

So Honestly, what is the first thing that comes to your mind when Jesus' disciple Thomas is mentioned?

"Doubting Thomas," that's right, that's his identifier. But does that really characterize Thomas fairly? No, not at all! Today we are going to think about who Thomas actually was and use his testimony to grapple with the following questions:

What is it that makes faith believable?

Has believing in Jesus transformed us?

I wonder how many times you have missed out on something extraordinary. One of those memorable moments, when your friends said – "Oh you just missed it" or "you should have been there." You often want to share in the experience. Recently my daughter Maddie, who is 14 won her first senior 100m race. She was racing against athletes that had been selected over her for the commonwealth games, and everything just went right – a perfect race, smashed her PB time and won the race! Her smile was wide, and I missed it... I was getting ready to preach at our evening service at St Johns. I should have been there, yet God had a different plan for me on that day...and I missed that moment of celebration...

Thomas, we are told wasn't there at that first moment of celebration, when Jesus appeared to the others for the first

time. The bible doesn't tell us where he was but our reading today tells us that he wasn't there!

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

And what was his response?

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."

Generally, our rational minds want evidence to get to the truth rather than the claims of others. That is probably even more true today in a world of fake news and the mistrust of grand narratives.

If we think of our criminal justice system, the accounts of the witnesses and the gathering of evidence are vital to making a judgment. We want to see the physical proof and so does Thomas! This is what Thomas needed in this moment to believe – he needed to see the physical reality.

It had been a whirlwind of fear, sorrow over the past 2 weeks. Jesus had appeared after his resurrection to some of the disciples but not Thomas. Imagine, missing one Sunday, and coming back to hear "Guess who showed up while you were gone?" Jesus! Would you believe it? Thomas gets the title "doubter" even though he's not the only one who is from the 'show me' camp! Peter, for one, doesn't believe the

women when they tell about Christ's body missing from the tomb.(But don't get me started on that!) So he runs and checks things out for himself. For Peter seeing Jesus for himself was what made it believable.

I think Thomas' reaction is quite relatable for us... it show us an honest reaction. He did not want to lie and say that he understood something that he did not understand; or that he believed something he could not believe.

It isn't enough to say to some people, 'Be quiet and just believe'. They need to seek out the truth and God is big enough to cope with our questions. We have a Bible filled with books like Job, and with plenty of Psalms where ancient Israel sang her painful questions in worship. If Thomas is an example to us, it is about church being a safe place for people with their questions, not one where they are shouted down. We are really blessed here at Shirley parish to have the 'Start' course and 'the journeying on together' course running. Both are brilliant opportunities to meet with others to ask the big questions and grapple with them through the exploration of the bible and church tradition. Lets be a church were we support one another to grow deeper in our faith, because as we continually say 'yes' to believing in Jesus then we are continually going deeper with God. It doesn't matter how long we've been a Christian or how old we are: God is always interested in us and he is always with us, wanting us to go deeper with him.

He is a gentle God, slow to anger and rich in love. If we look at the next part of this passage, Jesus appears again to his disciples and this time Thomas is there – Does Jesus shout at

him? Does Jesus rebuke him? Does Jesus turn away from Thomas? No, he says 'Peace be with you.' Jesus goes to where Thomas is and he reveals himself to him. And Thomas sees him and responds - 'My Lord, and my God'

Seeing made Thomas believe. But what makes Jesus believable to us today? Jesus references this in his reply to Thomas – 'because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen yet have believed.' So how do we believe?

Perhaps one of the most notable Christians for steadfastly not bowing down to the values of the world in the last century was Mother Teresa. Her care for the poor and those generally thought not worth bothering with and her freedom from wealth and acquisition made her admired by many, as we well know. But after her death in 1997, reports emerged about the severe doubts she expressed in her personal journal. SO how did she carry on believing when all around her she saw devastation and hardship?

There is a wonderful story of Jesuit philosopher, John Kavanaugh. In 1975 he went to work for three months at the "house of the dying" in Calcutta with Mother Teresa. He was searching for an answer about how best to spend the remaining years of his life. On his very first morning there, he met Mother Teresa. She asked him, "And what can I do for you?" Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him. "What do you want me to pray for?" she asked. And he answered with the request that was the very reason he travelled thousands of

miles to India: “Pray that I have clarity.” Mother Teresa said firmly, “No. I will not do that.” When he asked her why, she said, “Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.” When Kavanaugh said, “You always seem to have clarity,” she laughed and said, “I have never had clarity. What I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.”

Trust led to her belief and with her belief her life was transformed.

So what might convince the doubters? What convinces us to believe and trust in God when we can't physically see him? And how does it transform our lives and the lives of those around us?

Surely it is the little miracles of transformation that we witness? The love and light shining through the lives of Christ's followers?

The same outpouring of grace and blessing that continues to ignite hope and causes us to embody love in action. Like the work of food banks, welcome cafes, street pastors and night shelters. I wonder how has Jesus transformed your life?

Because Jesus transformed Thomas's life. He wasn't just a doubter, in fact, Thomas was one of the bravest Christians, a very insightful theologian; he had a burning desire to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the farthest ends of the world. He was the only apostle to venture beyond the Roman Empire to bring the gospel to India and the Parthian Empire.

In John 11:16, when Lazarus has just died, none of the other apostles wanted to go back to Judea where people had attempted to stone Jesus to death. But Thomas bravely said: "Let us also go that we may die with him." Why don't we know this incredible statement of Thomas' unwavering faith? Obviously, Thomas was unafraid to die for his faith and indeed he did die as a martyr for Christ later in his life. And yet, church history continues to define him in terms of "Thomas, the Doubter" because of one moment of weakness. As the saying goes: "Thomas will never live that one down."

Actually the truth was that Thomas' life was transformed by knowing Jesus and being filled with the Holy Spirit. And as followers of Jesus today, filled with the Holy Spirit, we also through prayer, reading the bible, journeying together and choosing to believe can be transformed when we choose to believe and put our trust in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Amen