

thomas: companion & guide

a sermon preached on the

second sunday of easter

3 April 2016

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: Acts 5:27-32, Psalm 118:14-29, Revelation 1:4-8, John 20:19-31

Thomas is our companion and mentor on Easter Two. But who is this Thomas, and where does he suddenly come from? He appears to be an invention of John the evangelist – the three synoptic gospels knowing nothing at all about Thomas, apart from his name,¹ whereas in John, Thomas makes several appearances.

In the Lazarus episode, in today's story, Thomas is called **Διδυμος** *Didymos*, 'the twin' – but the 'twin' of whom? Thomas calls upon the rest of the disciples to go with Jesus to Jerusalem that they might die.² Such bravado. Does he mean to die with Lazarus, or with Jesus? We don't know.

Later, in the 'Farewell Discourses' – when Jesus is speaking about his imminent departure, and describes himself as 'the Way'³ – it is Thomas who speaks the truth no doubt on the minds of all the disciples, but which in John's hand gives the distinct impression that Thomas is in some way deficient: "Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?"⁴

And then in today's episode, Thomas is cast even more deeply in a negative light, that paves the way for the term now common in Western discourse: 'doubting' Thomas.

Scholars have had a field day with the second half of today's gospel selection, offering various explanations for its characterisation of Thomas at the hand of John the evangelist. One of the obvious yet strangely overlooked features of today's gospel fragment is that the story of Jesus coming behind closed doors is told *twice*: the second telling almost reproduces the first; except this time, excluding the Pentecostal breathing of Spirit,⁵ instead, introducing a significant dialogue with a figure apparently completely unknown to the synoptic evangelists. Did John the evangelist have a need to paint Thomas in a negative light? Was there, perhaps, some rivalry between followers of 'John' and followers of 'Thomas'?⁶

Scholarly investigation of such questions was spurred on by the 1945 discovery of the Nag Hamadi text of the 'Gospel of Thomas'. This 114 verse collection of sayings attributed to Jesus is well worth reading – full of similarities, and surprises. It's neither dogmatic, nor creedal – no doubt a source of great frustration to doctrine-choppers, puritans and literalists, and ill-suited to the needs of an empire church which set about undoing the mission of Jesus, defining insiders and outsiders all over again. Like the parables in the 'canonical' gospels, Thomas has a rather mystical eastern flavour – which might explain something of the significance of Thomas to the church in south-west India – and a depth of understanding the meaning of the revelation in Christ as well as the human condition:

Jesus said, "If your leaders say to you, 'Look, the Kingdom is in heaven', then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea', then the fish will precede you. Rather, the Kingdom is inside you and outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father: But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are poverty."⁷

What astonishing insight! The church has been the poorer for having excluded such insights from its canonical scriptures.

Who, then, was this Thomas, who knew such things about God and humankind, but who in John's hands is portrayed as a dullard, lacking in faith? And what is Thomas' role in the proclamation of the gospel? If we went with what appears to be John's attitude to Thomas, then it may seem that he is presented as a negative symbol, of a lack of belief. But if we pay any attention to the Gospel of Thomas then we would see Thomas as a true seeker and searcher after the living God, and as one who understands the true mystery of resurrection: not as mere propositions *to believe in*, but as an *experience to undergo*. The kingdom is both inside *and*

¹ Mark 3:18, Matthew 10:3, Luke 6:15

² John 11:16

³ John 14:6

⁴ John 14:5

⁵ John 20:22

⁶ See for instance, Elaine Pagels, **Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas**, New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

⁷ Gospel of Thomas, verse 3, in Elaine Pagels, p227.

outside you. In this deceptively simple statement Thomas understands the necessity of non-duality. How desperately divisive Christianity needs this!

In Thomas' great cry of faith, "My Lord and my God!"⁸ does it mean that Thomas now understands that resurrection has occurred only in the life of Jesus? Or does it mean that Thomas has come to understand that resurrection is something that occurs – or at least, can occur – in his own life, in every human life? John's dualism is sufficiently ambiguous as to promote the former. The Gospel of Thomas clearly indicates the latter.

To say it again, is resurrection something that Jesus alone does? Or is resurrection that manner of life which *all* are called to live – that being freed to give our lives away, to love beyond the boundaries of our fears, where prejudice and hatred and anxiety die – that life may flourish?⁹

And what does the evangelist mean by saying, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe"¹⁰ Believing resurrection clearly does not rely on the outer signs of rolled-away stones, grave clothes, and even the wounded body of the risen Christ. Both Gospel of John and Gospel of Thomas suggest that it's about what we experience in ourselves, and in each other.

I am reminded of Mahatma Gandhi's famous saying: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." This remains the great impediment to Christian mission – it's simply too easy to grandstand 'belief in' certain dogmatic propositions about Christ, yet behave in ways completely antithetical to Christ. Our relationship with Islam, in particular, and in our time more than ever, exposes us as un-Christlike in this regard. There are many 'Christian' mission agencies still sending people around the world to convert Moslems: where do we suppose this will lead? We have seen that in the Gospel of Thomas Jesus tells followers that "When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father". Gandhi would be in agreement with the depth of Christian wisdom: to know God is to know oneself, and to know oneself is to know God.¹¹

This self-knowledge is surely the fruit of the Pentecostal breathing of Spirit, which John locates in that behind-locked-doors Easter day encounter: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."¹² But Thomas may well be the one who is sufficiently self aware, conscious enough to grasp that only those who truly know themselves are able to forgive; and only those who forgive come to a true knowledge of themselves, and God.

As the mode of pure peace and true freedom beyond anxiety, fear, hatred, revenge, and every form of greed and possessiveness, resurrection is clearly an experience of knowing oneself and being known. This is the experience of being wounded, even mortally wounded – as the crucifix exemplifies – yet returning without retaliation, with love, breathing life, that *all* might have life.¹³

vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au

⁸ John 20:28

⁹ John Shelby Spong, **The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic**, New York: HarperCollins, 2013, p298.

¹⁰ John 20:29

¹¹ **The Confessions of St. Augustine**, Springvale: Whitaker House, 1996, chapter 10, p245.

¹² John 20:23

¹³ John 20:31