

EASTER 2 2024
John 20:19-31 Tq

No one wants to be thought of as a 'doubting Thomas'. Thomas is one of those characters who have come down to us through the centuries with an unflattering tag associated with his name. We should not let the label associated with Thomas hide the fact that through him, Jesus teaches us some very important lessons. Thomas in his doubting was close to the truth and the blessing given to him by Jesus is a blessing given to us all.

In my surgical training we had lots of oral exams. The usual format was for the candidate to be with two examiners who asked for a description of a surgical procedure or the diagnosis and treatment for a patient we had just examined. In the practice sessions we undertook in preparation for the exam it was hammered into us by our tutors that we must put on an air of confidence and not show any doubt in the examination. It was a well-known tactic of the examiners to try to put doubt in your mind to make you less sure of your diagnosis or the treatment you would recommend. The question 'Are you sure of that diagnosis?' was always answered in the affirmative and the question 'Would you carry out that treatment?' was always answered 'Certainly'.

Well the strategy for passing worked with the examiners, but after I had been in practice for a while I became increasingly uncomfortable with the façade of certainty because I knew that in many situations there were options for both diagnosis and treatment which might be equally applicable and plausible. I began to share my thoughts with my patients. This was difficult for some patients who had been conditioned to expect *ex cathedra* statements from their specialist surgeon, but with most it started a dialogue and I think they were pleased that I was able to be honest about my uncertainties and able to discuss with them the alternatives available because they were wise enough to know that in many situations the choice is not between black and white but may involve one of the many shades of grey.

We all have doubts, at least at some time, about the decisions that face us. Some are trivial but some are quite important. For my patients it was often 'Will I have that operation with its risks and dangers?' For us it may be 'Have I chosen the right place to live?' 'Did I marry the right person?' 'Can I really believe the articles of the Christian faith?' When I changed careers I believed that God was calling me to follow a certain path with my life. I had faith in that belief, sufficient for me to make the changes required, but it would be less than honest to say that there has never been a time when I wondered if I were doing the right thing.

I suggest that you should be less concerned about the person who has doubts and has the courage to admit them and face them than the person who admits to no doubt. Of course doubt can be debilitating and may paralyse action. We have all seen people so racked by doubt that they are unable to make a decision. This is clearly unhealthy, but this is not what we are talking about and there is no indication that Thomas was in

this position. I find myself being very cautious with the person who appears absolutely certain of themself. For several reasons.

- One is that their apparent certainty may be masking doubts that they are unwilling to face and this may be unhealthy for them.
- Another is that they are so totally convinced with the correctness of their own views so that it is impossible to negotiate with them or reasonably discuss their beliefs. They present a rigidity and inflexibility which may be intimidating and, on occasions, dangerous. Sadly some church people adopt this approach to some issues.

I actually feel sorry for the politicians who are not allowed to express any doubt publicly. They know that if they do admit to any doubt they will be torn to bits by the press and TV commentators and the word 'backflip' is likely to be used. If they have any doubts they must keep them to themselves. Now I am not saying that we should all go around all day expressing our doubts, how boring that would be, but what I am suggesting is that in the quiet of our own heart we should admit to ourselves our doubts and not be afraid at laying them before God.

Does this have anything to do with faith? I want you to consider the proposition that the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty. Faith is not required to acknowledge certainty. You don't need faith to know that $2+2=4$ or that the sun will rise in the east. Faith involves both belief and trust. We cannot prove the resurrection. We have the evidence of how meeting the risen Christ changed the lives of the disciples and the experience of 2000 years of the power of the risen Christ acting through the Holy Spirit to change lives. Perhaps some of you have experienced this in your life. It is a very precious gift. We believe that Christ rose from the dead but we cannot prove it to the standard required by modern science. We have to be able to take the step beyond where knowledge ends. This is not a blind leap but a 'step taken in the light of all the thought and consideration we can bring to bear on it' (Macquarrie 347). It is a task we have to undertake, but the ability to take that step is also a gift. When we do make this step we may find that our life is changed and transformed.

In the gospel story, Thomas' dogged insistence on seeing the risen Christ is not misplaced; Jesus comes and offers to meet Thomas' needs and invites him to a deeper relationship, from mis-understanding to understanding, from darkness to light. Thomas responds and his recognition of Jesus as 'my Lord and my God' is without parallel in the gospels. At Jesus' baptism and Transfiguration a voice, which was clearly understood to be God's, announced Jesus as God's son. There were occasional glimpses of recognition by the disciples of Jesus as the Messiah. But 'my Lord and my God' from Thomas is unique. Thomas the doubter had leapt ahead of the others in his understanding. Thomas the doubter, when faced with the risen Christ, recognised God.

Thomas' recognition has three important messages for us.

- Firstly, since Jesus is God, we can worship him without idolatry 'God of God, light of light, true God of true God'.
- Secondly, because Jesus is Lord we can commit ourselves to a way of life and to follow in obedience.
- Thirdly, we must not forget that the sovereign one has pierced hands – crucifixion comes before resurrection.

The blessing given to Thomas was referred to by Michael Ramsay, former Archbishop of Canterbury, as 'the last beatitude'. Jesus' answer to Thomas 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe' goes beyond him. It is a blessing to all who believe in the risen Christ, including us. Despite not having seen we are able to believe and we are blessed. Our faith is based on those who have seen and understood, through the power of the Spirit given by Jesus. All who believe are drawn into the community of the apostles which exists today as the church.

So don't be afraid of your doubts. Having doubts does not mean that you do not have faith. Remember that when you are in doubt, as Thomas was, the wounds of the risen crucified Christ are very close and all you have to do is put out your hand in order to touch them. For me this is a wonderful comfort and reassurance. Don't be afraid of your doubts, but pray that when we meet the resurrected Christ we too may be able to say 'my Lord and my God'. For to those who can say this there is another blessing, given by the author of the gospel, when he indicates his purpose in writing:

'But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'

Amen