

I've Got my Doubts about "Praising Doubt"

Colleagues, Not till this past Sunday afternoon did I get around to reading the March 2006 issue of THE LUTHERAN, the monthly journal of "my" church, the ELCA. The cover page hyped the 4 lead articles: "In Praise of Doubt . . . Plus Study Guide." Because it was "last Sunday afternoon," the Sunday after Easter, I'd just heard the so-called "Doubting Thomas" text of John 20 a few hours earlier at our liturgy and listened to my pastor preach on the text.

Laying the magazine texts side by side with John 20, there was scant correlation. It was dinky doubt vs. deadly doubt. "Can some of those Bible facts be true, e.g., virgin birth?" vs. "Is the Death-Marked Easter Jesus 'My Lord and my God,' or is Death itself still my Lord and my God?"

The magazine authors (and the study-guide writer too) sought to speak to "this age-old affliction," but seems to me that all five diagnosticians were just scratching the surface, and all scratching in the same (wrong) place. Biggest signal thereof is the bandaids remedies they proposed to heal the affliction. In the lead article it wasn't even an affliction. "In Praise of Doubt" told us the benefits of doubt: "Keeps us creatively engaged with God, in tension with God," we were told several times. Can you imagine Jesus telling that to Thomas?

So it comes as no surprise—sadly—that in this lead article Christ never gets mentioned once (sic!)—for any benefit at all. So could not a faithful Jew—or Muslim—have written the piece? I think so. If doubt is finally "only" a headache, then aspirin will work. But if it's cancer, then ask Thomas what he'd have done, had Jesus told him (as the lead article concludes): "It's

OK to doubt. You're not alone in your struggles. The fact that you are still able to serve God, to do some good, to proclaim some truth and to love one another despite your doubts testifies to the fact that God must really be with you."

Had Jesus urged Thomas to trust such a gospel-within-yourself, Thomas would surely have replied: "Well then, one thing is clear: you are NOT my Lord and my God."

So I've got my doubts about "Praising Doubt"

We are given the Lutheran credentials for all five of these authors. Luther gets quoted for support too with references to his frequent mention of "Anfechtung" [see below]. Yet the five are not talking about "Lutheran" doubt either. Because they are not talking about the deep doubt, the "focused" doubt, that John's Gospel shows us in Thomas. It is Thomas' brand of doubt that is at the heart of Luther's word "Anfechtung."

Some thoughts.

1. Thomas' doubt is Christo-centric. That may sound strange, but hang on. Christ is the focus of what's "not believed." It's not doctrines or even alleged "facts" that are disbelieved. What Thomas does NOT believe is NOT that corpses come back from the dead. Given the culture he grew up in, he probably did believe that. What he won't/can't believe (as we learn when he finally DOES believe and put it into words) is that a crucified Messiah could be "my Lord and my God," or anybody else's either. "Can this death-marked Jesus, even alive after his own death, can he trump MY death. No way."
2. For Luther it's the same. Anfechtung is not about "mini-doubts"—virgin birth, Biblical accuracy, impossible facts, even resuscitated corpses. Anfechtung goes for the jugular, for what you "hang your heart on," as Luther

liked to say. The German word is attack language. "Fechten" is a sword fight. Anfechtung is someone pulling a sword on you. Anfechtung attacks the promise. Faith and Promise constitute the primal Lutheran corollary. Faith (=trust) is always "faith in God's promise." Central to that promise is Christ crucified and risen with his promissory word "Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven." Or in the promise-language of John 20, with nail-scarred hands he offers the disciples (3 times!) "Peace with God." No more bilateral enmity on my interface with God.

3. By contrast, the lead article never once mentions the word Jesus or Christ. The Title, "In praise of doubt," is praising something else than what afflicts Thomas. Thomas' Anfechtung gets no praise in John 20. It's an affliction. An attack. He's at the precipice. It's primal doubt. Is death finally my "Lord and God?" Is death or this crucified Messiah the one who finally owns me and has the last word? Thomas' Anfechtung is also the Anfechtung of all the other disciples in the text. Behind locked doors for fear of the Judeans, what are their hearts hanging on? Granted, not hanging on in trust, but in terror—imploded trust—but hanging on none the less? What else but the conviction that before long the locked doors will not hold, and death will also have its last word with them?
4. This may sound harsh, but it's true. Doubt that is not Christo-centric, promise-centric, is not "Christian" doubt. It's emaciated doubt. Dinky doubt. The doubt from the age of enlightenment. Doubt about scientifically unverified truths—generic doubt—is in the last analysis "trivial" doubt. That's not Thomas's problem. He's on a different planet. Thomas's Anfechtung is about the trustworthiness of Jesus as God's promise-keeper and God's continuing promise-maker. That confronts us too today,

every day. That's not trivial, that's the doubt that took Good Friday and Easter to remedy. For Luther that's the doubt that "attacked" Jesus himself on Good Friday in his "My God, my God, why...?" And all of that, for us and for our salvation.

5. I suspect that there is a parallel here to Luther's famous "sin boldly" advice to his colleague Melanchthon. Luther was in protective custody at the Wartburg castle in 1522. Melanchthon was "in charge" back in turbulent Wittenberg, but continually fretful lest he possibly do this or that wrong. In letters he told all this to Luther. "Stop fretting about these possible sins. They are all trivial," Luther told him. "If you want to be worried about sin, then do some big ones and do them 'fortiter' (robustly). Then trust and hope in Christ who is even bigger than your big sins." Enlightenment doubt about facts is piddly. Anfechtung, Thomas' doubt, is big stuff. It's "person" doubt on the God-and-me interface.
6. Is the one I confess as "my Lord and my God" trustworthy or not? That's the "to be or not to be" issue of real doubt. Given the wall-to-wall evidence to the contrary that surfeits the media, given the contrary evidence in our own personal lives (both inside and outside), is God for us or against us? That is THE question. John's Jesus claims that trusting him renders us "beloved" to his Father. Just as beloved as Jesus himself is to that Father. It's promise-language. All the disciples in John 20 are "Thomasic." So are we. Is death "my" Lord and God or is it the scarred and now risen Jesus? Even if we grant "factually" that Jesus is alive, why should that benefit us? Hooray for Jesus! But those enemies are still right outside my locked doors and "fechten" is what they are shouting through the keyhole. How does Jesus' conquest of death become my conquest?

7. The Thomas text is John's answer in his Gospel. Jesus offers the scars for Thomas to touch. To touch is to transfer. "My death-scars are for you. My being alive after that death-match is also for you. Touch and take. Be not distrusting (non-taking) but be trusting (taking). Trust the offer and you have what is offered. Another old Luther phrase comes to mind: "Glaubstu, hastu" – You trust it, you have it. [By the way, the term "doubt" actually never appears in the John 20 text. It's always "pistos" (trusting) or "apistos" (not trusting). Thomas's confession of unfaith is not "I doubt it," but "I will not believe." Greek: "ou me (double negative!) pisteusoo." "No way will I trust!"]
8. I wonder whether the sequence of two Sundays in a row within this John 20 text—"Easter Sunday evening . . . one week later"—points to something John intended. Namely, to John's own original audience of worshipping Christians and now us. Sunday after Sunday, Jesus arrives in our midst after another week of our Anfechtung, and over and over again does the same thing. "Here, have peace with God. The scars are the trademarks whereby I 'finished' it. No more enmity on the divine-human interface. Here, it's for you. Touch, take the transfer, trust. And as the Father sent me, so I send you out beyond your locked doors. See you next Sunday. I'll be here."
9. For Luther the super Anfechtung episode in the Bible for a believer was God calling Abraham to kill Isaac. The same God makes the promise and then says: Kill the promised boy. Really "patriarchal" is that Anfechtung, said Luther. None of us common believers could ever have survived it. But Abraham sets the pattern for us too. Trust the promise, even when the Promisor is now attacking you, yes, even attacking your hanging on to his promise. The conclusion of the Abraham story is itself Good News for

promise-trusters when our Anfechtungen come.

10. Finally. One of the 5 writers in THE LUTHERAN does indeed talk about genuine Anfechtung—her own—big stuff, horrendous stuff, that “shredded my confidence in God.” She tells us that after 5 years in the wilderness, she came to faith’s oasis. Sadly however, in her entire story, Christ never gets mentioned either. And worst of all is the “schlock” Gospel she was given by a friend and former pastor: “I have so many doubts,” he said. “So many questions, but I think God is big enough to understand. If he doesn’t, he isn’t a very secure God, is he?” How she found Gospel in that causes me to doubt. Can you imagine Jesus offering Thomas pabulum like that?
11. If Christ isn’t necessary to “fix” a doubter’s dilemma, the malady, though surely vexing, is trivial. Real doubt wrestles with who really is “my Lord and my God.” Whose am I?—that’s the “Lord” question. Whom can I trust?—that’s the “God” question. The Christian answer for both comes at Easter. His name is Jesus.

Who is why there is . . .

Easter Peace & Joy!

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