

Easter 2 Thomas the Doubter 28.04.2019

Prayer: May I speak and may you listen in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit Amen.

It's the same every year! We have the wonderful celebrations of Easter, of a risen Christ, a full joyous church, renewal of baptismal vows, Easter egg hunt and then a week later we are into "doubt". Did it really happen? Did this man, Jesus of Nazareth, actually rise from the dead? Every year the Gospel Reading for the second Sunday of Easter is John's account of Thomas the Doubter. Now this Sunday has been commonly known as Low Sunday - low, I presume, because in contrast to last week's great heights of Easter joy, we can only descend the mountain. It's often a time when vicars take a break. And can you blame them? Their journeys through Lent and then Holy Week to Easter Day will have been challenging and tiring. A break is fully deserved and they can leave our dubious friend "doubt" to the curate or perhaps a Reader. This is the fifth occasion I've preached on Thomas and I'm hoping you've forgotten the other occasions because I've been wondering if there is anything new I can say about "doubt" and "St Thomas". Well here goes!

If you have any doubts concerning the risen Christ, then you are in good company. At the beginning of the Gospel Reading it is the evening of the Resurrection Day. Mary Magdalene has already announced to the disciples that she had seen the Lord and talked with him. Well the disciples hadn't actually rushed out into the streets shouting, "Would you Adam and Eve it? Our master is alive! The one who was crucified just three days ago has risen from the dead!" No! the disciples also doubted - they obviously hadn't believed Mary because they were all inside a house whose doors were locked because they were frightened of the Jewish leaders. Perhaps what they did to Jesus they would also do to them. All were there except Thomas. We are not told where he was or what he was doing, but perhaps it reveals that Thomas had courage. He took the risk to be out and about and maybe recognised in the streets of Jerusalem. So Thomas misses the first appearance of the risen Jesus to the disciples when he showed them his wounds to prove it really was him; when he breathed the Holy Spirit on them - John's Pentecost!; when the disciples rejoiced on seeing the Lord.

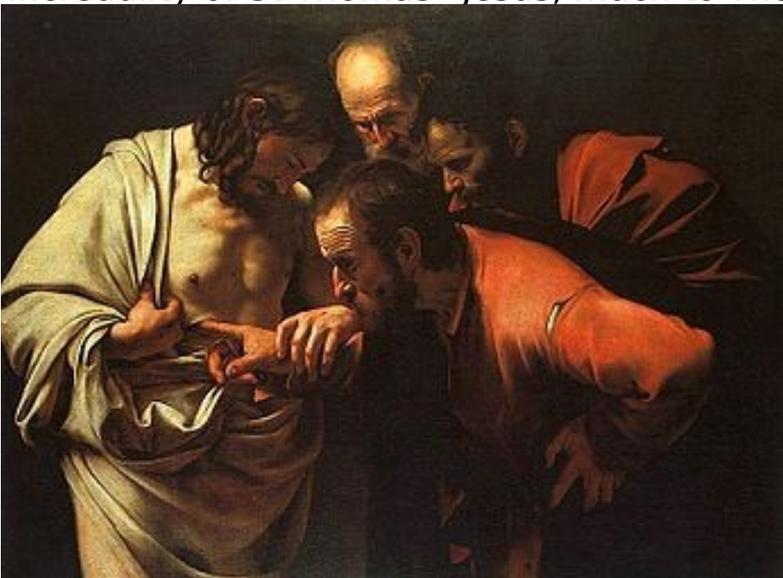
When Thomas returns he does not believe what the disciples tell him; what he has missed. He has already been told by Mary and now he's being told by his best friends and companions that Jesus has appeared to them ...and still Thomas doubts. Thomas, the archetypal sceptic! The realist, the one who requires empirical evidence. "Unless I see the mark of his nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Thomas wasn't going to be taken in by what might be "fake news". Rumour's a mischievous character. Probably a ghost, an illusion. Nobody rises from the dead.

Jesus keeps Thomas waiting a whole week before he appears again. Same manner! Through locked doors! Same greeting "Peace be with you!" Then the bold invitation to Thomas, which will destroy all doubt, dispel any second thoughts. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." How invasive is that? We are not told if Thomas actually did feel and enter the wounds of our Lord, but his exclamation, "My Lord and my God" reveals he now understands that Christ is risen and that he is God.

Malcolm Guite writes:

*Oh doubting Thomas, father of my faith
You put your finger on the nub of things*

That one moment, when perhaps Thomas stretches forth to feel our Lord's wounds, has stimulated many works of art. In Caravaggio's "The Incredulity of St Thomas" Jesus, much to Thomas' amazement, holds his



in Rembrandt's painting energy and vitality shining from looking Thomas backwards. In "Thomas" Thomas is reaching you can see that some of the courage to do the same. It is the Doubter, as he speaks for even disruptive, if it holds positive. Let me try and

To many people outside the church, there's a common impression that Christianity is about certainty. Yet the language used in our liturgy does not emphasise certainty, but rather faith and hope. When we say the creed we say "We believe" and not "we know" - and that's an important difference. I have lots of evidence that my twin brother, a doubting Thomas in his youth if there ever was one - and we are told Thomas was a twin - loves me. We regularly contact each other on FaceTime, we show great hospitality to each other and we share great faith. But I don't know he loves me in the same way that I know I have 8 fingers and 2 thumbs if I put up my hands. Faith and facts aren't the same things. Faith involves trust and hope - we can be confident about our faith but that's not the same thing as certainty. I believe the Christian Faith is true, but I can't prove it to you and at times I get doubts which challenge me to think and pray more deeply. The stories of the resurrection appearances of Jesus, and surely also of Thomas, are written for our encouragement, for building up our faith. There's nothing wrong with doubting. Indeed it can be a sign of a healthy mature faith. Unless we embrace some kind of fundamentalism or fanaticism, certainty will never be ours. We also know that fundamentalism and fanaticism are the curses of our modern world and lead to intolerance and terrorism. The life the Gospel promises us is confident, not comfortable, sincerely engaged, not arrogantly certain.

Jane Williams in her book "The Faces of Christ" writes:

"The door through which Jesus comes to Thomas is the way between faith and doubt, between death and life, between God and us. It is a door that has no lock on it, but one that every person, like Thomas, must reach out and open for themselves."

My Lord and my God. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Bill Pattinson

27.04.2019