

DOUBTS

John 20: 19-31

April 3 2016

Two of my best friends are Craig and Rachel Smillie. They run the Glad Café in Shawlands and both have played here at musical events. Craig is the one who gives you a hard time for not dancing hard (or often) enough!

But not everyone knows Craig's real name because he's known to many people as the Swan.

How on earth did he get that?

Does he have a long neck? Does he dress in white? Is he graceful? (*I for one don't think so!*)

Turns out he's always been a big Springsteen fan, and one day some folk were trying to sing the praises of another singer called Bruce – the Canadian singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn.

But although Craig *is* a fan now, back in the early days Cockburn's music was particularly mellow and gentle.

And Craig said "*That guy just sings songs about swans and flowers*" and from then on he was given his nickname of Swan.

He's happy enough with being called Swan – at least it's not offensive like *Fatface* or *Stinker*.

It's interesting to think that someone could become known to the world for such an innocuous remark, but it happens.

Sometimes people get remembered for the craziest things.

There was a mini-series on TV recently called *The Last Kingdom*. It's based on some novels by Bernard Cornwell about England during the wars between Saxon and Vikings.

One of the characters is Alfred, the Saxon king, who is hiding in a village on the marshes and trying to work out what to do next. In the middle of a conversation with some of the other main folk in the story, he starts putting something in an oven, and a few scenes later you see him pulling out some cakes that are overdone and smouldering.

It's a random moment that doesn't seem to have anything to do with the plot, (and it doesn't), but if you are as old as me (or older) you may remember from school that the "big story" about Alfred is that he burnt some cakes.

According to the story, he was asked by a poor peasant woman to look after her cakes as they were baking. He was preoccupied, didn't do the job well, and they ended up burnt. (That's the end of the story!)

Imagine *that* being remembered?!!

He's one of the most significant early kings of England and he's remembered in classrooms for centuries for burning some cakes.

It's a bit like *'Robert the Bruce and the spider in the cave story'* – but at least that story had a kind of moral to it.

So King Alfred is remembered down through history as a man who burnt the cakes.

Today we've got another guy who has been remembered bizarrely.

Thomas the disciple of Jesus is forever known as Doubting Thomas. This is what everyone remembers of him.

And I have to say he gets a pretty raw deal.

For a start, every reference to this guy in the gospels shows him to be a good man - totally committed to Jesus, willing to ask the questions that everyone else is secretly asking and he is also loyal and brave.

Only in the last reference do we hear about doubts.

But think about it. He wasn't like Judas. He didn't turn Jesus over to the authorities. He didn't take a bribe. He didn't try and do the dirty on his friend.

The truth is he wasn't like Judas and he **was** like all the other friends of Jesus. He was exactly like them. When they heard the news that Jesus was alive they didn't believe it. The disciples thought the women who told the story were crazy. Who can blame them?

Then after the disciples meet with Jesus and they realise what has happened - they change their mind. But Thomas hadn't met with Jesus. And so he was still sceptical. Who can blame him?

But sadly we have decided to remember him as being odd – the one who doubted – as if the others didn't! Even the hymn we have just sung together singles him out.

He's in the English language as "Doubting Thomas".

But it's not just Thomas who has been given a raw deal. There's a word that has been given a raw deal too. The word is Doubts!

Having doubts is often seen as a negative thing.

There are churches for whom doubts are a sign of weak faith. There are churches for whom asking questions is a sign that something is wrong.

And there are many people who have left church altogether and felt they could no longer belong because their questions or doubts were not acceptable.

Now I have to admit that doubts can be unpleasant and give us worry.
Having doubt can make us feel uncomfortable.
It's not always a fun place to be.

Nonetheless I want to say this.

Our doubts are important.
Questions are our friends.
The very fact we have faith questions at all proves that we are taking our faith seriously.

Doubts are often the prelude to new understanding.
Doubts are often the way that we come to discover something more about God.
And they lead us to a place where the goodness of God becomes even clearer.

Expressing doubts and asking questions is how we human beings grow in our scientific understanding.
The same thing is true of spiritual understanding too.

Here's two things...

Doubts helped create the Bible that we have.

The reason there are so many descriptions of God and images of God in the collection of books we know as the Bible is that people came to new understandings of God.
By the time the period of the Bible ends, human beings have a much different idea of God than that of the local angry tribal God of the earliest writings.
All because people were willing to explore doubts and ask questions.
And also because God is continuing to communicate with us.

If you were here on Good Friday, you might remember I mentioned Tony Campolo - who is a sociologist, author and Christian teacher in America,

Well I stumbled across a film in YouTube of a minister called Don Horban - the minister of Cedarview Community Church (wherever that is).
The film was of a sermon he preached where he wanted to criticise Campolo.
It was a pretty shoddy thing to do - to preach a whole sermon slagging off one other person, and I won't bore you with the details.

But one of the things he said was basically this.

Every bit of the Bible is as important as every other bit. It's all true because it's all the Word of God.
He even said that he didn't like those Bibles you used to get where Jesus' words were printed in the colour red. The idea was to draw special attention to what

Jesus said. He didn't like that. Because everything is "equally" important. Everything is equally true. There are no bits of the Bible that are any more important than other bits. And, by his own admission, even Jesus isn't any more important than anyone else.

In his world there are no room for questions. And no room for doubts.

This is Pastor Don Horban talking. And you just want to freeze frame that and go up to the guy and say:

"That is utter and total baloney! Total nonsense! And the people who listen to you and believe that are heading for trouble."

Imagine telling people that every verse in our Bible is as important as any other!

I opened up my Bible at random and read 1 Kings 6:8. It was a description of the Temple being built in Jerusalem.

"The stones with which the temple was built had been prepared at the quarry, so that there was no noise made by hammers axes or any other iron tools as the Temple was being built."

Imagine saying that these words are every bit as important as Jesus saying *"I have come to bring life in all its fullness."*

(John 10:10))

Imagine believing that the dietary laws in the book of Leviticus are as important for us as the Easter resurrection!

Imagine believing that slaughtering our neighbours and refusing to spare even children is on a moral par with Jesus saying we should Love our enemies!

Imagine believing that King Josiah in the Old Testament is as important as King Jesus in the New!

God wanted people to have doubts and to ask their questions. That's how the picture of God in the Bible came to change - to recognise more of what God is really like.

Doubts were also what made *Jesus* different.

He grew up in a religious tradition and he accepted much of what he was taught - even as a youngster.

But what made Jesus stand out is not all the things he shared with the religious teachers of his time, but all the ways in which he disagreed with them.

The trouble with Jesus and the learned priests and teachers of the religious Law was not the things they had in common, but the fact that Jesus did not accept that everything they said and everything that had been written was worthy of God.

And even as a wee boy, lost in the temple, Jesus was learning not just by listening but by asking questions and expressing his doubts.

Jesus grew up with a great understanding of scripture. He lived by scripture. He taught from scripture. He quoted scripture.

But – he also believed that not everything in scripture was right, not everything was helpful and not everything said of God was true of God.

None of us have it all worked out – no one can fully know all there is to know about God, but as history has moved on we have got a better and more accurate understanding of what God is like.

And this will continue to be the case as long as we are willing to keep our minds open, search for the truth, ask our questions and express our doubts.

It's how we learn. It's how we grow.

Here's the other truth I want to stress.

Our doubts are acceptable to God.

We often think that Jesus was giving Thomas a bit of a row (or at least taking him down a peg or two) when he says

"Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!"

(John 20:29)

But I think that's a misunderstanding. I think Jesus knew that Thomas' doubts were totally reasonable and understandable.

What Jesus is doing here is not slagging off Thomas but looking ahead to people like you and me – all the people who would become his followers in the years to come. For us there wouldn't be that opportunity that Thomas had.

Thomas hung in there with the believers even though his head was filled with doubt, and then he got the chance to encounter Jesus himself.

Well done, Thomas, I say.

There's some great Bible verses that we often hear at this time of year.

It's part of what is known as the Great Commission. That part where Jesus meets his disciples for the last time, and sends them on their mission to tell the world what has happened.

This is the final paragraph in Matthew's gospel.

Listen to this bit, just before Jesus starts to speak.

*"The eleven disciples went to the hill in Galilee where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him they worshipped him, **even though some of them doubted.**"*

(Matthew 28:16-17)

Then Jesus tells them that they are his people and he's got a great task for them to undertake.

But did you hear that bit about the doubters?

Even standing in front of the risen Jesus some people were having difficulty fully believing what was happening.

Surely Jesus should have noticed this?
Surely he should have asked the folk with doubts to own up and tell them to come back when they were ready?
Surely he should have seen that people with doubts aren't fit to be part of this new thing – this new group that would be come to be known as the church?

But no – Jesus includes everyone with their mixture of faith and doubts. Jesus turned no one away. Everyone is welcome.

Believers and doubters are all included.

We think:

We'll only be ready when we get rid of our doubts.

We'll only be accepted when we get rid of our doubts.

We'll only truly be part of the team when we get rid of our doubts.

We'll only be acknowledged by God and claimed by God when we get rid of our doubts, and get our act together.

Well we might think it – but I've got some good news.

It's NOT TRUE!!!

It's not true.

God calls us because we are loved. And that love is not dependant on us or how we measure up. That love is dependent on God. And God's mind is never going to change on this.

And as for having doubts, we probably need to express them, for that's often how we learn and how we can move on.

But we need to know that God understands.

God actually wants us to ask questions.

Because God knows it is how we grow.

And it is very often how we can become aware of what God is saying to us right now.