

# *questioning thomas*

a sermon preached on the

## *second sunday of easter*

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at

### *st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Acts 4: 32-37; Psalm 118; 1 John 1:1 – 2:2; John 20: 19-31

I expect that those of us are familiar with the phrase; 'Doubting Thomas' we may even have been encouraged not to be a 'Doubting Thomas' and we will have heard other described as 'Doubting Thomases'. Thomas of the gospel story is usually remembered as a doubter: He is the disciple who doubted when the others didn't, who demanded proof before he would believe.

When we look a bit closer at the text, it is possible to conclude that such a picture is a bit unfair; for there is more to Thomas than that, even if his doubting is an important part of the truth. It seems a bit odd that the first three gospels all include Thomas in the list of Apostles, yet they tell us nothing more about him, not even his occupation and after his listing as an apostle he is not mentioned again. But John's account of the gospel gives us three glimpses of Thomas, and through these glimpses it is possible to put together a sketchy portrait, which reaches its climax in today's gospel reading.

The first time that Thomas appears, Jesus is portrayed discussing with his disciples whether or not he should go to Judea, where both he and they would quite likely have been in some personal danger. For the most part the followers all dissuade Jesus from that course of action. It was Thomas who said to the others; 'Let us also go, that we might die with him' (John 11.7-16). If his comment appears to be pessimistic, it is also at the same time loyal and courageous. If Jesus is intent of seemingly doing a foolish thing, Thomas at least indicates that he will not desert him. This stance might also be an indication that Thomas had learned an important lesson about discipleship. Thomas has grasped that discipleship can be costly, might even cost his life, and he is ready to make that commitment.

Then appears for the second time in the discussions, which form part of John's account of the last supper. When Jesus begins to talk to his disciples about preparing a place in the Father's house for them and then coming and taking them to himself, and Jesus uses language which implies that all this should be familiar to them: 'And you know the way to the place I am going'. The implication seems to be that this is something the disciples can be expected to have learned and understood, during the time they have been with him. But while Thomas seems to have understood the teaching about costly discipleship it is clear that this teaching is new and strange to him. He has not understood what Jesus was saying about his destination nor does he know the route the way to it. Within the context of the passage, what Thomas says next enables Jesus to speak more plainly about himself as the way to the father. Here we are shown, albeit briefly, someone who isn't afraid to question and who is not prepared to say that he understands when he does not.

The Thomas we meet today in this gospel reading, a post resurrection story, has essentially the same attitude. When the other disciples tell him about their meeting with the risen Lord, he insists that he cannot take their word for it. He has to see and know for himself – nothing else will do. He doesn't say that their experience is all rubbish or that they are out of their minds or that none could believe such a thing. Nor does he invite them to convince him of their experience of the risen Lord. He simply insists that he has to see and know for himself and that nothing else will do. He is not so much doubting Thomas as questioning Thomas. When everything he believed in and hoped for has been cruelly shattered, it is simply not enough for him to be offered even the most exalted testimony. The questions he brings to that situation have to be more directly answered before we can feel embarrassed by the crudity of Thomas's demand to touch the wounds of Jesus, but its very strength of this demand which is in itself a testimony to how much it mattered to him. Thomas probably would have liked to have accepted the testimony of others; he liked the other disciples would have wished Jesus was alive again, but wishing was not enough. If you are an honest person, and Thomas certainly seems to have been that, you cannot make yourself believe something just because

you want to, no matter how desperately. Thomas cannot help his questions, nor pretend that they do not exist. They do exist, and they matter to him. It is his own anguished faith journey, which has brought him to this point.

Yet as John tells the story, this is also part of the church's faith journey. Although Thomas was not with the other disciples when they first met the risen Lord, he was with them when they met again a week later. He has not turned his back on the community of faith, and they have not turned their backs on him. He is welcome and wanted. His difficulties have not put him outside of the circle of followers of Jesus, close as that was. Somehow this community of faith is able to give Thomas the space to air his questions and doubts and see what happens. What happens of course is that Jesus appears again among them. Thomas's planned requests become instantly irrelevant as a deep confession of faith burst from him.

There are many people like Thomas in today's world and church. To pretend otherwise would be dishonest. Sometimes our faith in the goodness of God or what the death and resurrection of Jesus has accomplished are called into question by changing and developing life experiences, by illness, bereavement, redundancy, accident, failed relationships, and many other things. Sometimes our faith is called into question by the intellectual issues of our time – an example if we can alter human personality by genetic manipulation what need do we have of grace? And our faith may struggle with these things. Indeed, if it did not, what would it be worth? Some Christians seem to think that Christians can't or shouldn't ever have doubts about anything or, if unfortunately they do, they should never admit them. As a result of this some Christians become peddlers of simple answers to complicated questions, criers of peace and certainty where no peace or certainty exists. The more confusing and demanding the world becomes, the louder they shout. That way leads to spiritual death. Thomas could not help asking his questions and having his doubts and neither can we. We too need the church to be a safe and honest place where we can be welcomed and wanted and where we do not earn our place by the number of things we have managed to believe.

But of course questions and doubts were not the end of the story for Thomas, as we hope and pray they will not be for us. Thomas is engaged in a struggle to believe, certainly, but the struggle is worth it. It comes right in the end because he finds what he most needs. His particular doubt, whether Jesus had actually risen, will not be answerable in the same way in the future. Those coming to faith in the future will necessarily have to do without having 'seen' in the way Thomas has done and Jesus makes explicit reference to this immediately after Thomas's confession of faith. To believe even without seeing, is to be blessed. It is the Risen Christ who keeps us company on the journey of faith.