

Sunday 3 April 2016

The British Philosopher, Bertrand Russell once said that the trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt. So it is reassuring to know that Jane and I together with so many of our friends are really intelligent. Not unlike perhaps the central figure in today's sermon passage; doubting Thomas.

At first glance, Thomas does not cut a very impressive figure. The first three Gospels merely list his name among the Twelve. John's gospel offers a little more about him; this is the third of just three occasions when he becomes an integral part of the unfolding story of Jesus.

Firstly he plays a part in the story of Lazarus. Jesus receives a message that his friend Lazarus is dying. After a delay Jesus declares he is ready to go to his friend and the disciples try to persuade him not to go out of fear of them being set upon and stoned, possibly to death. When they fail to persuade Jesus to change his mind Thomas says: "Let us also go that we may die with him."

The second time Thomas is noted as saying something is at the Last Supper. Thomas appears aggrieved and peeved at the Jesus' attempt to comfort him as he announces he will soon be leaving the disciples. Jesus is talking about his Father's house with many rooms where he is about to go in order to prepare a place for his friends. Jesus says, "You know where I am going, and you know the way." But Thomas interrupts, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

Probably the other apostles were as equally unsure exactly what Jesus meant but it's only blunt honest Thomas who speaks out. At best I suspect the others thought Thomas' question uninspired and ill-timed; at worst, crass behaviour.

Certainly there is nothing to suggest Thomas was very close to the other disciples; he was not a member of the inner circle like Peter, James and John and in both instances shows independence of thought.

We are not told why Thomas did not join the others after the crucifixion. He might be somewhere, anywhere, contemplating the same tragic course of events but I don't find it surprising that he should not be seeking their company at that time. And of course, as we read, he is not there when the resurrected Jesus first meets up with the other disciples.

During the ensuing week Thomas joins up with the disciples and will have heard nothing but them going on and on about what a shame it was that he hadn't been there; how Jesus just materialised inside the room; how Jesus had shown them the nail holes in his hands and on and on. Here were people nearly overcome with excitement; telling him with joy ringing out in their voices.

Yet he was still in despair because he had seen the man and teacher he had spent his last three years with and whom he had seen doing all sorts of miraculous things but had, in the end, died on a cross like a common criminal.

Wish fulfilment was just one further thing he did not have in common with the other disciples. Thomas had rejected the disciples' collective wisdom in the Lazarus narrative and was the only one to be honest and brave enough to query what Jesus said at the last supper so it is understandable that he might not accept their insistence that Jesus was alive: "Until I see for myself and physically check out your story, I will not believe", he tells them.

And of course, Jesus returns to the room but despite being invited to do so, Thomas does not actually feel the holes in Jesus' body. Jesus merely shows Thomas his wounded hands and side, and Thomas whispers "My Lord and my God!"

There - in that instance - Thomas becomes the first person to look Jesus in the eye and address the word 'God' direct to him.

Earlier in John's prologue we read that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and later... the word became flesh and lived among us". Jesus the Word, was God; God had become flesh and lived among us; Jesus had lived among us, God had lived among us. That in a nut shell was what Thomas was acknowledging. Jesus of Nazareth, the man whom he had shared the past three years with, was God.

At the end Jesus offers a gentle rebuke to Thomas for needing to see before he would believe; but Thomas wasn't alone in this respect....

the disciples in the room hadn't believed until they saw the risen Jesus previously and even the disciple whom Jesus loved and who had run to the empty tomb arrived at his faith in just the same way....verse 8 earlier in the chapter says upon gazing into the empty tomb "He saw and he believed".

I see this really as less of a rebuke to Thomas, but more of an encouragement to all the subsequent generations including our own generation that without having seen the risen Christ for ourselves, we nevertheless can believe in him.

Thomas shows that part and parcel of a mature faith is questioning, of doubting. The importance of this is illustrated in *Praying through Life*, a book by Stephen Cottrell, the Bishop of Chelmsford and previously as some of you will remember - our own Bishop of Reading.

He says that faith is not holding out your hand in the dark and *knowing* it will be held but holding out your hand in the dark and *believing* it will be held. Otherwise, faith becomes a certainty and that, as Thomas shows, is not the Christian way.

Faith is holding out your hand in the dark *believing* it will be held, even though there will be times of great doubt as well as times of great faith.

Faith and doubt are two sides of the same coin; they belong together. Doubt is not the opposite of faith; doubt is the opposite of certainty. Doubting is part of believing.

Faith is a relationship between the individual and a living God; St Paul in his letter to the Ephesians compares the faith between Jesus and the church with marriage.

Faith is a relationship, just like a marriage and as in any marriage there will be times of un-knowing and uncertainty, times of doubts and despairs as well as times of joy and happiness. There will be times in our lives when we feel as if our hand is not being held; being made redundant, a serious illness, divorce or the death of a loved one and it is times such as these when our doubts sometimes challenge our faith.

This has become all too evident as I'm becoming more actively engaged in helping families arrange their funerals; but even in these black times the liturgy, the songs and hymns they choose so often reflect that deep down they believe their loved one's hand has been held and will continue to be held. They don't know this for certain, but they somehow trust and hope that this will be so.

They might say, we do not have much faith or we have doubts about what will now happen to their loved one, but their request for the arrangements to be overseen by someone who they *believe* does have faith illustrates exactly what I said earlier....that we hold our hand out in the night not in certainty but in the belief that it will be held.

Thomas is the first to acknowledge Jesus' divinity – an act for us all to acknowledge and understand: Thomas the doubter becomes Thomas the Apostle, not in spite of his doubts but partly because of his doubts, and although we have no further indication in the New Testament as to how Thomas felt or

behaved in the years that followed, I'm sure that he, like all of us, would continue to experience times of doubt.

I said at the beginning that the central figure we were going to talk about today was doubting Thomas; but that's a little hard on him.

Remember, first he was loyal Thomas; initially he alone out of the disciples was prepared to go with Jesus to meet Lazarus, even if that meant he would be killed.

Next there was honest Thomas; he asked at the last supper what other's daren't.

Then there was doubting Thomas who became believing Thomas, as I've described.

And finally there was faithful Thomas; a believer who went out into the world to spread the good news as Jesus had commanded.

He was a Thomas who would have held out his hand in the dark not in certainty but in faith that it would be held; a faith that we can all share in from the good news of today's reading.

Loyal, honest, doubting, believing and faithful Thomas

Today, doubting believers have two things which Thomas did not have – the gift left to all believers – the Holy Spirit and the written New Testament. By the power of the Spirit and the wisdom of the Word, we are uniquely positioned to overcome doubts when they arise and like Thomas to metaphorically look Jesus in the eye and acknowledge him as “My Lord and my God”

Let's pray