

Doubting Thomas and Antony Gormley's DOUBT

Assembly by Alastair Tighe, Head Master, September 2021

“Stop doubting and believe” (John 24:27).

You’ve often heard me and your other teachers, I am sure, encouraging you to look around you, to be observant and to cherish the wonderful environment we are all so privileged and fortunate to enjoy at this School - both because of Wells’ historic identity and also because of the School’s geographical location surrounded as we are by the Mendip Hills and the Somerset Levels. So I wonder how many of you have noticed since our return to School that there is someone new in town?

How many of you have spotted that there is a brand new sculpture positioned on our Cathedral’s famous and beautiful 14th century West Front? The sculpture is occupying one of the ‘empty’ spaces - niche 338 to be precise - on the far corner of the West Front just by the door by which many of you entered this morning.

You may remember we as a School helped to bring this about since money we raised on a mufti day last year contributed to the costs to get the sculpture transported and installed. But although it’s arrival has meant lots of people have been coming to Wells to see it, it has caused quite a stir. “Angry locals hit out at ‘hideous’ sculpture” read the headline in the Daily Mail when the sculpture was installed at the end of August. It’s certainly very striking and very, very different from all of the other hundreds of medieval stone statues that surround it. The sculpture is clearly in human form, but is an abstract realisation - a cubic arrangement made out of rusted cast iron.

It’s been made by one of the UK’s leading living artists - Antony Gormley. Some of you will, I am sure, already be familiar with what is probably his most famous sculpture - the Angel of the North - which can be found in the north of England near Gateshead and Newcastle.

Not only is Gormley’s abstract design for an otherwise ‘traditional’ collection of statues controversial. So too is the name he’s given his sculpture - DOUBT - and not just Doubt but DOUBT in capital letters. Some have questioned why a statute with such a name should ever have been installed on the front of a building which resolutely stands for belief and

faith - the seeming opposite of doubt. And the design of the statue when viewed against all the other existing stone statues metaphorically represents doubt too. All the medieval statues on the West Front - from Christ at the very top and down the layers via the Apostles, Angels, Bishops and Kings - all these statues face resolutely outwards - their faces gaze directly at you, and most importantly their feet point straight towards you - together they proudly declare the Christian faith and draw all of us 'mortals' who look on them into the certainty of their belief. But Gormley's statue does the opposite - his statue's face is turned sideways, and there is an almost downward inflection to it. And the feet do not point outwards, but are at right angles to the building - sideways on as if representing the uncertainty, the shyness, the doubt of the figure.

This is clearly very deliberate on Gormley's part. He has written of his sculpture, and I quote, "I am very aware of the paradox of placing an object called DOUBT on the facade of a building devoted to belief, but it seems to me that doubting, interrogating, questioning, are all part of belief. For me, doubt can be a positive force and the imaginative engine of future possibility."

Our reading this morning was all about doubting. It was taken from what are called the 'Resurrection narratives' in the gospels - accounts of the various ways Jesus, risen from the dead, appeared to his followers after his death on the cross so as to provide the evidence, if you like, that what Jesus had said about his being killed and then rising again had come true. This is the core belief for Christians - and yet, right from the outset, there is doubt. Thomas, calls into question the truth of his master's resurrection.

For me, this has always been one of my favourite and most relatable resurrection narratives. Wouldn't all of us, if placed in a similar situation, be as skeptical and incredulous as Thomas if we were being asked to believe that someone we had known and loved had risen from the dead?

Thomas, you will recall, wasn't present when Jesus first appeared to all his disciples. They told him that they had seen the risen Lord and believed him to have risen, and they expected Thomas to believe too just because they had had first hand experience of the fact. But Thomas replies that he can't or won't believe until he has actual physical proof personally - until he has seen with his own eyes and felt with his own hands the wounds of Jesus and his physical, living body.

Because this was Thomas's response, he has been nicknamed down the centuries as 'Doubting Thomas' - a nickname which I have always felt is rather diminishing or dismissive. It's almost as though we are criticizing or expressing a lack of approval for Thomas by calling him the 'doubting one'. How can he be called a true follower of Jesus if he even dared to doubt that what his friends told him was true?

But isn't Thomas so much more like me or like you? Do any of us - does anyone in fact - have a faith or a belief so strong that we are never doubtful or skeptical about what we are told.

So rather than go with what I feel can be implied criticism of 'Doubting Thomas', I would argue that we should rather empathize with him, and see ourselves in him, and consider how we would have reacted had we been in his shoes.

Thomas, you see, precisely because he is doubtful and skeptical, helps strengthen his, and in turn our, own faith. He does end up believing, as his declaration "My Lord and my God" makes clear - but only because he has questioned.

Thomas's doubt and questioning opens the door to his own belief, and gives Jesus an opportunity to speak not only to Thomas, but to his other disciples, and to us as well, 2000 years later. Thomas's doubt leads Jesus to say: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Those words are directed at every one who has come after the disciples and who have not had the opportunity to physically see the risen Jesus or touch his wounds.

And this isn't the only time in the Gospels that Thomas's doubt leads to answers and revelation. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus talks to his disciples about there being many rooms in his Father's house and that he will be going ahead of his friends to prepare those rooms - a text often read at funerals. Jesus says to his disciples - "you know where I am going". And in response, Thomas speaks for all of us who, I am sure, are equally perplexed and unsure about this, and asks quite bluntly: "Lord, we do not know where You are going, so how can we know the way?"

A perfectly reasonable and sensible question. A question which is direct, is grounding and which gets to the heart of what so many of the other disciples must have been thinking, but which only Thomas had the courage to ask outright.

And in asking the question, Jesus gives an answer which speaks not only to Thomas and his friends, but also to all of us, and which forms another central and fundamental tenet of Christianity: he says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

How often have you wanted to ask a question, but not had the courage to do so? How often have you been grateful for the fact that someone else has asked a question? How often have you failed to gain true clarity or reassurance about anything because you haven't properly interrogated the evidence? How often have you trusted blindly in the beliefs or comments of others and gone along with that they think, without truly asking yourself what you personally believe about something - be that a matter of faith, or behaviour, or knowledge?

I'd like to finish, then, by suggesting that far from being the 'poor, weak relation' in this resurrection narrative, Thomas is actually the hero. Through his skepticism and questioning, he strengthens not only his own faith, but shows us all the way we too should behave not just in matters of faith, but in the way we grow and learn too.

So take a close look at Gormley's DOUBT, and when you do, remember the story of Thomas. Develop your own informed opinion about the sculpture for its artistic value, but more importantly, let it inspire you to question and be curious about your own beliefs and your own learning. It's not so much a case of 'don't stop believin' to quote the rock band Journey, but 'don't stop being curious'; don't stop questioning; don't stop being a 'Doubting Thomas'.