

Merely-Reserving-Judgement Thomas

A sermon on John 20: 19-31 by Nathan Nettleton, 23 April 2017

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An Explanation

When I was twelve years old, I spent a couple of weeks visiting relatives in New Zealand, and I can still remember clearly an ad that was playing on the TV there at the time. Everywhere I went, everyone was talking about it. Was it blasphemy, or kiwi humour at its very best? The ad showed a bloke wearing a floppy hat, a black singlet and shorts, and a large pair of gumboots, standing in a paddock with a few similarly clad mates, singing:

We three kings of orient are
One on a tractor, two in a car,
One on a scooter, tooting a hooter,
Following yonder star.

Oh, star of wonder, star of light,
Star of beauty, she'll be right,
Star of glory, that's the story,
Following yonder star.

That add was launching the first album of Fred Dagg, a character created by John Clarke, and I've been a fan ever since. John Clarke was not only very funny, but he was an extraordinarily perceptive reader of human beings, and of social and political systems. His two and a half minute sketches could frequently give a clear and accurate explanation of some otherwise baffling reality, and leave us all in stitches. The Wall Street Journal once included a link to one of his satirical sketches as the best succinct summary of the international debt crisis.

John Clarke died suddenly while bushwalking two weeks ago. We will be much the poorer for the loss of his guidance in understanding ourselves and laughing at ourselves.

Tonight, as a fan wanting to offer tribute, I am going to attempt to channel a bit of the early John Clarke, and preach from our gospel reading as I think Fred Dagg might have addressed it. There will be some lines directly lifted from Fred Dagg Scripts, but most of it I'll have to make up. So if you enjoy watching me fall flat on my face, this could be your chance! You'll have to imagine the gumboots. Here we go, mind the step.

The "Sermon"

Ah, yeah giddy. Now I want to have word with you today about one of the great injustices of life and that's the way that a reputation can be set in stone by a minor incident somewhere in the early bronze age, and still be holding sway in the court of public opinion long after social media is supposed to have turned all information into ephemera fit for attention spans measured in nano-seconds. Now I refer of course, in the case of my very good self, to the matter of appellations, or descriptive nicknames that outlive their usefulness by a millennia or two. Thus it is that ever since I refrained from leaping to hasty acceptance of what appeared to be an early example of fake news, I have been known to the ages as "Doubting Thomas".

I could perhaps have lived with “Doesn’t like to jump to hasty conclusions Thomas”, although I’ll concede that it perhaps doesn’t flow off the tongue quite as smoothly in casual conversation, but why should one’s brief moment of mental hesitation be remembered for two thousand years with an appellation that makes me sound like I’d even question that the sky was blue or that there’s lashings of self-interest holding the AOC to ransom. It denies a man a fair go and second chance, and it flies in the face of everything this country has come to stand for, and this country has been bent over backwards in an effort to make it stand for just about anything.

I’ve done my best to lose the moniker, or even reinterpret it over the years. For a few years I tried to make out that it was simply a misunderstanding of my Chinese name, Dao Ting Tom, given to me by a wise old Chinese gentleman during my travels, but this didn’t convince anyone, perhaps owing the fact that it was commonly known around the town that my major travels were not to China, but to India.

I’ve also lodged several freedom of information inquiries seeking to know why I was saddled with this derisive descriptor when none of my equally deserving mates ended up with a big celebrity heads label to forever remind the world of their more embarrassing moments. Why is Peter not forever remembered as “Denying Peter”, or even as “Never heard of him in my life Peter”? Why is Mark not remembered as “Dropped his sartorial and ran away naked into the night Mark”? Why are James and John only nicknamed the “Sons of Thunder” and not as the “Sons of the eternal fight to decide who’s the king of the castle”? Believe me, the public deserves answers to these questions.

And the less said about the case of the oft-forgotten Apostle Trevor, the better, because to be perfectly Francis with you, there was a fair amount of evidence that Trevor wouldn’t have known if a tram was up him til the bell rang. And if you do happen to stumble across an extant copy of the lost Gospel according to Trevor, a quick scan should suffice to reveal the wisdom of having omitted it from the big book in the first place. I’ll concede that my account was omitted too, but at least mine is still available to the discerning reader, albeit usually only on the seconds shelves of obscure bookshops inhabited mainly by members of the bow-tie and long socks brigade.

Anyway, let me get back to the beginning and fill you in on the back story to all this.

The most important fact, which I have banged on about endlessly in my own defence, was that Jesus was dead. There was no disputing this. By any test of degrees of deadness, Jesus was ticking all the boxes. All manner of vested interests had made it their business to make absolutely sure that he was dead, gone, deceased, buried, and no correspondence shall be entered into. Not so much shuffled off this mortal coil as forcibly expelled from this mortal coil, and his lifeless body used for a little javelin practice just to be extra sure.

Furthermore, the said same vested interests went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that no one could tamper with his tomb. There have been malfunctioning nuclear reactors that have been subject to less security. This was the Roman equivalent of encasing in six metres of concrete and enforcing a twelve kilometre exclusion zone with the perimeter patrolled by heavily armed members of the border protection force, or perhaps some outsourced private security contractors who won the tender in a highly transparent top-secret process, the details

of which will be revealed when hell becomes the preferred holiday destination for polar bears and Antarctic penguins.

So you can understand then why it did not immediately strike me as a likely-to-be-true story when a few of the Trevors, some of whom were well known for practical jokes and for the speaking forth of what could best be described as bovine excrement, claimed that Jesus had dropped in for a visit and was showing off his scars like an exhibitionist recovering from a quadruple bypass.

Now speaking of scars, it didn't exactly enhance their credibility that none of them were showing any scars. Because I can tell you without a shadow of a doubt that if I'd been Jesus, and all my mates had dived for cover and left me to face the lynch mob alone like this lot, any return visit I'd make would be about settling a few scores and dealing out some just desserts. Rather than smiles and "peace be with you" and "sins are forgiven", they'd be looking like they'd just gone ten rounds with Jeff Fenech after consuming nothing but Harvey Wallbangers for a fortnight.

I did have some cause to doubt my own doubt, because some of those who were passing on the report were the type of people usually referred to by lawyers as "reliable witnesses". A hostile prosecutor may have sought to highlight Mary Magdalene's questionable past, but her record for not gilding the lily was fairly well established. And Peter was one of my best mates. Not always the brightest crayon in the box, I'll grant you, and certainly my polar opposite in his penchant for letting the expression of firm opinions and convictions cross the finish line and claim the medal well before sensible thought and critical analysis had even stripped of their track suits and settled into the starting blocks. But as a general rule of thumb, and even a finger or two, if he said he saw something, you could accept that he saw it.

Mind you, the question of whether anyone can trust their own perceptions has been called into question by more than a few philosophers since our time. Perceptions, they reckon, are notoriously fallible and the visual sense in particular has been known to play tricks. Sometimes when you think you see something you actually don't see it, and sometimes you don't see something, or you say you don't see it, and it's common knowledge around the village that you saw it. When it comes to doubting, some of these blokes have got me well and truly covered.

Why it's me and not René Decartes who got the moniker "Doubting" is anyone's guess, and if we can sort it out a great injustice might be righted. "Doubting René" as I like to call him, was a member of the French nation, and the whole business of doubt was perfected and refined under his hand. Doubting René pointed out that if you can't trust your own perceptions, then pretty soon you get on to doubting whether you're actually here, or maybe you only think you're here. Now this level of doubt could have had everyone in all sorts of existential crisis if it hadn't been sorted out by a bloke called Bruce Bayliss who's lived up the road from here ever since he moved in. Bruce was able to demonstrate to a high degree of certainty that he exists, because if he doesn't exist, he reckons, why does he have to pay tax? It's a compelling case, worthy of my own good self, but Bruce reckons each to their own and if some people still reckon that they're not really here, that's fine with Bruce and they can buy their own beer.

Now back to my story, and to prove that my alleged doubts were not even in the same arena of play as Doubting René's, I need to let you know that my doubts were not premised on some philosophical questioning of my own powers of perception. The fact was that when Jesus made his post-entombment appearance, I wasn't there. Everyone else was there, but not me. Despite what some have alleged, this wasn't because I was curled up in a foetal position with the blankets pulled over my head. A few of the trevors had done quite a bit of that in the previous three days, but at this point I simply wasn't there because someone had to go out and get the fish and chips. I wasn't even gone for long, and if the bloke in front of me hadn't started a high-level diplomatic dispute over whether he'd ordered his dim sims streamed or fried, I might have made it back in time for the big surprise.

But I wasn't there. And I would have a lot less to complain about if they had been calling me ever since "Turned up late and missed the whole thing Thomas", because I will admit to having backable form in that event. It's been an issue for me since the day I nearly missed my own birth. I was indeed, on that occasion, curled up in a foetal position with the blankets pulled comfortably over my bonce, and it took a mighty push from my mum to make sure I didn't miss the whole egress into the light thing.

Now, egress into the light has become a bit of a theme of my life too, given my propensity to turn up a bit late and miss the big moment where they pick the teams and explain the rules, and I guess you've heard what happened after I missed seeing Jesus's unprecedented return to the field of play a mere three days after being carried from the arena with fatal injuries. I expressed my perfectly reasonable reluctance to place too much weight on the reports of an unreliable bunch of trevors who were known to be a bit prone to what scientists refer to as wishful thinking and what psychologists refer to as self-medication or the indulgence of the drowning-the-sorrows reflex.

But anyway, a few days later, or a week to be precise, we were gathered again, and this time the spinning bottle had sent someone else out for the fish and chips, and I found myself suddenly standing face to face in a locked room with a bloke who I knew without a shadow of a doubt to be dead, buried and under guard. But there was Jesus himself, standing in front of me, saying "Giddyay. Peace be with you."

Now I don't know about you, but a dead bloke who may possibly have a bone to pick with you standing in front of you telling you to be at peace is not the most peace-inducing experience one can have. So the mind was in a fair bit of turmoil, and the knees were doing a pretty convincing impersonation of a certain gelatinous dessert favoured by small children, and I was wondering whether Doubting René might not have been on to something when he said that the fact that you saw something, like a bloke being killed and buried, didn't necessarily mean that it actually happened. Jesus though was fairly encouraging on this point. He didn't claim that he hadn't been killed, or even that he wasn't actually dead. In fact he seemed only too willing to show off his fatal injuries to prove that he was indeed dead. Apparently the perception that needed to be rethought was the widespread perception that being dead necessarily cancels out the possibility of being simultaneously alive, and even more alive than you were before you were dead. Which is quite a lot to get your head around really, and if you've got it sorted out to the satisfaction of the examiners, then you're doing a fair bit better than me and probably starting to make Doubting René look like nothing more than a second-rate naive realist.

But at that moment, my now thoroughly gelatinous anterior cruciates and medials gave way completely, usually a season ending injury, and I found myself on the floor at his feet crying out “My Lord and my God!” which was kind of shorthand for “Despite my previous hesitations, I now realise that even being comprehensively dead doesn’t stop you from being more devastatingly alive than anyone else I’ve ever met, and on that score I am thereby convinced that you are not only the author of life but the one who holds it safe from death and shows us how to live it to the max, so you can count me in.” Or words to that effect.

Anyway, I need to shuffle off. I’m catching up with René for a couple of quiet ones, but I just wanted to leave you with the bit of advice that Jesus gave me that day. He said, “Look, I’m not having a go at you for holding out until you could see me with your own eyes, but René was probably onto something when he said that the evidence of your own eyes is not the be all and end all. I’ve spend three years trying to open the eyes of you lot, not to mention of the Pharisees and their ilk, and no one’s going to be giving me an honorary doctorate in ophthalmology on the strength of my performance. So be prepared to read other signs too, and if ever you see life and love breaking free where the fear of death reigned, ask yourself whether you really need to clap your peepers on the cause, or whether you can just trust the Spirit of Life wherever and however you witness it at work. Blessed are those who, even though they are out for fish and chips and miss the visuals, can feel and trust the new life that is bursting forth all around them. Follow the life and the love, not the visual effects.”

So that’s probably a good note to leave it on, and René’s probably onto his second round and Peter may be already under the table, so I’ll get out of your way now. I’ll see you later.