



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The First Sunday After Easter, March 30th, 2008

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. AMEN** ✠

The Gospel readings appointed for today tell the story of Jesus' appearances to his disciples shortly after his resurrection and of St. Thomas' refusal to accept the fact that our Lord had risen from the dead: "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe."

As a consequence, Thomas was the recipient of the put down of all times: "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands: reach hither thy hand and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing." With those words, poor old Thomas was formally installed as the patron saint of doubters. And over the ages, his nickname – "Doubting Thomas" – has become a by-word for skeptics.

But Doubting Thomas' doubts are utterly different from the doubts expressed by doubters today. Indeed, by today's standards, Doubting Thomas wasn't a doubter at all. Thomas certainly believed in God and in Jesus' divine mission. He simply had trouble accepting the reality of his physical resurrection. By contrast, most doubters today seem to doubt God's very existence.

Many, if not most, skeptics would attribute today's cultural inclination towards atheism to science. Belief in God, they would argue, is unscientific. Well, kinda! God, you see, is infinite, and as the modern scientific principle admits only that which can be measured, it is not a very useful tool for demonstrating or disproving the existence of God.

Yet, ironically, modern science came into being for the purpose of investigating the nature of God. It came about as a consequence of the Continental reformers' mistrust of fallen human reason. Instead, they advocated a reliance on only that which could be observed and measured.

It wasn't a bad idea, but it had its limitations in terms of the questions posed and the methodologies applied. If, for example, one decided to assess my father's intelligence by observing his efforts at carpentry, one might be driven to conclude he was a complete and utter moron rather than a bright and exceedingly capable businessman.

He would disappear into the barn with the intention of repairing, say, a delicate Sheraton occasional table. Hours of hammering, sawing and cursing would ensue. Eventually he would appear with something oddly shaped and quite definitely not Sheraton in his hands. He would offer it to mother and say: "I made this for you."

She would turn it over in her hands trying to disguise her puzzlement. "It's very nice, dear," she would say. "You don't like it," he would reply. "But I do, dear, it's very nice." "I bet you don't even know what it is." Mother would glance up to the heavens: "Give me three guesses?" she would counter in desperation. "It's a knife box!" he would roar. "So it is, dear, so it is," mother would reply soothingly.

Sadly, you see, reason as applied by scientists is no less fallen than that of other human beings and it has often proved embarrassingly flawed. Many reputable scientists, for example, denied the existence of electricity until it could actually be measured. It should, thus, come as no surprise that some scientists are skeptics. Scientific methods are unlikely to be able to demonstrate the existence of God until somebody figures out a way of measuring the infinite – something that seems infinitely beyond human ingenuity.

But while God cannot be measured by any scientific instrument of man's devising, his existence has most certainly been demonstrated by a far finer instrument – one of his own devising: the human mind. Indeed, until about 50 years or so ago, it was not at all respectable to express doubts about the existence of God.

This is because it didn't make sense. A majority of thinking people believed all the physical evidence available indicates that there is "an intelligence" behind creation. The traditional name for this "intelligence" is, of course, God.

There is nothing innovative about such a notion. It didn't spring fully armed, like Athena, from the forehead of Zeus in the 18th or 19th Centuries. It was, perhaps, most persuasively expressed four centuries before Christ by the Greek philosopher Aristotle and systematized into the scholastic discipline known as "Natural Theology" by his disciple St. Thomas Aquinas some 1800 years later.

Natural Theology is the body of knowledge about God which may be obtained by human reason alone without the aid of revelation. Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, essentially, argue the universe is so intelligently ordered, so logically constructed, it is, to all intents and purposes, impossible that it came into being spontaneously as the consequence of some vast cosmic accident.

Order does not arise naturally from chaos, and an accident is a chaotic act. Thus the logical explanation for the existence of the universe is that it was created by an intelligence far greater than our own, an intelligence we call God.

Aristotle, further, went on to analyze the nature of the creation and, on that basis, argue that the nature and powers of the Creator were so different from, and so superior to, our own, the only way we could get to know him was for him to reveal himself to us.

Aristotle's thesis was so profound, so persuasive; intellectuals throughout the ancient world embraced it. Soon every university of any note boasted an altar to Aristotle's unknown creator. It was this altar St. Paul spotted when he arrived on the campus of Athens University, the most prestigious in the Roman Empire. Never one to miss a trick, he declared "Men of Athens, I see you have an altar to the Unknown God. I can now reveal him to you in the person of Jesus Christ."

Natural theology is complementary to “Revealed Theology”, knowledge of God obtained from Holy Scripture and, thus, is one of the fundamental underpinnings of classical Anglicanism. The Church’s doctrines, you recall, are based on the tripod of Holy Scripture, Holy Tradition (history) and reason (Natural Theology).

When Scripture and reason agree against tradition, tradition falls, When Scripture and tradition agree against reason, reason falls. Tradition and reason, however, cannot overthrow Scripture, revealed truth.

Today’s cultural inclination towards atheism, if I might call it that, is a relatively new phenomenon – something that has gradually reared its head over the last 50 years or so. Sure, people, priests even, had doubts in the past – but not about the existence of God. It was obvious he existed. The doubts centered on whether he cared about them individually.

This is not a question primarily answered by Natural Theology, but by “Revealed Theology” in Holy Scripture. While it is not the purpose of Holy Scripture to prove the existence of God – that’s the job of Natural Theology – Holy Scripture, among other things, answers that vital question: “Does God care?”

The answer is, of course, he cares – deeply, profoundly infinitely – about every single human being he has created. But that, I have to say, is the subject of yet another sermon. *AMEN*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.