Opening prayer:
Lord, as we travel through both faith and doubt, help us to find you travelling alongside us through them both. Amen.

On July 3rd, the Church remembers the apostle Thomas. It would probably be impossible to think of Thomas without thinking of doubt. And just after Easter we looked at the account of ‘doubting Thomas’ that we’ve just heard again today. Then we saw how Thomas’ doubting, Thomas’ honest questioning led the disciples into a greater understanding of the resurrection. And we saw too how Jesus did not condemn Thomas’ doubting, but helped him find the answers to his questions.

But what about us? Is doubt something to be got over without admitting it if possible? Is it a failing that we hope God and our fellow Christians will help us through as quickly as possible? Does the story of Thomas simply show us that God is kind to us in our weakness and forgives us our failings? Or is there more to doubt than that?

I would like to suggest that, rather than something to be feared or dreaded, doubt is actually an essential part of our journey of faith. Doubt is essential if our faith is to grow and deepen. If we truly believe in a God who is infinite love, we surely must cry out in doubt and confusion sometimes at his apparent inaction in the face of the pain and injustice in the world. Our cry of, ‘Where are you God? Why don’t you do something?’ must at times make us doubt, or at the very least question, either his existence or his goodness.

I believe one of the most profound statements of faith in the Bible is the cry of the father of the demon-possessed child in Mark chapter 9. He has just asked Jesus to heal his son ‘if you are able’, and Jesus has told him that all things can be done for one who believes. ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ the distraught father cries. That must surely be the cry of every
person of faith as we look around our world at pain that does not go away and problems where we can see no way forward.

That doubt, that cry of, ‘Can God really be all that we long for him to be, all that deep down we believe he is?’ is a doubt, a problem that people of faith have wrestled with for as long as people of faith have existed. Job, which scholars are almost universally agreed is the oldest book in the Bible, wrestles with questions about God’s character and God’s intentions in the face of unexplained suffering. And Job’s many questions are left unanswered. Yet at the end of the book of Job, Job himself is content. He has experienced God’s presence, and realises in doing so that many, if not all his questions, are simply not relevant. He accepts that mystery is part of humanity’s experience of God and that we can never fully know God.

The American writer and theologian, Frederick Buechner (pronounced ‘Beekner’) has said, ‘Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave me no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.’ We might also say that if there were no room for doubt there would be no room for choice, and with room for choice, there could be no faith. Doubt and choice and faith must co-exist if we are to have the freedom to be ourselves, to grow into the people God calls us to be, loving him because we feel called to, feel invited to, not because we are forced to.

But just as we must take risks in every human relationship – we cannot grow to truly know one another without making ourselves vulnerable, without risking getting hurt, so God takes risks in his relationship with us. In giving us the freedom to doubt, God takes the risk that our doubt might drive us away from him. And just as doubt deepens faith for some, for others it does indeed drive them further from God.

In my times of doubt and questioning I have found that it helps to think of God’s relationship with us, and God’s willingness to make himself vulnerable. Jesus hung on the cross and died there because his love for us was infinitely greater than his
desire to control us. In Jesus, God was prepared to risk everything. God threw aside certainty and trusted himself to my love, which gives me courage to hope that I too may be able to throw aside certainty and trust myself to his love. And when I think of the alternatives to trusting in God, I find myself saying with Peter, when Jesus asked his disciples if they wished to leave him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’ (John 6: 68-69)

*Let us pray:*
Lord, help us to see doubt not as an enemy to be feared, but as a companion to guide us into greater understanding of you, and a deeper faith. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

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