

## Sermon John 20 19-31 St Swithun's 10 April 21

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

'Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails and put my finger into the print of the nails and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.' On one level, today's gospel seems straightforward. Thomas makes his position clear. He refuses to accept the testimony of the Resurrection second-hand, even from his fellow apostles, instead insisting that in order to believe, he needs to see for himself. A week later, Jesus appears once again in the locked Upper Room, and this time, Thomas is a witness. Now he can believe. In the most powerful language, Jesus affirms Thomas' need to 'see', whilst at the same time commending those who have not seen, yet have an equally strong faith. How then, might Jesus' response, and the events narrated in this morning's reading speak to us now?

It took a mere matter of hours for those who travelled with Jesus for three years, living and breathing his every word, to evaporate into a band of terrified, disillusioned individuals on the run after his arrest. If they faltered so quickly, is it any wonder that so many of us, far removed from the events recorded in the gospels, frequently find it hard to discern God's presence? We need only to listen to the news to be reminded that tragedy and suffering continue to be the lot of so many, young and old, saint and sinner, rich and poor. The worldwide Coronavirus pandemic has brought home a truth that we may have known in the abstract, but many of us not perhaps emotionally: that no-one can be insured or shielded from grief or loss. The evidence for these things is as clear as were the marks of the nails Thomas saw on the resurrected Jesus. Yet, unlike Thomas, we have not been granted the opportunity to see and to touch the body of the risen Christ. We have only the testimony of others to go by; testimony which Thomas rejected as not being sufficient for faith.

Many people claim to have no belief or interest in a God who, in their experience, manifestly does not make himself manifest. There are others, though, who would like to 'believe' but, like Thomas, need to see. Since they

cannot be privileged with his experience, they decide, often as a matter of regret, that they cannot accept the claims of Christianity. To which, some Christians respond by saying, 'You just need faith, like those Jesus refers to, "who have not seen and yet have believed"'. And such faith is a great gift, one of the three things, St Paul tells us, with hope and love, that lasts forever. But through faith does seem to come naturally to some people, others cannot help doubting, and may struggle with this sort of emphasis, since the idea of 'just having faith' can sound like a doctrinal requirement that defies reason.

Atheist, agnostic, hesitant Church member; orthodox Christian – 'doubting Thomas', as he is often known - seems to provide a rationale right across the theological spectrum. It may seem to be stating the obvious, but all these positions approach what happened with a particular focus: what did Thomas believe before and after he witnessed the resurrected Christ? How about looking at the story from a different angle: not, what did Thomas think, but instead, what did he actually *do*?

When news of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances spread, the disciples could not at first take in what had happened. Jesus' death signified the end of all they had lived and worked for, and they were unable to make sense of what he had told them about the course events would take. Thomas was hardly the only one who doubted: the women at the tomb were not at first believed; and the disciples on the road to Emmaus initially neither understood what had happened nor who walked with them. Eight days passed between Jesus' first and subsequent appearance in the locked Upper Room. There may have been many hours spent in that room during that period. Certainly, the siege mentality of the disciples shows that they believed themselves to be in great danger. It needs little imagination to appreciate the highly charged atmosphere of this fugitive group, one moment despairing and terrified, the next transformed en masse – and how Thomas's scepticism might have been received. What is so significant is that, though he was full of doubt, there seemed no question to Thomas of disassociating himself from Jesus. Instead, he continued to risk all for the master he was not sure he 'believed' in – the master that one disciple had already betrayed and whom Peter, the 'rock', has denied over and over again. At no point is there any suggestion or hint that he

will behave any differently from his fellow disciples. He continues to share in the dangers to which the group are exposed; without the comfort of knowing Jesus is alive.

Had he not done so – had he abandoned the little community – Thomas would not have been present when Jesus appeared again. Strange though it may seem, what he believed is hardly the point; the really important thing is what he did. The way he acted spoke of someone who had given his heart to Jesus, even if he risked his heart being broken. The fact that Thomas remained with the others also speaks of a hope alive, against all the odds. We can never *know* in this life –if by ‘know’ we mean concrete proof, but the response to doubt is surely not to shut out the hope of God’s presence, but rather to allow ourselves to be open to Him. Though with God nothing is, of course, impossible, if we do not seek to hear Him, recognition of such an experience; discerning the ‘still small voice’ is likely to be more difficult.

Following Christ is perhaps, then, less about what we ‘believe’ in the abstract sense (faith is not entirely something we can will) but rather about how we act. Christianity is indeed a choice - to try, fail and try - again and again to use only love to overcome hatred, violence and fear. ‘By your fruits you will be known’, Jesus tells the disciples; where we experience love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are the Holy Spirit is at work. The pandemic has created the perfect conditions for a siege mentality whose characteristics - if not circumstances - resonate with the experience of the disciples immediately after Jesus’ death. There is the threat of imminent physical harm and even death; a perception that others cannot be trusted; the sense that the world as previously known has been turned upside down; a desire for safety above everything else. Yet fear, anxiety and distrust tend to produce strife, discord, selfishness and hatred - the very opposite of Christ’s call to empty ourselves for love of God and neighbour.

Admitting our fears and true feelings to ourselves is for many of us difficult enough, let alone acknowledging them before God. Yet there is a danger that if we don’t try to be inwardly honest about the parts of ourselves we dislike,

we'll project this 'shadow side' onto others. The more fearful people are about the threat of the virus, the more this fear often seems to be displaced onto blaming others for increasing the dangers. And we tend to hold back from sharing our deepest anxieties and darkest thoughts with God, as though it were possible and desirable to conceal our real selves from Him - rather than God being our true source of strength and freedom; our ultimate healer. God knows and loves us completely with all our fears, doubts and failings; all those parts of ourselves of which we are ashamed: are we willing to come before him in vulnerability and trust? It is the tax collector who acknowledges his many sins and his need for God whom Jesus commends, not the Pharisee who congratulates himself on his moral rectitude.

Can we, like Thomas, seek to remain faithful to Christ even when we cannot see the Way? We have no better example, nor one whose encounter with the risen Christ can inspire greater epiphany faith, hope or love. Look at Thomas's honesty in admitting his faith was challenged to the core. And in opening himself completely to Jesus, Thomas is all the more attuned to the voice of his Master- and recognises the call of the shepherd who knows his sheep. When the risen Jesus speaks her name, Mary Magdalene replies 'Rabbi'. When Jesus addresses Thomas by name, he, the sceptic, the doubter, understands fully who is calling him: 'My Lord and my God.' Amen.