

## Easter 2 - St Thomas

Someone once said that faith is like a jigsaw puzzle - as you go through life, you slowly assemble the puzzle until you get a picture with no gaps. At that point, something shakes the picture and scatters the pieces, then you have to start assembling it again. Every time it happens, there is a slightly different picture. Maybe, in that respect, it is a bit more like a kaleidoscope.

Thomas, in our gospel reading, has an interesting journey.

He is impulsive and offers to die with Jesus when Jesus was travelling to Bethany (John 11), but dubious about the place and the way he was leading them. Then there is this episode, which has been his enduring reputation to this day.

I came across a quote about how Thomas has been treated by subsequent spiritual teachers. 'They both blamed him for his lack of faith and thanked him for his scepticism'.

Which is understandable - his world, his way of life had come crashing down. If you buy into something, dedicate yourself to it, relocate for it - when it fails, or doesn't live up to your expectations - then you are going to feel hurt. Devastated, even. It is easy to get into the same place as Thomas.

So, Thomas does what comes naturally to all of us - limits his horizons and criteria to limit his capacity to pain.

Thomas sets himself criteria based on his experience. He didn't simply go along with the crowd. He is already braver than most - he's actually half-way there. Rather than simply denouncing it as preposterous - he actually gives the situation a chance to resolve itself. 'Unless I put my hands on his side, I will not believe'.

Even though it looks like everything has crashed down, Thomas knows the man he's followed - he was the one who convinced the disciples to go to Bethany - where Jesus raised Lazarus after all!

In our gospel reading, he is struggling with how to believe and what to believe in. Like his earlier questioning of the road to Bethany - he is struggling with the place and the way to get there.

It seems counter-intuitive for Jesus to go near Jerusalem, into danger. But Jesus does it for the love of a friend. I did a funeral this week and it was completely counter intuitive to not offer even a handshake or go and see a family to plan the service. It seems very counter-intuitive to keep our distance in order to help people at the moment.

But our faith grows as a result of working with doubt and questions - it deepens and should enlarge our hearts. It develops by talking and acting together. I hope many of these social initiatives we see around us continue even after lock-down has lifted.

So, after the death of Jesus, Thomas wants to see and touch so he can be sure he's going the right way and he can believe again. He doesn't want to get fooled again. He is responding authentically with a wariness that is natural and understandable. For that, I think he deserves understanding rather than dismissing.

Today, it is easier to raise barriers we might not see lifted. Unless wars cease, that person changes, that person apologises, I will not believe. Unless I experience some measurable difference in my life, I will not believe. Therefore, the whole thing is not worth bothering with.

Thomas didn't have the luxury of figuring out all the pieces - the Resurrection, in the form of Jesus, happened to him right there and then. Whether we think his reaction was good or bad, it was certainly natural.

I once heard someone say 'church is just a club - it only helps it's members'. My response to that is - what are you wanting to get out of it?

I am sure, based on their experience, that it seems true. But it is not my experience - my experience is quite the opposite. I have seen more people use their tragedy for good, their time, talents and finances for the good of others around them. They just don't shout about it.

Rather than make conditions that will become bricks in the fortress we build around our minds, hearts and souls; these people can use their experiences to give others life too. I wonder if Thomas, after touching the hands and feet of Jesus, would have recognised the phrase 'speak from your scars, not from your wounds'. I am certain that there are far more unknown saints - for which the person, example or teaching of Jesus - have moved them to proclaim 'my lord and my God' like Thomas, than I will know in my limited experience.

The encounter with Jesus certainly changed Thomas. Because after his resurrection experience, and Pentecost, Thomas fades away into rumour and legend. He is believed to have travelled to India, founded at least 7 churches there & influenced a branch of the church called 'St Thomas Christians' - one of the oldest Christian communities of Jewish origin in record.

He still ventured into the places where it was not common to go. He continued to walk his own way - even changed and deeper than he had been - and way beyond his perspective in that upper room.

I find that quite admirable in a lot of ways - and contrary to those spiritual writers I quoted at the start of my sermon - I thank Thomas for his scepticism and his lack of faith. It teaches me a great deal about what the resurrection might look like to me and you as we continue to celebrate this Easter wherever we are. Amen

