

EASTER 2 Yr B 2018
St David's Eucharist

'You can be an in-ner and an out-er, a believer and a doubter.'

So said Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh, whose departure from formal faith is well-known and documented, speaking on Radio 4's Start the Week last Monday. The programme was about faith and doubt and I can heartily recommend it to you if you missed it but have access to BBC iPlayer.

Another thing he said, which I think is helpful is that the opposite of doubt is not faith but certainty. Faith won't give you certainty if that's what you're after. It is, as the French thinker Pascal, once said, 'a bet' - though like all bets there are grounds for making it.

I have a real soft spot for Thomas, being ordained deacon on his day, 3rd July, one year and celebrating my first Eucharist as a priest on the same day the following year. But not just because of that. He also reassures me when my faith is a bit thin, when I'm not so sure, when I have questions.

Thomas is a real modern man in one sense: he wants proof. Other people's say-so isn't enough for him. If Jesus is alive he not only wants to see him, he wants to be able to put his hands into the wounds he knew were made in his crucified body.

Is there too, perhaps, some wilfulness in his desire to see the risen Jesus? Was his ego offended that Jesus, whom he had encouraged the others to follow into danger and risk death with him, was he angry that Jesus had chosen to appear when he wasn't with them? Couldn't he have waited till we were all there? He might have thought. Why was I the only one left out?

But, whatever, that's how it was, John tells us. And as John looks back and recalls the events of Jesus' life, this final appearance to Thomas seems to him to be a fitting end to what he's writing. In his Prologue he had written 'nobody has ever seen God' but here, at the end (the incidents that follow are a kind of Epilogue added later) here is Thomas, making the ultimate statement of faith as he responds to Jesus' outstretched hands by exclaiming, 'My Lord and my God!'

He's made the leap of understanding which goes beyond amazement; Thomas is the first to realise that Jesus, who now slips through locked doors and seems to be able to move from one world to another with complete freedom, is not just the man he's spent the last three years with, not simply a builder turned rabbi and miracle-worker, but actually the hitherto unseen God. Jesus is both human and divine.

Thomas, it turns out, is not the ultimate doubter but rather the one who suddenly understands who Jesus really is. His exclamation is actually the climax of this great gospel. It's one of life's ironies that he's come to be known as 'Doubting Thomas' when in fact he's the first one to proclaim what Christianity is all about. We say, if you want to see God, you must look to Jesus. That's what God is like. And that's Thomas's great discovery.

John recognises, though, that we won't all have Thomas's experience of encounter with the risen Christ, at least not in that kind of direct way because he says, 'But these [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.' He is writing his Gospel to tell us about the signs that point to who Jesus is, from the turning of water into wine at the wedding in Cana to the overcoming of death itself on the cross.

John, and all the evangelists of course, are writing in order that we may hold on to what they all know perfectly well is not easy: faith. But not just any faith, either, faith in the risen Jesus. Our faith brings us into contact with Jesus. He is not going to appear to us as he did to Thomas, but John and the others know it is vital that we keep in contact with him if we are to live out our faith in such a way as to be signs of who God is in the world of today.

So we need the gospels and the other scriptures to sustain us when our experience of life causes us to doubt. This, by the way, is what the letter of John we've also heard this morning is doing in another way. He is writing to encourage and sustain the faith of a particular Christian community. And we are no different from them; there will always be events and people who will make us question faith and wonder whether it's all a fairy story. There's no avoiding it.

This is precisely why the Christian community is so important. Here is the body of those who profess faith in the risen Christ and try to be his body in the contemporary world. Jesus calls us together not least so we can help and support one another in living out our faith. Churches, then, need to provide the opportunity for their members to do that; it's one way that faith can be thought about and shown to have substance and to be reasonable.

It also means that when our own faith is thin and we feel like giving up the whole business there can be someone who will notice we aren't there, who will register our absence and maybe pick up the phone, call round, send us a text, just to see how we are, to offer company, to be a support, just, perhaps, to be a listening ear.

These are simple ways in which we, like Jesus, notice people and pay attention to them individually. This is how we become for each other his presence in their lives, just as Jesus did for Thomas.: 'Well, you wanted to see me; here I am. It is me. I am real. You can touch me if you want.'

Let's not forget too, the other way that Jesus comes to us tangibly, not as he did to Thomas but no less really. It is in this very sacrament we are celebrating this morning. He comes to us in bread and wine that are transformed for us by what is said when we take it and share it - 'This is my body. This is my blood'. This is not a lie: but an amazing, if mysterious, truth. And it's one that is capable of transforming us and enabling us to become his real body, flesh and blood in our own place and time.

Nor is this an arbitrary sign: as we have been powerfully reminded in the events we've remembered during Holy Week, it's one Jesus himself chose to give us. And one given at great cost to himself.

Here then, are two important ways in which the risen Christ comes to us today, in response to our own inevitable doubts: in his Church and in his sacraments. Do they offer certainty? No, but they do offer faith. They do keep open the reality and the possibility of God as he comes to us in the risen Christ today. Here and now.

And lives are changed and affected by his presence in people and sacraments. Look what happened to those who heard the disciples talking of their experience of the risen Lord in the Book of Acts.

They shared everything and so became a sign of the generous and unselfish love of God which Jesus lived and showed in the signs the gospels record.

And it continues wherever faith creates communities filled with his Spirit today. I was talking with a colleague the other day who had recently been on a visit to N Ireland with a group including the Archbishop of Canterbury. Amongst other places they had visited a monastery - Clonard - whose website declares: 'At the heart of who we are and what we do is Christ the Redeemer'.

And what they do is to offer themselves as a safe place for people to come and share in a community animated by faith in the risen Christ. The group who visited were told the story of how the monks there had done that particularly powerfully during the euphemistically named 'Troubles' in that country.

For it was there that both sides were able to come and meet each other; a place where they could be encountered as people in a different space, a different context, one shaped by the life of the risen Christ.

Their role, it seems, though unsung on the big stage, was nonetheless crucial in forming the relationships that began the transformation that became the Good Friday Agreement.

Real people willing to encounter each other and be changed. Such things are invariably the result of people meeting people. The handshake between the negotiators and Martin McGuinness first happened there. It was a more public one with Ian Paisley that sealed the deal. 'I know of no better witness to the truth of the Gospels than a community that believes it', said Bishop Leslie Newbiggin.

'Here, Thomas, touch me. I'm no ghost. I'm alive and I'm real.'

'My Lord and my God.'