

Year C Proper 14 St Thomas' Day

Habbakkuk 2: 1-4

Hebrews 10: 35- 11:1

John 20: 24-29

3rd July is St Thomas' Day, the day when we remember the disciple Thomas.

I have said it before, but it is worth repeating; I think Thomas has an undeserved reputation in comparison to the rest of the disciples. Thomas was the only disciple not locked away on the upper room when Jesus appeared to them late on that first Easter Day. So, it was easy for all the other disciples to have seen and believed. The following week, when Jesus appeared to them all again in the same upper room, Thomas also saw and believed. It feels very unfair to have therefore labelled Thomas for ever after as doubting. I am sure any of the other disciples would also have doubted unless they too had seen. Anyway, we shall come back to that upper room in a while.

We know little about Thomas, but what we do know really endears me to him. All four gospels mention him. In the synoptic gospels; Matthew (10:3), Mark (3:18), Luke (6:15), he is one of the named disciples. In Luke's second volume, the Book of Acts, he is also listed as a disciple (1:13). We know Thomas is a twin. The Aramaic for twin is 'Thomas', and he is also introduced as Didymus Judas Thomas. Didymus is Greek for twin. I once heard an interesting sermon where the preacher, based on his psychology background was convinced Thomas was the younger of twins – always less assertive and less sure of things. The preacher said these were common personality traits of the younger twin. I am not sure about that, but in John's gospel we have a far greater insight into Thomas than we do from the mere mention he gets in the other gospels and in Acts.

In John chapter 14 we get our first encounter with Thomas.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going."

⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Thomas speaks up when none of the other disciples want to admit that they don't have a clue about where Jesus is going. I really admire this aspect of Thomas, not afraid to ask the question that I am sure was in all of their minds. And by asking the question we gain a much better insight into the good news of eternal life.

It is interesting that after this passage the next few verses show that Philip's doubt is great...

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

We don't say 'doubting Philip' do we?

Our reading today was from John chapter 20, which recounts Jesus' two appearances in the upper room, and Thomas's reaction as witness to the second appearance. I am so glad for Thomas' unbelief when told by the other disciples about Jesus' first appearance in the upper room. It is so, so honest, and real. I have no doubt I would have thought something similar to what Thomas said, but would I have actually said those words, or applied a filter and kept quiet, but sullen?

Thomas's unbelief is of great benefit to us, compared to the faith of the other disciples. Thomas had been with Jesus throughout his ministry, but on witnessing the risen Christ with his wounds he was the first to acknowledge Jesus as, 'My Lord and God', to publicly acknowledge the divinity of Christ. Thomas saw the man Jesus but believed in God.

We don't know much more of Thomas' life. Tradition has it that he travelled east to evangelise across the Persian lands and then into India, even as far as Madras, modern day Chennai. There are churches and denominations that use

his name; in fact a Southern Indian congregation in Aberdeen used to use our church for their services and were Mar Thomas Coptic Christians.

The gospel of Thomas is an interesting subject, and I know Neville has talked about it before. It was in 1945 that a jar was found in Nag Hammadi in northern Egypt containing a document written in Coptic that has become known as the 'Gospel of Thomas'. The gospel is not a narrative story, it is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus. Some academics claim it was written shortly after Jesus' ascension, whereas others consider it to be a second century document. Could this gospel have been buried on purpose at a time of persecution of Christians and the ransacking and confiscation of written documents in Alexandria? It seems possible, and yet whoever buried them had no idea when or if they would be found but had faith that one day it would be found. I bet that person didn't think the text would be found about 1,700 years later, and cause such a stir?

The faith of that person, so long ago affirms the words of Jesus in that upper room, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Jesus says we are blessed because we have not experienced the risen Jesus in the flesh and yet believe. And how did each one of us come to believe?

Was it the lives of Christians who have been an example to us of what a life following the way of Christ looks like, and how it made us feel?

Was it the compelling stories in the teachings, healings and mission work of Jesus? God's preference for the poor?

Was it the narrative of his life, his commitment to follow through, no matter the cost, with living a life of service and providing glimpses of what eternal life, heaven coming down to earth, looked like?

We will all have our own sources for our belief. Given your faith journey, what might that say about how you may want to speak about your faith to others?

Given your faith journey, in who you are, in being and doing, how might you be an example to others and let them know of your motivation in life and your desire to follow Christ's way?

Unlike the twelve disciples, we have not seen Jesus, but we may have experienced his presence through the Holy Spirit, prompting, guiding, nudging, us.

We have come to faith, so it must follow that others who have not met the living Jesus can too. How might you help them come to follow the way of Christ?

Two interesting quotes...

In a homily given by Gregory the Great, on Thomas, he said,
'On hearing he doubted, doubted he touched, touched he believed. Thomas healed the wound of our unbelief as well as his own.'

St Paul wrote in his letter to the Hebrews,
'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' (Heb 11:1)