

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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MARCH 11, 2007



John 14:5-14

"Two Skeptics"

There are some people who live by the "show me" philosophy, whether or not they are from Missouri. They want to see the money, they want the hard evidence, they will not entrust themselves to anyone who does not first demonstrate that they deserve it. This approach is frequently supposed to be the province of engineers and scientists, although in my experience that's not quite right; engineers of course always want a workable solution now, if not yesterday; scientists on the other hand are quite accustomed to holding two diametrically opposed views at the same time on anything, and waiting for either new evidence or a new perspective to emerge that will solve the dilemma. Engineers can't afford to wait – they need something that works, now!

When it comes to spiritual matters, we find "show me" people, as well as dreamers, among believers in all ages. Among the people who met Jesus, there were two members of the Twelve who were skeptics, hard-headed men who said "show me." Their names were Philip and Thomas. They are usually named right after Peter and Andrew, James and John, in the lists of the apostles, and we know something about their call, their actions, their questions, their discipleship, and about what they did in the life of the early church.

1) *Philip The Apostle*

Philip was from the lakeside town of Bethsaida, the same as Peter and Andrew, and was apparently also a fisherman. Jesus called him when they were all down south in the region across the Jordan where John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing. It's possible that Philip had been a disciple of John's, but when Jesus calls him in classic fashion: "follow me," Philip does. His first recorded action – like Andrew's – was to go tell someone else that they too ought to meet Jesus: in Philip's case it was a friend from his home town, Nathanael (called Bartholomew in the other Gospels). "We have found the one Moses and the prophets talk about," he says, "come and see."

Here is the man who likes to see, to show, to know: "Come and see." A few months later, when huge crowds are following Jesus, and it is getting late in the day to find food, Philip the pragmatist announces that to feed the 5000-plus people, it would take "200 denarii" – about 8 months wages for a working man – "to buy enough bread even to give everyone a taste." Philip must have been deeply impressed that Jesus had the power to make enough bread appear to supply everyone and have plenty left over.

That would be a real “show me” action for Philip!

There is more to say about Philip and Jesus, but it’s clear that he became a firm and devoted disciple, and the historians tell us that he became an effective evangelist who traveled far with the gospel of Jesus. His early travels were said to be in East, in what was then called Parthia – to us, Syria and Iraq. But later he returned to the Roman province of Asia, went as far west as Athens (by some accounts, he became bishop of the church there); and he ended his life in the major city of Hierapolis (in modern Turkey) where there was a major center of pagan worship of “the great dragon.” Many ancient images show Philip “exorcising the devil,” and casting the great snake or serpent or whatever it was out of its temple in Hierapolis. He died there, by crucifixion, because he fell foul of the Roman consul; in a story that turns up several times for apostles and evangelists, the trouble came when the consul’s wife converted to Christianity (there is maybe a warning here about messing with powerful men’s wives!).

2) *Thomas The Doubter*

Thomas, the other skeptical apostle, we know little about until his famous encounter with Jesus after the resurrection. We hear nothing of his call, and know only that tradition has him as a carpenter and builder. A practical man, you could say.

He was also a brave man, and perhaps more intuitive than his reputation as “the doubter” would suggest. A matter of months before Jesus arrives in Jerusalem for the last time, he and the Twelve have “retreated” to the villages of Judea, as the opposition and the plot to kill him have advanced. Then news arrives that Jesus’ good friend Lazarus is sick, and there is debate over whether Jesus will return to Bethany (which is very near

Jerusalem). Thomas emerges as the spokesman for the Twelve, and says “let us go with him, even if we die.” He is the only one of the Twelve (except, perhaps, Judas, who we will talk more about another day) who seems to have any intuition that Jesus is indeed going to die in Jerusalem.

Thomas’s bravery and imagination are shown well in later years: the historians tell us he carried the gospel of Jesus further than any other apostle. He began his ministry, like Philip, in Parthia, but extended it further east. He preached, said one historian, to “Parthians, Medes, and Persians,” and he ministered through the whole area of what is today Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, until he crossed the Indus River. Thomas is credited, to this day, as being the one who brought Christianity to India, in the 1st C. AD. His first work was in the north-west, in the Punjab; later he is found on the south-west coast in the Kerala region, and most famously, he settled the rest of his life – until his martyrdom - on the east coast in a village that is now a suburb of Madras. There is a cathedral there today named St. Thomas’s; and there are whole denominations of Indian Christians who even now collectively call themselves “St. Thomas Christians.”

Thomas, like Philip – and Peter, and Paul and Barnabas and Mary Magdalene and others – became so famous in the 1st C. church that generations later, people were publishing books with their names on them – so we have parts or wholes of *The Gospel of Philip*, and of course *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Acts of Thomas*, *The Apocalypse of Thomas*, most of them dating from the 2nd-5th centuries AD. They are very popular today for the light they may, or may not, shed on the diversity of beliefs that flourished during the first few Christian centuries. Of course, their late dates and attempts to borrow the prestige of well-known people means they have to be read very carefully, as one would

- for example - if today one was given a recently written book entitled *The Daily Journal of Thomas Jefferson*. A great many comparisons with older sources would be needed to evaluate what was written.

3) *Jesus and the Skeptics*

But let us return to the main question in this series: what about Jesus' interactions with these skeptics, and what of theirs with him?

Each man leaves us with one immortal "show me" moment, which Jesus accepts and turns into something neither man could foresee. With Philip, it is at the Last Supper. The Twelve are eating the Passover meal, and remembering God's gracious dealings with Israel throughout her history. Jesus has told them that he is going to be betrayed by Judas, and denied by Peter. He speaks of going away, and of the sadness they will experience, and that he intends to "provide a place for them where he is going."

Both Thomas and Philip raise questions, pleas for clarity. "We don't know where you are going, Lord, so how can we follow you?" says Thomas. It's a perfectly valid point. They are all confused, having never to this moment taken in what Jesus has said about betrayal and suffering and death. Now he's talking about going away - where? So practical Thomas asks how they can follow if they don't know the way, and hears the immortal reply from Jesus "*I am the way, the truth and the life...*" They do not need to know *where* he is going, they need only to know *who* they are following.

But Philip is not satisfied. He wants to be shown something he can rely on. "Lord," he says to Jesus, "just show us the Father and we will be satisfied." "Show us!" "Show us God, and that will be enough; we won't need any more talk, any more directions. Show us God!" And Jesus gives him the answer he

needs, the answer none of them had fully grasped up to that point, the answer that would take the Christian community another 30 years to grasp: "*If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.*"

You want me to show you God? Here he is. This is what God looks like, talks like, acts like, when he appears as a human being. If you want to know about God in terms that you can understand, that you can interpret from your own experience, look at me! That is the challenge Jesus gives to Philip, to the Twelve, to you and me and to all the other billions who have lived between us. If you want to know about God, Christianity says "Look at Jesus." If you are a "show me" type of person, here is your answer: *God in human form*, where you can recognize what sort of human that is.

And Thomas too has his famous "show me" moment: when Jesus appears to the remaining apostles on the evening of the first day of the week, the Sunday of his resurrection, Thomas is not present. Thomas does not believe what the others tell him, and swears that "unless I can see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." And so a week later, graciously meeting his skeptical disciple at his point of need, Jesus appears and says "Peace be with you," and calls Thomas over to take a look at his hands.

From the narrative, it looks as though Thomas doesn't get far with his examination before he is on his knees before Jesus, calling him "*My lord and my God.*" It is, you could say, the high point of the Gospel of John, and it is all done to satisfy a "show me" skeptic named Thomas.

4) *Jesus and Us*

So it comes down to us. What do you need? What do you or I want in the way of evidence? What would persuade us to become true believers, devoted disciples of Jesus Christ?

If you are still holding back your assent, your will, your mind, your body; why is that? Is it because you fear the consequences of belief – that you will have to give away some part of yourself: your mind, your intellect, your freedom, your personality? Do you think you might have to change your style in some areas, give up some friends?

Is that moral apprehension hidden under a mask of skepticism? “I don’t believe because I don’t find the evidence compelling.” Is “show me” a defense, or the truth? Whichever it is, here are the answers the Gospels offer to hard-headed people who say they want to be “shown.” If you really want to know about God (and not just argue about him), look at Jesus. Really look at him. Study him, think about him, read what he said and what he did. What does he show you about God that you didn’t know before? Did you think God was a grumpy old geezer sitting in heaven taking notes on your behavior and your thoughts? Does Jesus come across that way? Look at Jesus; let him show you God.

Maybe you don’t believe in miracles (after all, you took science courses in college). Do you think the resurrection of Jesus was a story made up by the Christians 100 years later to account for their devotion to this “Jesus”? Are you a skeptic? See my hands, says Jesus, if that’s what you need.

Blessed, says Jesus, are those who see and believe, and even more blessed are those who have not seen and touched, but yet have believed. So thank you, Lord, for catering to

skeptics, and to others. Thank you, Philip and Thomas, for asking good questions, for probing, for saying what we might have wanted to say if we had been there!

“Show me, and I will believe.” Gladly, says Jesus.

Let us pray...