

Many other signs

Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

In the American author John Irving's 1989 novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the narrator John has a number of conversations with his friend Owen Meany about the meaning of belief. In one scene in the school playground, Owen illustrates his faith in God by pointing to a grey granite statue of Mary Magdalen as twilight falls. When it has become so dark that the statue is no longer visible, Owen asks John if he knows that the statue is still there. The conversation goes like this:

"YOU HAVE NO DOUBT SHE'S THERE?" Owen nagged at me.

"Of course I have no doubt!" I said.

"BUT YOU CAN'T SEE HER - YOU COULD BE WRONG," he said.

"No, I'm not wrong - she's there, I know she's there!" I yelled at him.

"YOU ABSOLUTELY KNOW SHE'S THERE - EVEN THOUGH YOU CAN'T SEE HER?" he asked me.

"Yes," I screamed.

"WELL, NOW YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT GOD," said Owen Meany. "I CAN'T SEE HIM - BUT I ABSOLUTELY KNOW HE'S THERE!"

The character Owen Meany is a good example of the kind of faith that John, in his gospel, celebrates. Owen believes so fully and completely in God, he stakes his life on his conviction. He does not need to see; he does not need signs and wonders; he believes and orients his whole life around that belief.

Faith and doubt go hand in hand. One encourages the other. Openness enables our striving after faith to be something that lives and moves and has room for wonder and mystery.

Not that we shouldn't have beliefs. Not that we shouldn't have things about which we feel confident, but that we shouldn't be so sure that we shut down or cut off the possibility of more.

Which is why we find ourselves in good company with Thomas. Thomas is the patron saint of our questioning age. Thomas is unafraid to ask, and to reach out, and to wonder. Thomas is unafraid

to say, in the original Greek of this passage, "there's no way I will believe unless I see it for myself." I commend his honesty, though I wonder what effect it had on his friends, the other disciples and believers. After Thomas expressed his doubts and disbelief there is a whole week until Jesus appeared again. What did they talk about? Did they try to convince him? Did they give him the cold-shoulder? Was he included in their number reluctantly? Did they appreciate the grounds for his doubting, and wondered if they hadn't had the experience of the risen Jesus, would they have been any quicker in their believing? After all, they thought the women who had been at the tomb were simply telling idle tales.

The truth is - as with so many things in the Bible and the story of Jesus - we don't know. It is not all laid out neatly for us, cross-referenced and foot-noted and verified by the BBC verification team. A few hundred or thousand believers would come to faith in Jesus' lifetime. Literally billions have come to faith through the centuries after, when Jesus could no longer be seen in person. With Thomas we find faith comes through hearing. Jesus speaks, the word is heard, Thomas believed. With or without touching, we are not told.

Decades after this event in the upper room between Jesus and Thomas and witnessed by other believers, the last disciple died. Never again on earth would physical eyes or noses or tongues certify the presence of Jesus. This is the time we live in. We take as our patron saint Doubting Thomas, but do we see that for Thomas it did not end in doubt, but belief? Somehow he experienced Jesus. Who Jesus was, what Jesus meant, and that was enough for him.

"My Lord and my God", he says.

It is with this kind of radical suspicion, followed by equally radical doubt, that the new way of relating to Jesus began, and continues. We must ask questions and wonder; through them we will find a way to believe and put into practice what we believe. These will be part of the many other

signs that have worked from Jesus' time to this that point towards the experience of Christian living today. The fact that believing is making a difference.

I believe that people today are waiting to see the marks. They are not looking for the marks in Jesus' hands and side anymore. They wait to see the marks on the church - the wounds on our hands and sides - the evidence that we are really connected to the Jesus Who was crucified and raised. For all that we hear about the sophistication of modern people, they are much more willing to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead because they see the difference our faith makes in us, and in the things that we do...The marks, and also the many other signs John talks about, are the ones to be seen on us. Is there evidence in the way this Church works, is there evidence in the way we treat others and our world, and indeed treat ourselves, that would point those who encounter us towards Jesus? Are we acting as signposts to Jesus through how we behave, and how we are? ⁱⁱ

John writes, *"Jesus did many other things in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe...and that believing you may have life in His Name."* And at the end of the next chapter John finishes with: *"But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."* The death and resurrection of Jesus was not the end of the story, it was the continuation of the story, and it continues in the lives of women and men today, and beyond today. Faith in action lives and breathes and moves and adapts and sings and is silently prayerful and is to be found in our lives now, and in the lives of people around us. Not perfect people, but faithful people, and hopeful people, and loving people.

The last week has been dominated by the death of Pope Francis. He wanted to die in the Vatican, which is why he moved from the hospital. But more than that, with the help of others, I believe he

wanted to live until Easter. It is beyond powerful that his last public words were from the balcony overlooking St Peter's Square wishing the world a happy Easter.

He said many other things that seem to me to be amongst the 'many other signs' that John refers to in his gospel, that point us towards Jesus, and to the life of lived-out-loud faith. He said: *"This is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned His gaze. And this is what I said when they asked me if I would accept my election as pontiff. I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I accept in a spirit of penance."*

He said: *"History repeats itself, and what happened (at the end of the World War) is happening now too: we are all suffering because of the conflict and violence affecting various parts of the planet, and we wonder what we can do to relieve people's suffering. We can contribute through charitable works...like reconstruction or the redistribution of vital aid, but our more significant contribution may be the effort to eradicate from our hearts any hatred and resentment for those who live alongside us...We must learn to build a culture of peace in the world...Do we really want peace? If so, let us start by working on ourselves."*

He said: *"...I still cultivate a dream for the future: that our Church might be a meek, humble, servant Church, with all the attributes of God - therefore also tender, close and compassionate...an opportunity to rediscover a **climate of hope**."*ⁱⁱⁱ

It seems to me that Pope Francis, whose way was not the only way and was not always universally liked (who is?) has been one of the 'many other signs' for the whole Christian family, and indeed the whole wider faith family, and indeed the whole world in these recent years. The man who carried his own luggage; paid his own hotel bill after his election as Pope; washed the feet of women, prisoners, and Muslims as a sign of his humility and their inclusion; visited war zones, prisons and slums; concentrated on the reality of environmental catastrophe; speaking truth to

power. His was a ministry that went consistently to the frayed edges of the twenty-first century because it was there that he felt we would encounter those in greatest need, and the God Who had not forgotten them.

He looked for, and found, the 'many other signs' of Jesus in our world today. He was a sign himself. Let it be our prayer, and our practice, that we will be signs too, for others to see, and then to walk, with us, beside Jesus creating a 'climate of hope.'

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, 1989, in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 2* p397

ⁱⁱ E Elizabeth Johnson, *Feasting on the Gospels, John Vol 2*, p328

ⁱⁱⁱ From Pope Francis, *Life - My Story Through History*