

Meet Doubt, a friend of Faith

In another tumultuous week for UK politics, one piece of news was hidden. The poet Geoffrey Hill died on Thursday. Not a household name but regularly described as the greatest living poet writing in English, his was a singular voice. His poetry addressed profound themes, not least because he found religion's attempts to address them wanting. He was often described as writing "difficult" poetry – but he made no apology for this and was a peculiarly English voice which has fallen silent just at a time when Englishness itself is arguably in crisis. His poems addressed Britain and England, particularly through the past, describing England as a "nation with so many memorials but no memory".

His is a voice I turned to when I was thinking about the gospel today – Thomas- who is often known as Doubting Thomas because of the story we heard this morning. And today when we're baptising baby Cameron, we will state together our faith not our doubt – so it may seem like an odd combination in some ways.

But I have always had a great affection for Thomas – Doubting Thomas - not least because I was ordained on this day 21 years ago - and it seemed to me at the time and seems even more to me now that it was a fantastic day to be ordained on – a day that meditated on faith and doubt in the person of Thomas.

But back to Geoffrey Hill: part of the reason I turned to this self-described working class English voice with his ferocious intellect, unpalatable vocabulary and combative, merciless style, was that he believed in God.

Much of his poetry dramatizes a passionate wrestling with God. He seemed to live in faith with constant doubt. His wife Alice Goodman is an Anglican priest, a Jewish American Church of England vicar. His poem entitled *Canaan* includes the searing line.....

"I say it is not faithless/ to stand without faith, keeping open / vigil at the site."

In one exchange printed in a newspaper interview with both of them, Alice points out that he kneels at the Church altar on Sundays. Her husband, she says, is "*communicant but resentful*".

"When did I say that?" says Hill.

"You didn't, I just said it now."

"It sounds like me."

"I've been married to you for some years," she says drily.

(The Daily Telegraph 1 July 2016)

Voices like Geoffrey Hill's are important because they hold together the seemingly contradictory truths of living that political life or 24 hour rolling news simply can't. He wrote, for example.....

We are difficult. Human beings are difficult. We're difficult to ourselves, we're difficult to each other. And we are mysteries to ourselves, we are mysteries to each other. One encounters in any ordinary day far more real difficulty than one confronts in the most 'intellectual' piece of work.

Geoffrey Hill was a Christian, with a deep grounding in theological thought, and for him said one admirer, "the English church is a church on the ground, engaged, suffering, not a metaphysical or High-Church abstraction".

At a time of deep questioning of identity – and especially I would suggest of Englishness even within Britishness, London has been shown to be very different from nearly all the rest of England and the divisions between people geographically, economically and culturally seem across England to be widening not closing. Doubt and uncertainty have been words used every day to describe profound questions of identity following the vote just 10 days ago and the chaotic political aftermath since.

At times like this, just as important and influential as the political, legal and economic arrangements are the stories and myths we tell ourselves; the hinterland full of emotion that asks us questions not so much about what we earn or how we voted but who we are and who we trust. And this hinterland of stories, hopes and fears is where church, where Christianity lives and breathes.

Whenever I am in situations where an audience or group is asking me questions, quite often, someone will ask about doubt. I was with a group of sixth formers recently and it came up there. Do you ever doubt? And I'm always taken by surprise – because I can't believe they think I don't. I forget that the funny dog collar and robes might lead people – might lead you – to suspect that doubt is not something I might be familiar with. Because the answer to the question do you doubt? - is – of course – every day – it's normal – it's part of faith. But behind the question is an anxiety that doubt is somehow wrong or weak or destructive.

Doubt is a complex element of faith but it really depends on how we view it that determines how it plays out in our lives. And so in the spirit of Thomas and in response to today's gospel, I want to address the question....

What happens when we doubt what we believe?

This isn't just a religious question. When seemingly stable assumptions are thrown up in the air by a vote or by a diagnosis, this question is relevant politically and personally as well as spiritually.

I want to offer two possible scenarios. One is when we assume that doubt is the opposite of faith. The other is when doubt is part of faith.

If doubt is the opposite of faith, then doubt is the enemy of faith, doubt threatens faith, and the story goes a bit like this.

Doubt comes visiting – oh no we think – I don't think I'm supposed to let him in. Like the disciples in the gospel, we are hiding behind a locked door. So we resist for a bit. But then we think we could probably handle it, after all we're grown-ups - so we start to entertain Doubt. The conversation goes fine at first – well put arguments, vigorous

conversation. And we keep it all up in our heads, playing with the concepts and engaging with the challenge. We're proud of ourselves being able to question ourselves. After a while, and we are still feeling a bit naughty for even having Doubt in there, we start to notice that Doubt is niggling away at more core emotions – making us doubt more fundamental things; maybe she doesn't love me after all – maybe I was wrong to leave that job.....maybe I didn't try hard enough to make him happy, no one's really going to like me so I'll stop trying to make friends or go on dates. Bit by bit, we listen to the doubters in our head – maybe life isn't for love, maybe I can't do what I want, what have I done with my life? oh did I really mess up my daughter– she says I did – and so on and so on.

Doubt like this is like acid thrown on a rose: inexorably burning away the flower, the bud, the scent of our best hopes and dreams.

And soon, Doubt invites round his best friend; Fear. They march into the living room, put their feet up and crack open a beer. Great they say. Everything's fine as it is. Let's never sell this comfy sofa – let's never repaint the walls – it's all fine as it is. And every time you want to go into your own living room, and maybe suggest going out, or inviting someone round, or doing something different, there they are, colonising your space, keeping you supplying them with crisps. "You can't do it!" they say triumphantly, "you just can't!....Stick with us!

And gradually you find that you have stopped hoping for anything else.

In this scenario, Doubt sniggers at our best hopes, chips away our confidence, makes us less willing to take any risk and convinces us that the world is as it is and we are as we are because, well, deep down we've probably failed: we were fools, we were duped, and now we're stuck. And before we know it, the two of them, Doubt and Fear, with their other mate Despair, have made us belligerent like Thomas, encouraging us to lock the doors and demand a list.

"I don't believe you" we say. "I just don't believe you". Because deep down we know that believing might change our life.

A second scenario is when we think of Doubt not as the enemy or opposite of Faith, but as part of Faith itself. A friend of Faith.

So Faith's friend Doubt has been coming round for years, knows you well, asks you sometimes quite awkward questions; her style is bracing and frank. But you get the feeling she's standing up to you because she likes you.

Doubt, far from drawing the curtains and locking the doors, does quite the opposite. Doubt throws open the curtains and lets the light of Reason stream in through the windows. This light of Reason doesn't aim to destroy but tries rather to illuminate, make things clearer, with more depth of understanding. Questions are welcomed, laughter is heard as Doubt points out the absurdities and contradictions of life, and community is grown, nurtured and celebrated. Doubt and Faith invite their friends – How, What, When and the wisest friend of all, Why.

Friend Doubt is bracingly honest, insists not only on sitting in the living room where the teapot is still warm, but following you into the kitchen to see all the washing up in the sink, simply disallowing you to maintain any fantasy about what you're like.

And in some areas of life, Doubt can save lives. Doubt might have saved the lives of the young men we commemorated this week who died in the Battle of the Somme. Doubt in the diplomatic orthodoxies of the day might have let the light of reason shine on a set of unexamined political assumptions that could have averted the slaughter of the 14-18 war. Who knows.... But Doubt - defined as the willingness to question accepted orthodoxies – if given light and room to breathe - is one of the most precious abilities that humans can bring to bear when imagining and planning for the future.

If doubt is cast as the opposite of faith, if we think it's the enemy, it makes alliances with fear and despair to corrode and destroy our best selves. Group- think is not challenged because doubt is cast as disloyalty and sometimes as a result, catastrophic mistakes are made.

But if we cast doubt not as the opposite of faith, but as part of faith – our inevitable doubts are

honoured and welcomed as part of grown up debate and creative conversation.....“But I'm not sure what she said is right”- you think – “good point” she says – let's talk.

Doubt as part of faith is a commitment to open hearts and open minds: coming to God as Jesus said, like a child – tirelessly asking why.

This doubt doesn't destroy faith, but it does puncture our own hubris and it will winkle out any secret conviction we've got that deep down, well, come on, we really do think we're right. It stops us becoming like the road runner bird in the Loony Tunes cartoon – where the character often runs over a cliff and the legs keep going for a while until it's clear the bird must drop like a stone. Without doubt, we can easily go over the cliff and overreach ourselves – we've gone out strong, we're right out there because we said it was what we thought and there's a bit of a delay while we keep going until we realise the ground isn't there any more....

Doubt is important – it keeps us checking that the ground we're standing on is at least reasonably solid while we travel along.

And so a Christian spirituality begins to emerge from these two experiences of doubt that takes doubt seriously. And it's why it makes an appearance in our parish strategic plan 2016-19, which we discussed at our APCM this year. We state as one of our core beliefs that *Communal Christian life is marked by joyous celebration, forgiveness, doubting and discernment, sustained by friendship and prayer.*

Why would a church put doubting in our core value and belief statements? Because we will define doubt not as the opposite of faith but as part of faith.

And here's the thing....

Doubt, when it's assumed to be the opposite of faith, is an isolating and frightening thing. It reeks of failure and makes us brittle. We learn this from the gospel. Thomas was isolated – he returned to the group and they told him something that had happened while he wasn't there. Out of this isolation, his reaction is fearful, maybe even a bit petulant, rigid, demanding

proof. At least some of his reaction is surely simply wanting to belong – to have the same experience as the others.

But for those of us who Jesus refers to – the ones *who have not seen*, who have not had the chance to put our hands into his wounds, for us, we're asked to *share* both our belief and our doubt, because as our parish plan says, this Christian life is *sustained by friendship and prayer*.

One of the paradoxes of doubting is that when it's shared, it often grows faith. Oh – thank goodness I'm not the only one sitting there thinking – “really” “what does that mean?” When we share our doubts, paradoxically this often helps us believe. And we stop being, in St Paul's words from our first reading today, “strangers and aliens” to ourselves, to God and one another.

We become friends.

As the light of reason pours in through our 17th century windows in this church, we bathe in its light, bringing our questions to the fore, admitting our uncertainties, and resolving that we will try to make friends with the questions themselves, resolving to make friends with the others here today too.

And we pray for Cameron, that his life in Christ beginning today, will be sustained by friendship and prayer, whatever he believes and however he doubts.

And so without proof and without seeing, sustained by prayer and friendship, we nevertheless stake ourselves on this path, praying with the father of the boy Jesus healed in Mark's gospel: *Lord I believe. Help thou my unbelief*. This isn't a prayer to eliminate – the man doesn't say “destroy my unbelief”. He says “help”. And the verb he uses is a continuous verb – please be helping – carry on helping – my unbelief – which is always with me.

Today at the Eucharist, we offer our open hands: *I believe we might say – help thou my unbelief*.

And on a day when we not only remember Geoffrey Hill as a singular English voice that has fallen silent, we remember too a towering voice in Europe whose death was announced this morning. Eli Wiesel, author of the Holocaust memoir *Night*, who spent his life after Auschwitz begging a continent so recently riven by war never to forget.

And so we come, promising to remember Christ's insistence that peace is with us, and we find that without seeing, without looking even, we have been held all along in the wounded arms of Christ, who knows that we have never seen and who asks us nonetheless to let go, and trust and believe.

Lucy Winkett