

Sunday 15 April 2007: The Second Sunday of Easter

Doubt, faith and questions

Readings: Acts 5: 27-32; John 20: 19-31

Doubt and faith, questions and fear, waiting and the start of something new, the ramifications of which no-one at the time could possibly have envisaged. All these things are around in today's readings as we gather together for the first time since the day of resurrection. On that day, whether it was in the darkness at 5.30am with the strong flame shooting skywards on the portico and the sound of bells ringing or at 10.00am in the sunshine with the children and the choir and the water, we proclaimed, with confidence – Christ is risen, he is risen indeed – alleluia. And all seemed well with the world.

And yet, just a week later, we read of the apostles, imprisoned, escaped and re-arrested for preaching the faith and now being questioned by the High Priest. No sooner is the embryonic Christian community born than it comes face to face with political reality. And then in the gospel, the disciples, locked behind closed doors because they were already fearful and Thomas, doubtful until he's seen the evidence of his own eyes.

This all feels somehow un-nerving but also, paradoxically real and human. However much we may want to, few of us will be able to sustain that 'high' of Easter Day consistently for very long. Soon, the doubts and fears, questions and waiting of our everyday lives and of the world around us begin to re-surface but God knows that that will happen and makes provision for it – not the least by giving us a character like Thomas.

I haven't been there but I understand that, in South India, there is an unusually large number of churches dedicated to Thomas and that people there have a particular reverence for him. That comes from the tradition that it was Thomas who took the gospel to India and that he lies buried somewhere in Indian soil. I don't think there's any proof that that actually was the case but it is one example of why, if we think of Thomas as 'The Doubter' – 'Doubting Thomas' we use a description of him that's inadequate because, in India at least and my sense is that it's certainly not restricted to India, it's through his very doubts that people may come to faith.

If we try and think back to that house where the disciples gathered, where 'the doors were locked for fear of the Jews' – those few words speak volumes. The young church, in its earliest moments, wasn't a place of noble courage. Just hours after the resurrection survival had become the primary instinct. The disciples had retreated and closed in on themselves. They were a fearful group, not understanding what had just happened despite all Jesus' teaching while he'd been with them and uncertain of the future. It took a resurrection appearance, for Jesus to come and stand among them, for anxieties to be calmed and confidence restored. Perhaps he wondered whether he was ever going to be able to leave them, fully, in a physical sense.

But Thomas wasn't with them. We don't know why. Where was he? It sounds rather as if he may have been asserting his independence. Not for him to join with a huddle of fearful souls. Thomas wants to be his own person and not to accept, on trust, the message from his fellow disciples. Jonathan Sacks has described modern western society as one in which individualism has run riot. What, he asks, is the ideal of the modern world? and he answers 'The central character of our

modern melodrama is no longer the saint or the hero but the free self, unencumbered by attachments, unobligated by circumstance, freely negotiating its temporary contracts with others; Frank Sinatra singing “I did it my way”. But such attitudes are destructive of the mutual obligations which underpin society.’

If authoritarianism doesn’t fit with God’s will for us then, as relatively free individuals, we have to face the need for voluntary obedience and self-accepted discipline and that was the challenge for Thomas also.

To think of Thomas only as the disciple who doubted and who demanded proof before he would believe is a bit hard on him. There’s more to him than that. Strangely, although the synoptic gospels all include him in the list of disciples they tell us nothing more about him, not even his occupation, and he plays no further part in the story they tell. It’s only in John’s gospel that we’re given three glimpses of Thomas culminating in today’s well-known passage.

In John, the first time Thomas appears in the story, Jesus is discussing with the disciples whether or not he should go to Judea where both he and they would probably have been in some danger. The other disciples seemed keen to dissuade Jesus from going – it was Thomas who said ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’ That’s quite a revealing comment in the light of the ‘doubting’ story. If Jesus was determined to do something that, on the face of things, seemed somewhat foolish, then Thomas, at least, wasn’t going to desert him. Jesus had already taught that discipleship might involve martyrdom and so it seems possible that Thomas was the one disciple who had actually grasped something of the implications of that.

Then Thomas appears again in the account of the Last Supper. Jesus is talking to the disciples about preparing a place for them and then coming and taking them to himself and he says ‘You know the way to the place that I am going.’ It would appear that Jesus believes that the disciples would, by now, have understood that but it’s Thomas, however much he may have grasped about martyrdom, who owns up to ignorance on this one. He hasn’t even understood what Jesus says about the destination ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going’ so he can’t possibly know the way there ‘How can we know the way?’ Thomas has that sort of honesty that isn’t afraid to question and he won’t say he understands something when he doesn’t. And that actually gave Jesus the opening to speak more plainly about himself as the way to the Father.

That Thomas sounds very like the one we see in today’s reading. When the other disciples tell him that they’ve met with the risen Christ he just insists that he can’t take their word for it. He doesn’t say ‘You’re talking rubbish’ and neither does he try and get them to convince him of what they’ve seen. He simply insists that he has to see and know for himself and that nothing else will do. He’s perhaps not so much doubting as questioning. That sobriquet ‘Doubting Thomas’ has become so much a part of our lexicon that we just accept it, much as, for example, because of its portrayal in popular culture as an apple we assume that the fruit eaten in the Garden of Eden actually was an apple – when scripture actually tells us no more than that it was fruit.

Thomas sounds rather blunt in all of this but, if it hadn’t really mattered to him, then he would have been unlikely to have reacted so vehemently. Thomas’ reaction gives us something to ponder on if we ever wonder whether the resurrection might really have been a bit of wish-fulfillment on the part of the disciples. Thomas wanted to see Jesus alive but, for him, wanting wasn’t enough. He couldn’t make himself believe something just because he wanted to. His questions existed and they mattered to him. His journey of faith had its measure of anguish.

And one imagines that wouldn't have been made any easier by the wait he had to endure before Jesus returned to the disciples. 'A week later his disciples were again in the house and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them.'

That wait, that anguish, that week of living in lonely scepticism, isn't only a part of Thomas' story. It's also a part of the faith journey of the church. Although Thomas couldn't accept the words of the other disciples he didn't turn his back on them representing, as they did, the community of faith and neither did they turn their backs on him although his absence at the original meeting and his subsequent refusal to accept their account might well have put a considerable strain on the group. Instead, he's welcomed and wanted – not excluded from the group of Christ's followers. Somehow, they were able to give him space to air his questions and doubts and then to wait and see what would happen. And what happened, of course, was that Jesus did appear again among them. And we may note that he didn't stand before them or above them but among them. Whatever they do, wherever they go, in the midst of their struggles and questionings he would be among them and among us.