

Discerning the Nail Prints of Jesus
John 20:24-29

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But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Jn. 20:25b

The focus of my sermons since the pandemic separated us has been on personal religion with the aim of helping our people imagine God in their individual lives. Today I shine the spotlight on the public realm of faith with the aim of helping our people imagine how Christ wishes them to think about public policy, whether it is policy having to do with the government’s response to the pandemic or any other matter of social justice. This public thinking is a vital part of Christian living. We people of Easter faith believe the Risen Christ is afoot in the world as an active agent, and so an important question we must face wonders what criteria we are to use in ascertaining whether Christ is giving his blessing to a particular proposal or plan of action.

Thomas can be our guide in identifying criteria to use toward discerning whether the Lord is in a particular public policy proposal. Thomas is typically seen to be the doubter and applying these verses about Thomas to some aspect of the subject of doubt is the proper use of this text. However, having said that, I want to use these verses in a different way today. Rather than interpret Thomas as a doubter I want us to look upon him this morning as a discernor. One who discerns uses various criteria to discriminate between the truth and the false, the right and the wrong, the valid and the invalid. Thomas had two criteria he was going to use toward ascertaining the authenticity of the resurrection of Jesus: the nail prints in the Lord’s hand and the gash from the sword in his side. To Thomas’ mind, that which is authentically of Christ bears the wounds of the nails and the sword. Just now we will keep our thoughts to the image of the nail prints.

Given that biblical background and use of Thomas as a model discernor, my thesis for you this morning is this. Christians should assess public policies according to the extent to which those policies display the nail prints of Jesus. This does not mean the policies have to be deliberately or distinctively Christian and formed in the name of Christ. But it does mean the policies should be consistent with Christ as he is revealed in the scriptures if they are to win Christian support. To paraphrase Thomas: unless we see the mark of the nails we should withhold our support from any project, policy, or plan.

Now the crucial question is, What are the nail prints we should be looking for? I count at least four of them, and I think all of them have to be present in order for something to gain my backing as a Christian. See what you think.

Boldness

Boldness is one of the nail prints of Jesus. Unless something is bold it is hard to see Christ is in it. Whatever Jesus was, he was not timid. The nail prints show he went to the cross,

and there is nothing timid about going to a cross. Jesus boldly set his face toward Jerusalem, knowing that death awaited him there (cf. Lk. 9). And he accepted this destiny courageously in Gethsemane. His courage can be heard in his prayer: “Abba, Father . . . remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” (Mk. 14:36 and par.)

Our Lord displayed courage throughout his life. An angry mob in his hometown was ready to throw him off a cliff. After telling them what he thought, he calmly walked through the middle of the mob and left. (Lk. 4:30) He was once told a powerful, selfish, and pompous king was after him and that he should avoid crossing him, but Jesus shrugged it off and went on with what the thought was right. Pharisees were after him. Sadducees were after him. Scribes were after him. All the parties were after him. Even the demons shouted at him. But Christ faced them all squarely and with steady eyes.

So the quality of boldness – not timidity – will mark proposals that have the blessing of Christ.

Honesty

Honesty is one of the nail prints of Jesus. Whatever Jesus was, he was not deceptive. He openly showed his wounds. We once had a parishioner – gone many years now – who always wore long sleeves. She was caught in a fire when she was young and the flames left her arms severely scarred. She wore long sleeves to keep her scars hidden. Jesus openly showed his wounds. “Look,” he said to Thomas, “you wanted to see my wounds? Here they are! See for yourself!” It should be pointed out that he showed them to the other disciples, too, a week earlier, when he first appeared to them and Thomas was not with them.

It was always this way with Jesus. He had integrity. He was actually on the road he said he was on. He was no Dr. Jekyll concealing a Mr. Hyde. He was no grifter hiding behind an altruist’s agenda. There was nothing duplicitous about Jesus. When people came to arrest him under the cloak of darkness, he called them out saying he had been teaching every day in the light of day, openly in the temple. (Mt. 26:55b) Jesus lived with constant integrity as a man with nothing to hide.

So the quality of honesty – not deception – will mark proposals that have the blessing of Christ. Policies that can win Christian approval will be bold and honest.

Love

Love is one of the nail prints of Jesus. Those who have left us reports of Jesus’ life have said love was at the center of his personality and self-identity. It did not matter if Jesus was dealing with people *en masse* or on an individual basis. Love was the starting point of what he did. You remember the stories the records tell. A group of people at least 5000 strong was gathered one day, and Jesus, we are told, had compassion for them. (Mk. 6:34 and par.) A young man came to him another day; the young man was earnest but idealistic and mistaken in his self-assessment. Jesus, we are told, look at him with love in his heart. (Mk. 10:21)

Love is in the nail prints he showed Thomas. When the writer of the Fourth Gospel began to tell his story of the last few days of Jesus, he opened his telling by saying, “Having loved his

own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” (Jn. 13:1b) Love sent him into the world, that same writer said (Jn. 3:16), and love led him to the cross. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (Jn. 15:13)

So the quality of love will mark proposals that have the blessing of Christ. They will be bold, honest, and loving.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice is one of the nail prints of Jesus. It may be the chief of them all. The nail prints are in his hands for the sake of others.

He could have called ten thousand angels
To destroy the world and set him free;
He could have called ten thousand angels
But he died alone for you and me.

[Ray Overholt]

He sacrificed himself for others.

And please note this is not a sacrifice like the one portrayed in a Spectrum advertisement now running on television. You’ve seen it, I trust. It shows a primitive people gathered at the top of a volcano. Their economy is threatened because of lack of rain for their crops. The unfeeling emperor of the tribe and his smiling lieutenant position themselves to take charge by forcing an innocent young man to jump into the volcano as a sacrifice to save the economy.

The sacrifice that left the nail prints on the hands of Jesus was not the sacrifice of the lesser for the greater. It was the sacrifice of the greater for the lesser.

For the dear Lamb of God left the glory of heaven

To bear it to cold Calvary.

[George Bennard]

Policies that bear the mark of Jesus have the element of sacrifice about them. And it is this kind of sacrifice. They do not serve the powerful by riding on the backs of the weak. They strengthen the weak through the costs borne by the strong.

Boldness. Honesty. Love. Sacrifice. I suggest these are the nail prints that help us discern Jesus in public life today. Study current events as closely as you can. But learn to say along with discerning Thomas, “Unless I see the mark of the mark of the nails . . . I will not believe.”