

Patron saints are not quite as popular as they used to be. Once was the time when it wasn't just churches: every town and city, every club and society, every trade, profession and activity, even every illness and affliction had its holy helper. And it was not just that people *had* their saints: they used them as well. Patron saints were not some sort of mascot for a town or trade, an impressive emblem to add to your coat of arms and nothing more. The prayers of the saints on behalf of their clients were powerful helps, the heavenly equivalent of a word with the manager from an employee who has the boss's ear, a helping holy hand to move your petition to the top of the in-tray, divine lobbyists with the Prime Minister's ear.

Sometimes these patronages are straightforward and readily understandable to our 21st century mindset. Local-grown holy heroes became local saints (such as St Cuthbert or St Bede in Durham), or visitors to a place, whether while living or later in the form of their relics, could become its patron-, so St Barnabas, in Cyprus or St Mark in Venice.

St George was a soldier and thus patron of the military, hence why the bone-headed thuggishly martial English adopted him as their patron even though he never set foot in this green and pleasant land, luckily for him as no doubt if he had he would have been locked up in a detention centre before being deported. St Luke, the blessed physician became patron of the medical professions, St Augustine, the great thinker and metaphysician, became patron of theologians. Familiarity with a place or a form of human endeavour naturally made the saint more likely to pass the message on to the boss.

Often patronages were less apparently straightforward based on highly tenuous links, stretching somewhat the notion of saintly sympathy usually based on some straw of sympathy in the saint's CV. St Stephen was stoned to death so was thought, perhaps understandably, to have a marked sympathy for those suffering headaches; St Margaret, bursting forth from the belly of the dragon would readily empathise with those in the pangs of childbirth, St Clement, martyred by being tied to an anchor and thrown into the sea, became by an act of pretty lateral thinking the patron of sailors, just as St Bartholomew, flayed alive, would be the best patron for leatherworkers. I'm sure he laughed when he saw that on the newsletter.

Perhaps we have lost something by allowing the patron saints to gently fade from our everyday lives, and in order to make things always bang up to date, perhaps there should be patron saints for periods in time. So, for example, the 1940s, known for their austerities could have St Anthony of Egypt a particularly severe ascetic for their

patron, the 1960s era of flower power and folk festivals would naturally choose St Francis, man. St Sithney, who is currently in charge of mad dogs (I kid you not- he puts in a spectral appearance everytime somebody rings the Rectory doorbell) might want to add the 1970s to his portfolio. St Matthew, of course, would oversee the 1980s, decade of Thatcherism, yuppies and mobile phones, though Sithney might want to help out a bit here too.

And if we had to choose a patron saint of our times- and if we expand our view away from England- after all as far as I know there is no patron saint of panic and idiocy- there could really only be one contender, one of the saintly crew who is head and shoulders above all others when it comes to representing and understanding our times, and that is St Thomas. Doubting Thomas, who would not believe the resurrection unless he saw with his own eyes, unless he put his fingers into the nail holes and his hand into the spear gash. Yep, skeptical cynical St Thomas is without doubt, the saint for our times.

We are a world that doubts. We are a skeptical world, a world that sneers, that questions and rarely trusts motives. 'You would say that wouldn't yo.u' So many times our trust has been abused, the wool pulled over our eyes, the tricks played on us, that we now find it easiest and safest, almost automatic, to start off from a position of mistrust and doubt. We are shot through with doubt, riddled with the stuff. Everyone and everything is guilty until proven innocent. You want our trust? Earn it.

Let me illustrate. Some of the activities in human life seem to crystallise that life, to paint our attitudes, beliefs and behaviours in sharp and vivid colours. Driving is one I came to rather late in life and boy, does it confirm one in what would technically be called a negative anthropology. Put a human being in a tin box and never again will you doubt the doctrine of original sin. Mild mannered men and women become irredeemable monsters. Suddenly the-world-that-matters shrinks in size and is reduced solely to the occupiers and contents of the said tin box. One of the many reasons for this, I suspect, is that it seems that almost everyone is told by their driving instructors at some point or another that one must act as if everyone else on the road are complete idiots, expect everyone else to be appallingly bad drivers and then act accordingly. I seem to have imbibed this lesson well: one those rare occasions when kindness is displayed by another driver: the one, say that after 10 minutes of waiting stops to let you turn into the Croydon Road, in such circumstances I am so surprised I sit there paralysed with unbelief. Everyone else on

the road is idiots is, I suppose sensible advice and probably on the whole increases the safety of our streets, but it does tap into and feed on that core of doubt at the centre of our beliefs. Everyone and everything is guilty until proven innocent. Doubt everyone.

Driving is just a particular hot house of our behaviour patterns: I'm sure you can with only the slightest of effort start to fill in all the other ways in which doubt pervades our lives.

Doubt has a part to play in our faith too. It might sound oxymoronic, but as the theologian Paul Tillich said "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith". At times in our life, on our journey of faith, we will find ourselves doubting this article of faith or that or this doctrine of the church or that. We may find ourselves, entertaining qualms about the virgin birth say or the immaculate conception. If we rise high enough in the episcopal hierarchy of the Church of England we may even find ourselves expressing doubts about the resurrection. But the doubts of faith are not quite the same as those of other parts of life, because we cannot doubt the heart of our faith, that Sacred heart of Jesus. Doubts we may have come, I would say, from our inability, quite understandably and unavoidably, to understand the things of God, from the utter inadequacy of our language to even start to describe the things of God, - the very same language as it happens, that we use express, state and define what we believe. The deficiency leading to doubt, is not in the thing we are attempting to describe, it is in our ability to describe, it is in our description. Just this once, the workman can in all honesty blame his tools. Until we enjoy with all the saints the beatific vision, until we see God face to face, our knowledge will be very partial indeed, incomplete and perfused with doubt.

So St Thomas, that man ahead of his time, the man who wanted proofs and ended up with so much more. Did he I wonder, put his fingers in the nail holes, did he reach his hand into Jesus side? The gospels do not tell us either way, they are enigmatic and leave us to make up our own mind. Perhaps, a true 21st century man, he did, stubborn to the last. But perhaps when 'proof' was in Thomas's grasp, when proof was, in a very real sense at his fingertips, well maybe it was then that it all started to unravel and just fell to pieces in his hands. When Thomas looked into the face of his Lord and his God, proof no longer mattered.

How many of us start out boldly and determinedly saying 'prove it', and find that, as we sit grasping at straws in the presence of Jesus, uncomprehendingly listening to the word of God, never really knowing what we are doing receiving communion, that we

no longer need proofs. We had demanded to put our fingers into his hands and feet and side— then we will believe. We find, despite ourselves that we are believing and the proofs no longer matter. Those proofs indeed, could they be provided would be simply children's games, idle amusements. To be with Jesus, to simply be in his presence: this is the limit and the fulfillment of our knowledge and our faith.