure PR hype to me – no different to Apple's Eastertime iPad launch. Why this obsession with numbers? There is, after all, nothing in the teaching of Jesus to support such a

¹ John 20:19b, 21, 26b, 22b

² Acts 16:5, 2:41, 4:4

fixation with numbers. Quite the opposite in fact – Jesus’ teaching is characterised, rather, by constant exhortation in scores of verses to turn away from mass phenomena of every kind,³ to take the narrow path,⁴ to seek the Kingdom which is to be found in the smallest, the least, and the last.⁵ The disciple is to take up a cross,⁶ not fill a football stadium! So why this obsession with numbers, which betrays early Christianity’s slip? Clearly the followers were, from the beginning, prone to insecurity and defensiveness – apparently feeling the need to shore up their confidence in a threatening environment – and the environment was indeed threatening. For it would appear that there was an attempt to ‘prove’ resurrection efficacy by statistical means.

So, taking stock, our insecurity and defensiveness can be first located in the cultural position of Christianity in the West in a post-Christendom era. But further back, deeper still, it is clear that Christianity was prone to defensiveness and insecurity from the beginning. There is, however, a yet deeper reason for our insecurity – deeper and more potent!

The evangelists themselves sowed the seeds, perhaps unwittingly, for this profound insecurity, perhaps most especially John. “You believe because you can see me.” Jesus declares to Thomas. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”⁷ Every year on this second Sunday of Easter we hear this gospel, and this text which strikes me as seed-bed for a deep-seated insecurity. For taken literally by countless preachers, and taken in isolation and in a one-sided manner, this text has the effect of depriving the believer of the one fundamental human necessity – the necessity of experience. Robbed of the primacy of experience, the believers are left trying to make themselves ‘believe in’ things for which there is no experiential basis in their actual lives.

This, at root, is what makes we Christians so insecure and defensive. We attempt to make ourselves believe in alien, external things for which we have no experience. Under these circumstances, the pressure to both conform and belong in a religious institution makes intolerable demands upon our souls. We have forgotten - or deliberately obfuscated! - that all religious statements, dogmas, rituals, texts and symbols are the products of experience, of actual encounter with the Divine – just as it was for every major figure in the Scriptures themselves! Our malaise, clearly there from the outset, arises from the fact that we have attempted to force the reverse equation, to impose upon ourselves an external reality, an alien reality, for which we have no actual experience. One wonders about all those ‘thousands’ to whom the writer of the Acts refers – could it be that this is a classic illustration of an imposition upon the crowds of externalised claims, vociferously presented as rational argument from the mouth of Peter, externalised claims for which the crowds had no actual experience? Whatever the truth may have been then, certainly we can observe in ourselves, in the here and now, that this externalised imposition without actual experience makes us insecure, defensive, very argumentative, at times abusive and violent. Ultimately, this leads exteriorly to the tragedy of ‘mass conversions’ and their deadly consequences, and interiorly to a profound soul-sickness.

So what can liberate us from this soul-sickening condition which illegitimately imposes externalised data, making us so insecure and defensive? Well, in spite of John’s questionable treatment of Thomas, it is Thomas who in fact represents the only safe and enduring path to acceptance of the resurrection proclamation. Experience, encounter with the Divine is the necessary foundation for any secure, non-anxious, non-defensive, and ultimately safe religious faith.

Wrestling with the mystery, the paradox, and the enormity of the Divine, not remote-control manipulation of externalised dogmas and texts, is the well-attested necessity in Jewish tradition. The illustrations are too numerous to name – though Jacob’s all-night wrestling match at the Jabbok,⁸ and Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness with beasts and angels⁹ readily spring to mind. Thomas’ demands of the risen Jesus amount to a wrestling with God – he demands, as his ancestors had, an encounter, an experience. In the end, it is only possible to honestly and authentically declare “My Lord and my God”¹⁰ when one has in fact touched the Divine reality, the Divine wounds. Until then, what is needed is the same wrestling with the Divine Mystery as Jacob, Jesus, and Thomas.

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³ Matthew 6:6

⁴ Matthew 7:13

⁵ Matthew 13:31, 19:30

⁶ Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34

⁷ John 20:29b

⁸ Genesis 32:24-32

⁹ Mark 1:12-13, Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13

¹⁰ John 20:28