

Sermon 16/04/23 – Thomas – the doubtful?

I have a feeling this morning that I am about to embark on volume two – on a sequel that includes characters we already know. Their importance within the story may have changed so that the centre of the action may now be on people who only had bit parts in volume one. Or maybe not.

So why am I feeling that.? The last time I preached it was Maundy Thursday and the Gospel was about Jesus commissioning the disciples to 'Love one another, as I have loved you'. In today's passage he adds a second part to their task. 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'.

Remember the Christmas night Gospel? The prologue to John's Gospel. That spine tingling, poetic summary of the whole thing. Beginning in the beginning with the Word and in verse fourteen, as the reading ends 'We have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.' The last two chapters of John's Gospel are about the disciples seeing the glory, the grace, the truth.

And then there is Thomas, called with the others of the twelve at the beginning of Jesus ministry, but to date he has hardly been a main player in the story. Just present with the others when they are all there – except one night he wasn't there.

Poor Thomas. Destined to go down in history as the one who doubted what his friends had told him. Who questioned before he believed. Yes, I know that the Bible is full of stories of people of great faith who act on even the most improbable of instructions from God – think of Noah building the ark, even if he understood God's frustration with the ways of his people, did a massive flood seem that likely. But then there was Abraham, frustrated by his lack of children, who questioned God when God promised that he would be the father of many nations and it just seemed impossible. Both Moses and Elijah questioned, they may have done what God asked of them but they still questioned the rationale.

Even before Donald Trump trumpeted the concept of 'fake news' parents have cautioned their children against simply believing what their mates tell them. Thomas is questioning what he has been told but seen no evidence of. We don't know the reason why he was not at that first meeting. In one learned book I read it was suggested that he was so fearful he stayed away – the reality is that there are several possibilities and we don't know why.

Immediately after the crucifixion there must have been tension within the group of disciples. Anxiety about their own future, confusion about what they had seen, about what they wanted to see, about what it could really mean. All these things must have distorted their perception of what was really happening. A bit of reluctance in accepting what he was being told seems the right thing to do. Thomas may simply have been trying to get his own thoughts in order.

We are told that Jesus breathed on the disciples, telling them that they were receiving the Holy Spirit. The spirit that enabled them to forgive the sins of others. The spirit that allowed them to be sent as God had sent Jesus, that enabled them to fulfil the second part of his commission, 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'.

It seems that although he was not there at this point Thomas was also commissioned with the Spirit as traditionally he is thought to have taken the Gospel to India. He did not need to be present to receive the Spirit, and the task. That is as important a message for us as are the words of Jesus that we are blessed if we believe without seeing. Faith can come from signs or without them, it can be based simply on an inner knowing, possibly on the actions of others. Like the first disciples we can receive our faith in different ways, we can live out that life of faith in different ways. Those instructions to the disciples are not very specific, 'Love one another as I have loved you. As the

Father has sent me, so I send you'. These things can be done in so many different ways. A quick look at our Parish magazine or website, shows a number of activities that demonstrate the ways in which we can serve our community. Sometimes being of service can take the form of turning up, of sitting alongside someone that we don't already know, of being with them. We, Shirley parish, are a community of individuals with our different personalities and skills. None of us can do everything between us there are few things that we cannot do. What holds us together although we may not always be conscious of it is that instruction – love one another. And the love of Jesus who told us to do just that. To love one another and to encourage others to do the same.

Poor Thomas, destined to be remembered as the man who took time believing. It reminds me of children learning arithmetic, some may quickly learn how to perform whatever function that day's lesson is about, but there are others who take longer because they need to understand not only what to do but why. Their learning is more complete. When Thomas did meet the risen Jesus he saw not only the friend who had been dead but was alive again, as the others had seen. Thomas saw in addition the Son of God glorified, the Son of God as described at the start of John's Gospel, and in the words of the great Easter hymn 'the morning star who came back from the dead, and lives and reigns for ever and ever'.