

SEEING IS BELIEVING  
Thomas the Apostle, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2016  
Sung Eucharist  
St. Michael's Cornhill  
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If you travel westwards along Pall Mall and at the far end turn right up St. James Street, you will arrive at Piccadilly. Continue straight across into Albermarle Street and you will encounter some way up on your right the classical façade of the Royal Institution. Inside this noble building during Christmastide are the scientific lectures for children and young people for which this place has become famous. Inside this building there have been a procession of lectures by the greatest scientists of the day. Inside this building too have been conducted some of those experiments and research which have moved science forward in great strides in the past two centuries.

Founded by Henry Cavendish in 1799, it has had fifteen Nobel Laureates and included Lawrence and William Bragg, pioneers in crystallography, Lord Rutherford, Benjamin Thomson, (Count Rumford), J.J. Thompson and many more. But perhaps the most fruitful time of all was in the early-mid nineteenth century when Michael Faraday made enormous leaps – alongside James Clerk Maxwell in understanding electricity and magnetism, eventually propounding the electromagnetic theory of radiation. It was Faraday who began the Christmas Lectures.

The work of Faraday and Clerk Maxwell was seminal because it began to push boundaries such that scientific theory and advance began to be seen in a quite different way. There had developed almost a certainty about what scientific research could affirm. Unlike all other aspects of human knowledge, scientists could *know*. Facts are facts and they are solid! But these two showed how electricity and magnetism could behave in very uncertain ways. Later with the work of Albert Einstein and Max Planck this developed further. Light, X-rays, electricity, radio waves appeared sometimes to have the properties of a wave and sometimes of particles.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this led to an increased humility amongst the best scientists. Any theory is now seen as a hypothesis. It's the best explanation we have on the evidence so far available.

Let us now return to our gospel passage, and you may see why I began in Albermarle Street and with scientific research. Thomas had not been with the other followers of Jesus when he had appeared to them. In a determined way, however, they told him:

‘We have seen the Lord.’

This had changed the course of their lives already. But Thomas, albeit a disciple of Jesus, was made of sterner stuff:

‘Unless I see the mark of the nail on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I shall never believe it.’

We have all met people like Thomas. They require absolute certainty. They won't put up with woolly theory; they won't believe just anyone; they need to have cast iron evidence. Only the other week, a clergyman was telling me of a member of his congregation who could not believe in certain elements of the faith. They included, I think, the virgin birth and the resurrection. Ironically he believed God to have created the heavens and the earth. He

believed Jesus in some way to be God incarnate – but I'm a scientist, he said, I can't accept those other things.

Now the key to this divide lies in an understanding of how we can know and discern things. So, for example, when I hear much good music, I learn more about myself, about human life and about our world that I could learn in no other way. Coming here to St. Michael's, with our amazing musical tradition, reminds me of this every week of my life. Similarly, when I read poetry, go to see a play, read a novel or spend time in an art gallery, I can say something similar. Nothing of what I have learnt could be expressed in mathematical formulae or in a scientific hypothesis. Science could explain something of the medium but not the message.

So it is with moral and religious truth. Each of these is different from the other, but again neither can be boiled down into empirical formulae. Interestingly enough Michael Faraday and James Clerk Maxwell were both devout Christian believers. Maxwell expressed the positive conjoining of science and religion very crisply:

'Nothing is to be holy ground consecrated to Stationary Faith, whether positive or negative...All fallow land is to be ploughed up or a regular system of rotation followed...Never hide anything.'

The mystery of religion remained crucial for Maxwell, for Faraday and so many other scientists, but their scholarship also meant openness to new truths.

So, ultimately, we should be grateful for Thomas, the apostle's honesty. We should be grateful too for his humility once he saw Jesus' wounds. Then he too embraced the mystery: 'My Lord and My God.' How shall we positively respond to the challenges of those who say only science can speak? How can we point to the myriad ways in which we come to know of the mystery of creation – in music, poetry, art, morality – and ultimately in our faith? In other words, how do we listen out for God in Christ? Amen

### Reading

Habakkuk 2. 1-4

Ephesians 2. 19-end.

John 20. 24-29.