

Believing Thomas?

Most of us of a certain age have grown up with the phrase 'a doubting Thomas'. That is grossly unfair to the Thomas of today's gospel, held up as he has been from the beginning as the patron saint of all doubters. As if the crisis of Christian belief in our day is only a contemporary expression of what has always been a possibility, and for which Thomas is the first and best illustration!

Much more to the point, however, is that the tag 'a doubting Thomas' is devastatingly misleading for us. For as the first chronological Christian after Easter day, Thomas is actually the prototype of true faith. Today, the first Sunday in Easter, we too find ourselves in a similar position to Thomas. How we make that transposition from doubting Thomas to believing Thomas is the burden of the next few minutes.

To do this, we need to make a few observations about the Church year. The fact that we read the gospel of John today reminds us that the liturgical calendar is a construct derived primarily from the chronology of the gospel of Luke, where the strategic confessions of Christmas, Lent, Easter Day and Pentecost are given their allocated extended places.

On such a reading - understandably so as the Creeds apparently confirm - Easter Day is made into one more object, as if it is the case that in addition to believing in everything else, Easter simply offers another item of belief to be added to the Christian sack of beliefs. The persistence of such a view highlights for us the perennial danger of separating out that which the gospel today is asking us to hold together. If we follow its leading, this morning we will not leave the ministry of Jesus and Good Friday behind us, as if Holy Week is merely a sad and unfortunate prelude to what turned out to be alright in the end.

The revolutionary helpfulness of the gospel of John is that it offers another way of looking at it all. Unlike the other gospels, it telescopes all the apparent separate cameo panels of the past four months, and zips them all up in a seamless robe.

Today, for example, we encounter the first occasion of the common meeting between Jesus and his disciples *this side of the Cross*. It is precisely this occasion which brings together *simultaneously* what we call his ministry, his death, Easter day, Pentecost and the disciples'

commission for mission. No forty days here. But this is simply the brilliance of John's grasp of Christian faith. All these apparently separable components are now seen to coincide as a unity in the figure of Jesus himself.

Rather like a fly wandering backwards and forwards without regard to the blocks of dates on a wall calendar, so John reverses the sort of time lines which we lay out like a row of bricks. Think, for example, in this gospel of the patent temporal absurdity of Jesus' cryptic utterance: 'Before Abraham was, I am'. That is to say, John is concerned to allow *Jesus himself* to reveal the significance of past and future times and spaces - not our so frequent insistence that he must be fitted into *our* measurements.

So would it not be good to do as the Gospel today proposes, namely to understand that the faith of Easter day simply expresses faith in Jesus - not, we might say, as something additional to his person, but rather to be simply faith in Jesus himself? That is to say, resurrection faith is the very possibility of anything that could be called Christian faith at all. The difference between these alternatives bears some consideration.

In this difference Thomas is our ally. Let me therefore put it as starkly as possible - our text clearly wants to demonstrate that the doubt of Thomas is not a temporary lack of faith in a miracle of the dead Jesus now purported to have come to life again - which is seemingly that most durable caricature of Christian faith. No. Thomas' doubt is of quite a different order - it is doubt about *the true revelation of the crucifixion of Jesus*. That transposition is the one thing that we should make our own this morning, indeed resolve to make it permanent achievement, for the difference then and now is crucial.

That is why when the other disciples offer to Thomas the confession - as we in our turn are being encouraged in like manner to make - 'We have seen the Lord', Thomas must needs say: 'Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails and - even more decisively - place my finger in the mark of the nails', and as if that's not enough, 'place my hand in his side: I will not believe.'

As the story unfolds, Thomas eight days later is granted his wish in the presence of Jesus. *Its significance, however, is that, despite Jesus' invitation to touch, the text is silent as to whether Thomas actually does avail himself of*

this previously non-negotiable requirement. Why is this? What has happened to make what Thomas demanded - as mandatory - now totally unnecessary?

The first clue lies in the number three. It is surely striking how often the number three assumes significance in the gospel. One thinks of Peter's threefold holy week denial for instance, or of the soon to be threefold questioning of Peter as to the state of his discipleship, or in the Synoptic gospels' of Jesus' threefold temptation. Three is the biblical number for fullness, for totality.

So it is that, in the gospel today, we are told that three times the crucified Jesus in his coming to his uncomprehending community says: 'Peace be with you'.

We can scarcely exaggerate the significance of that blessing. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, this word for peace was used to express everything that was conveyed in the Jewish greeting 'shalom'. Shalom is inherently trans-personal. Shalom comes about when all the alienating divisions between human beings, the creation, and the Creator are destroyed once and for all. This is the peace which Jesus in his ministry had spoken of, and which he was anticipating would come true in the faithfulness of God, and which, incidentally, we dare to offer one another before participating in the Eucharist. No mere friendly greeting this, much less some internal narcotic – rather is it a truly radical offering of an already accomplished future.

Here, for the very first time - and this is the gospel - this cosmic peace is *the* reality of which Jesus himself has become the author and mediator. In other words, the final crucifixion cry, uttered only in the gospel of John: 'It is finished', is here, decisively, being implemented. The word of Jesus - in which in his ministry that peace was being foreshadowed - and which in the Spirit has been incorporated into the finality of his life giving deed – that word is now coming to pass, too, for would be followers, paralysed then as now, in our variously locked rooms.

This is why the first words to his community must be the three times offered blessing: 'Peace be with you'. Thus has Jesus' ministry, his death, and the future hope of shalom come to expression in the present experience of the crucified one - an experience which we call resurrection. In a word, in this concurrence, the continuing *life* of Jesus is here being made one with his *death*.

We cannot then emphasise too much what is at stake:

Thomas, it is clear, does not finally touch. Instead, Thomas hears.

We cannot touch either, but we can hear. In the face of Jesus' 'Peace be with you', believing Thomas, not doubting Thomas, is the prototype of all Christian believing. All that remains for him - as for us - is the answering recognition: 'My Lord and my God!'

In this way is the blessing multiplied down through the ages, and the promise opened to as many as look for it.

It is understandable, then, why to the question then and now: 'Have you believed because you have seen?', the only possible rejoinder has to be: 'Blessed rather are those who have not seen and yet believe'. Believe what? With Thomas as our original, the answer must surely be: that the three times offered 'peace of God' has been realised in such a wounded way that, so believing, we, not to speak of all creation, may have life in his name.

God grant, therefore, that, singly and together, we may grow ever more faithfully into this gift of Thomas.

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