

Geoff's sermon for Easter 2

Acts 5

²⁷ The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸ 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,' he said. 'Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.'

²⁹ Peter and the other apostles replied: 'We must obey God rather than human beings! ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead – whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.'

John 20

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!'

But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.'

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'

²⁸ Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

I said last week
that I wasted the first ten Easters of my ministry
trying to convince doubters of the resurrection

I say that partly
because I think sometimes I was trying to convince myself

there are some things you either believe or don't
and some people are easier to convince than others

but as I also said last week, at the end of the day
it's all down to faith

I used to work with a born pessimist who'd say
"I don't expect much out of life
And so far I've not been disappointed!"

Dear Thomas, is one of those bible characters
Who gets a pretty bad press

Especially when you consider how not alone he is
was he not simply saying what a lot of us think?
Or would say were we placed in similar circumstances?

actually, when we look a little closer at him
Thomas could well have been displaying a *love* for Jesus
Which goes much deeper than many of the other disciples

For starters,
this isn't the first time the pessimist has shown his cards

In chapter 11, when Jesus announces a trip to Bethany
John has Thomas saying
"Let us go with Him, so we can all die together"

He may have been a pessimist,
or a brilliant prophet - or both
but whatever you chose to call him
Thomas certainly wasn't lacking in courage

"Let us ALL go"

He clearly loved Jesus very much
and wanted to support Him

Whilst the others were hesitant and nervous
Thomas wasn't about to let Jesus go to His death alone

It seems clear that whilst Thomas was *expecting* the cross
There was no way he would shy away from it.

And even though he saw it coming,

Jesus' death still came as a shock to him

this is speculative – but popular among theologians
that Thomas was absent when Jesus first appeared
simply because he was grieving - alone

most men don't grieve in public
it's drilled into us from a very young age
that big boys don't cry
we have to be strong,
"chin up, stiff upper lip" and all that

John Gray,
in his book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*
quite rightly points out that when faced with adversity
Fred goes into his cave
whilst Freda prefers to share her problems

King George V once said
"If I have to suffer, let me be like a well bred animal
And let me go and suffer alone".

So there's a very real possibility
that rather than showing indifference by his absence,
Thomas wasn't there because his heart was falling apart
And he didn't want to show his grief in front of the others

And when they told him about the Lord's appearance?
Well, that was just too much to bear

'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands
and put my finger where the nails were,
and put my hand into his side,
I will not believe.'

Lesson one this morning
Be careful what you pray for!

Fast forward to the next scene
And we have Jesus, knowing Thomas' heart full well
And offering those very wounds for inspection

And please note, any doubters of the crucifixion
who've seen paintings of nails in unlikely places
there's no mention of any wounds in His feet

the victim was hung on the cross by nails through the wrists
so that the weight of the body would literally
squeeze the breath from his lungs as he hung there

lovely eh? So much for Roman civilization!

So there's Thomas – face to face with the risen Lord
And what does he do?

Well I'll tell you what he doesn't do
He doesn't shrug his shoulders like some grumpy adolescent
And mumble, "huh, s'pose it's you then"

He's so totally stunned, so completely blown away
That he falls to his knees
and shows his complete love and obedience
'My Lord and my God!'

And Jesus makes a powerful and challenging statement

'Because you have seen me, you have believed;
blessed are those who have not seen
and yet have believed.'

Question one – Is Jesus saying this to you this morning?
Is He challenging you, to stop doubting and believe?

I'm not asking this because I doubt anyone's faith here
I'm asking it as your spiritual guide and mentor
I'm asking as curator of your souls

We all have times
when we allow doubt and fear to overtake our faith
when actually – sometimes it can strengthen us

don't be ashamed
if you are going through such a period right now

please don't feel everyone else is celebrating the risen Lord and you're the only one
with doubts

it happened to one of the closest, chosen disciples
it can happen to any of us from time to time

and perhaps lesson two we can learn from Thomas himself
don't fall away from the group

whatever the reason – no matter how tough it gets
stick with the church,
it's not called the Body of Christ for nothing!

we all need that fellowship
that oneness
that support we get from one another

Thomas' grief caused him to miss that big moment

when Jesus first appeared

Things happen when two or more are gathered in His name
Things that amaze us
Things that thrill us
Things that strengthen us
Things which don't happen so often when we're alone

I'll never forget the night in Bridgwater
When angels blessed us with their presence

Had we not gone to church that night
Joan and I would have missed out
And probably would've been saying the following week
"unless I see their halos
and put our hands in their wings
We won't believe it!"

Lesson two, stay with your fellow believers
Particularly in the hard times
And lesson three – be honest

Thomas wasn't afraid to express his doubts

He didn't allow himself to be so much in awe of others
Or so jealous of their faith
That he just smiled and said "oh wow! That's amazing"
Whilst thinking "yeah right, like that *really* happened!"

be honest
With yourself - with others and with God
(actually that last one's a bit academic
You can't lie to God
He knows exactly what you're thinking
So if you think you're fooling God you're fooling yourself!)

It's *okay* to question
It's *okay* to interrogate your faith from time to time

it's good to give your beliefs an MOT occasionally
otherwise there's a real danger
when you come to a major crisis in your life
that you find one of your wheels falling off!

Question two this morning
Do you rattle off the creed every Sunday on auto-pilot?
Or do you cross fingers behind your backs here and there?

It's okay to ask, to question,
to check things out occasionally

Because if there's just one,

overriding lesson we can all learn from Thomas
it's this

when all is said and done
when he's dealt with all his doubts, fears and uncertainties
Thomas falls to his knees and cries
"my lord and my God"

Thomas' doubt ultimately led to certainty
And in that certainty his surrender to Jesus was complete without reservation or
hesitation of any kind

One of my favourite bible commentators, William Barclay writes
"the man who fights his way through his doubts,
to the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord,
has attained a certainty (of faith)
to a degree that the man who unthinkingly accepts
could never attain"

There are several books which didn't quite get into the bible
One is The Gospel according to Thomas
And another is The Acts of Thomas

In the latter (and this is legend but please bear with me)
The disciples draw lots to see who goes where
to spread the gospel throughout the world

Thomas drew India
(and there's a Thomist Church in southern India
Which bears witness to this)

Thomas at first, typically refuses to go
Even after Jesus appears to him and assures Him
Thomas still refuses to go to India

But then an Indian called Abbanes arrives in Jerusalem,
With orders from his king to find a carpenter
(which is Thomas' trade)

Jesus tells Abbanes that Thomas is His slave
and He sells him to the man,

The next morning
Thomas once again finds himself on his knees, praying "Lord, let Your will be done,
I will go wherever you send me"

Same old Thomas, slow to be sure
Slow to surrender
But once his surrender is made, it is completely sincere

Abbanes takes Thomas back to India
And under orders from the King
He gives him a fortune to buy materials, to build a palace

But seeing the squalor in that country
And remembering all that Jesus taught him
Thomas gives all the money to the poor

And keeps the king updated with false reports
On the progress of the building
Until one day the King insists on seeing the palace

Thomas tells the King
"You can't see it now, but when you depart this life
Then you will see it"

At first the king is angry
and threatens to have Thomas executed

but Thomas told him the gospel
won him as a disciple of Christ
and thus brought Christianity to India

I can't help admiring Thomas
Faith was never easy for him
Obedience never came that readily or instantly

Thomas was the man who had to be sure
The man who had to count the cost
But the man who, once convinced
Would go to the ultimate limit of faith and obedience
Even to risk his own life

Surely such faith is better
than any glib profession of a creed learned by rote
and recited by ritual

For when a man like Thomas says "yes"
You can be sure – even when the chips are down
he won't go back on his word