

St Thomas the Apostle 3 July 2022

Ephesians 2.19-end

John 20.19-31

“The others told me about having seen Jesus, and of course it would be on the one occasion when I couldn’t be there.

I’m afraid I wasn’t very sympathetic when they told me. I have always been known as “Doubting Thomas”, from way back. It’s not that I have a natural inclination to disbelieve things – quite the contrary actually. It’s just that I always like to ask lots of questions. Just to make quite sure. Many people do.

In this case I wanted to ask my friends how Jesus had managed to get into the room without them noticing, I wanted to ask them exactly what he looked like, whether they had actually seen his scars really close up, whether his voice had changed, and whether he left them by the same route as he had arrived, and so on. I wanted to ask all these questions because if you have known and loved someone for three whole years, which have changed your life for ever, and that person has died but is suddenly claimed to have reappeared alive – well, you want to be 100 % sure that it’s true.

You won’t believe it, but my friends all said they really couldn’t remember ! They were all so dumbfounded by the knowledge that Jesus had apparently and miraculously returned after just three days, that they hadn’t registered anything at all about his appearance. All they could say was that it was so wonderful and unbelievable.

So you can imagine my delight a week later, when I was with them and Jesus appeared again, as if out of nowhere. The doors were shut, but

suddenly he was there, talking to us, saying “Peace be with you”. This time I was as dumbfounded as the others, but fortunately Jesus spoke directly to me and he clearly knew what I had been saying and thinking about his previous appearance. He asked me to touch his hands and his stomach where he had been stabbed by the soldier’s spear, so that I could feel the scars.

I was speechless, as much by the knowledge that this was the same Jesus we had known and followed for three years, as by the realisation that he had returned to us – as he had always said he would: I had never forgotten that. I found myself stammering “My Lord and my God !”

It is true that he then said “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” but I didn’t feel that was a criticism of me, because we were all still in a state of shock over his death. Now, however, we had been reassured of the truth of his promises. Now, after receiving the Holy Spirit, we all feel empowered to go out to the ends of the Earth and spread the Gospel of the Good News of our friend, Jesus Christ.”

What I have just read out are my imagined thoughts and words for St Thomas, who of course did go out and spread the news of Jesus Christ, who has therefore set us a fine example of evangelisation, even as far as the west coast of India in the first century. If you have been to the Indian state of Kerala, you may well have seen churches dedicated to Mar Thoma of the Syrian Orthodox Church of India (as it is handed down that St Thomas had come from Antioch on his journey eastwards).

How Thomas came to accept what had happened says something about our humanity: we love to touch and feel in order to reassure ourselves of the nature of something, and especially of something which we revere or is particularly dear to us. It is a way of cementing our belief in something or someone. After all, it was Thomas who was prepared to face danger or even worse by accompanying Jesus to Bethany when Lazarus was gravely ill (in John 11), and who, by pointing out that the disciples didn’t know

where Jesus was going and so couldn't possibly know the way (in John 14) – it was therefore Thomas who created the occasion for Jesus's encouraging promise "I am the way, the truth and the life", which must have helped all the disciples to come to faith in him. Thomas's behaviour, I would suggest, is far more typical of how most human beings come to faith, contrasting with the cynical reputation he has earned down the ages.

And it's not just Thomas who behaves in this way, wanting reassurance: remember the reaction of the disciples recorded in Luke 24. When Mary Magdalene and the other women went to tell them what they had seen, it was dismissed as an idle tale and they were not believed. Even the disciples, at the beginning of our Gospel reading today, do not seem to recognise Jesus immediately. He appears to them (in spite of locked doors), says "Peace be with you" and shows them his hands and side, whereupon we hear that the disciples rejoiced that they were seeing the risen Lord. Perhaps for a moment they thought they were staring at a stranger.

But the point of the way in which John narrates this scene is to make it crystal clear who Jesus is, so he emphasises a process of gentle persuasion, recognition and finally acknowledgement that Jesus is God. Today we might call such a process "taking ownership" or buying in" to an idea or project.

When we start learning how to become a Christian (at whatever age we might be) it's things like an Alpha Course or a small group, or music or art, or simply meeting members of a Christian community in worship, which sow the seed within us. By the same token this brings home to those who already regard themselves as Christians the importance of not just the knowledge of who Jesus is in a historical sense but more importantly acknowledgement of who he is today in terms of our own internal and external lives. Because, after all, we too listen and watch and try to touch this new life that has been offered to us in the resurrection and described

in the most detailed way in the Gospel accounts, although often we cannot quite get our heads round what a sensational and revolutionary thing it is to love God and our neighbour as ourselves.

With the coming of Easter and the resurrection of Our Lord, we were invited once more to share a new confidence, based on a tradition that converts eyewitness testimony into a whole programme of joy and love and life in all its abundance.

O God, we thank you for Doubting Thomas, we thank you that you allow us to have doubts about you, your Son and your Holy Spirit. We thank you that this is how you work with the weave of our individual human nature, so that we are given time to accept you and then to proclaim you. In the name of your risen Son. Amen.

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