

Sunday 24th April 2022
Easter 2 (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Acts 5.27-32
NT: Revelation 1.4-8
G: John 20.19-end

It is a privilege to be sharing with you in worship this morning and opening up God's word in this wonderful city centre parish church. And it was particularly kind of Fr Crispin to protect my sensibilities by ensuring that congregation numbers were swollen with attendees from the Ecclesiastical Law Association conference, a captive audience if ever there was one!

I thought we would spend a few minutes looking at Thomas Didymus, also known as Thomas the twin, or colloquially, "Doubting Thomas", one of the most maligned of disciples with a rather poor representation over the centuries. Not quite Judas, but certainly second rate in terms of faith and belief. It's a good few years since I advocated in a court of law as opposed to presided over one, so I'm taking this as my defence brief completely *pro bono* of course, to paint him in a better light.

And of course we are all very familiar with the context from our gospel reading this morning which instinctively, and perhaps without drilling too deeply, many may regard as the principal evidence for the prosecution. "*The disciple whose faith falls short.*" The one who could not believe without seeing it for himself. The one who wants all the physical evidence laid out before him, the mysteries explained, nothing left to doubt. Like the kid at the birthday party who wants to know how the trick is performed by the conjurer, and shouts out that he can see the missing card up the sleeve.

Despite this faith deficiency, however, he became a martyr, and those of you who know your religious art will appreciate that the Incredulity of St Thomas has been an inspiration for artists and sculptors since about the sixth century. One of the very first depictions can be found on the mosaics of **the Basilica of Sant'Apollinaris Nuovo** in Ravenna where he can be seen with all the disciples gathered around the risen Christ, with arm raised, revealing the wound in his side. Thomas is at his feet bent over, but mysteriously his hands are covered by his clothes. So the question is begged: was he or was he not examining the evidence for himself by putting his hands, as Jesus suggested he did, into the wounds? This very issue has been the fulcrum of a theological debate carried over into the artistic world which has energised scholars of Catholic and Protestant persuasion for a very long time, because a simple reading of the text from John's gospel leaves that open to question:

“Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” 28 Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

Do we infer that he did what was suggested, or do we assume that Jesus' instruction **not** to disbelieve was sufficient for Thomas? The Catholic theological interpretation has been that although Jesus emphasised the primacy of *believing without seeing*, nevertheless the fact that he was prepared to offer this tangible bodily evidence, provided support for the physical experience of faith, such as pilgrimages, the veneration of relics, rituals and so on.

On the other hand Protestant and reformist interpretation of the passage to support *justification by faith alone* was that this never happened - he never put his hands in the wounds - although the *incredulity of St Thomas* and initially the other disciples is seen as providing compelling evidence for the truth of the resurrection, simply because suspicion of what is seemingly impossible makes them more reliable as witnesses. And so we have the

debate raging on, not only in theological treatises, but carried over into Mediaeval and Renaissance art with the counter-reformists making sure that their pictures spoke a thousand words to dispel the potentially heretical notion that Thomas may not have actually touched the wounds.

For the *yes he did* side, perhaps the most famous piece of sculptured art is the bronze statue of **Andrea del Verocchio** which was first commissioned for the church of **Orsanmichelle** in **Florence** and originally set in a marble niche on the exterior of the building. This depicts the outstretched hand of St Thomas reaching towards the wound on Jesus' side, clearly wanting to check it was real. Interestingly, at one stage the statue was moved to the **Santa Croce** where the Merchants' Guild used to sit as a tribunal, a kind of judicial body, and the statue was symbolic as representing the search for proof and the presentation of reliable evidence, something, of course, very close to my own professional heart.

Fast forward a few decades to the beginning of the 17th century and we now have the equally famous "**Incredulity of St Thomas**" an oil painting by **Caravaggio**, the Italian Baroque artist, which is presently in a museum in Potsdam in Germany. I don't know whether anybody has ever seen this picture, but it's a very evocative depiction, typical of Renaissance art, which shows Jesus without any halo, because he's still in bodily form, guiding Thomas's hand with his outstretched finger into the wound in his side. The expression on Thomas's face is one of astonishment and sums up his passage from *sceptic disbelief to belief*. It's almost photographic in quality.

The Dutch and the Flemish masters also weighed in at the time the Protestant environment was enclosing, and there are some similarly evocative pictures of Thomas exploring the

wound with his finger from **Matthias Stom** and other Caravaggists, as well as Rembrandt and Rubens.

So where does all this leave doubting Thomas, so often portrayed as arriving at his faith belief only in the face of the hard evidence and physical proof which he found himself, and in the context of our reformist theology which emphasises faith and belief in the absence of irrefutable proof? *Is doubt a bad thing and should we be regarding our faith journey stumbling when doubt surrounds us?*

I think it helps to reflect on the other disciples at this point. The passage from John represents a defining moment in the history of the church, the great commission when the disciples who had been picked by Christ were now being asked to begin a ministry of forgiveness of sins in repentance. And yet the contrast between them and Thomas is really quite blurred, apart from in this single incident of incredulity.

There are several things to note here. First the disciples had not been with Mary Magdalen and were hardly transformed when they were told the news by her that she had seen the risen Christ. You can just imagine one or two of them muttering, *she's just a hysterical woman overcome by her emotion, seeing things*, and so on, because, of course, your average male 2000 years ago was rather less enlightened or politically correct than the 21st C male who would surely never say such a thing! So we find them at the beginning of this passage locked away, absent Thomas, in fear of the Jewish police who were on the prowl, when Christ appeared amongst them.

Second, although there is no statement of disbelief or doubt that this was their master, there was no immediate acknowledgement either, and they had to be shown the physical evidence of his wounds before they started expressing their joy.

Third, despite this being the moment of the great commission, the imbuing of the power of forgiveness through the Holy Spirit in the first representatives of the church, we hardly see a great and instant transformation of confident fearless believers. Reading on a few verses, after they have had their exchange with Thomas and his refusal to accept without evidence, where do we find them, but back behind the same locked doors probably in fear of ongoing persecution? This appearance of Jesus a second time is mentioned in the Gospel passage by John to emphasise the difference between belief without seeing and disbelief, but the reality is that the disciples could hardly claim the moral high ground here, and you can imagine one or two of them are feeling a little uncomfortable. The reality is that their belief was far from perfect at this point, either in what they were seeing and hearing, or how they would be shaping the church to come.

Even Thomas's proclamation "*My Lord and my God*" is hardly the beginning of a life changing experience for him or the others. In John 21 we read of an encounter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee when several of the disciples fishing, including Thomas, were somewhat slow to recognise Jesus, and we have the famous exchange between him and Peter where Peter's role as a shepherd feeding lambs and taking care of the sheep had to be spelled-out.

Although John's language projects a future time in which the disciples will understand Jesus, that perfect knowledge always lies outside the boundaries of the Gospel story. The disciples embody a belief that reaches toward but never quite achieves a complete understanding, and that includes Thomas whether or not he plunged his hands into the wounds of the risen Christ.

So to go back to my brief in defending Thomas and to the question *is the lack of perfect belief and doubt something which makes us deficient in faith?* Although there will be many throughout the ages whose unquestioning faith experience will be breath-taking, Thomas

really isn't very different from most of us. We can all be inquirers and want to understand the evidence, to have our doubts from time to time, and to acknowledge that perfect belief in a perfect irrefutable truth may be unattainable. (As a judge wrestling with this reality on a daily basis I can certainly vouch for that).

But on a personal faith level I am content with never knowing for certain. I am not going to have Thomas' experience – none of us will – and there are so many deficiencies in our human understanding, but that is what faith is really all about. I am content to be an enquirer, to accept that some of the interpretations may be wrong and to keep my mind open, not to be dogmatic and emphatic that I am right and somebody else may be wrong. A little bit of doubt here, or a little bit of questioning there is surely better than a fundamentalist attitude of any faith or religious hue, with extremist confidence that plants suicide bombs in mosques or encourages conversion therapy for those who follow their own sexual orientation.

After all the only way in which we are going to let the gospel truth change our lives is an acknowledgement of the mysterious and often unexplainable intervention of God in humankind.

His Honour Judge Graham Wood QC

Chancellor of the Diocese of Liverpool

