

Reflection for Easter 2 2023 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

All of us I am sure, from time to time have doubts about a particular situation, a person, or even ourselves. Am I really in the right job? Did I turn the oven on before I came to church this morning or will I get home and find an uncooked meal? Did I lock the car door? Is that meeting today? My mother was one who was always doubting herself, especially when it came to security issues – things had to be double and triple checked!

Some doubts are important, maybe fundamental to who and what we are, others less so, but we all have doubts from time to time.

This Second Sunday after Easter focuses on the doubts the disciples had in relation to the resurrection of Jesus, and these doubts are focused on the figure of Thomas. For whatever reason he was not present when Jesus first appeared to the disciples and, as a result, has doubts and questions about the resurrection of Jesus. Unless Thomas sees the evidence for himself, he is determined not to believe.

The more I reflect on Thomas the more it is like looking into a mirror. I see in him attributes that I relate to in myself - a man who wants things to be grounded in reality; a man who wants to be sure of exactly where he stands.

Look at the stories of Thomas in the gospels, especially those in John's gospel where he features. He is portrayed as less a skeptic and doubter, rather a loyal but at times pessimistic follower of Jesus, ready to die with him if need be, slow to comprehend but always willing to question and dig deeper.

A good example of Thomas's character is found in the 14th chapter of John's gospel as Jesus explains to his disciples about the path he is about to travel, the way of the cross, and encourages them not to be downhearted. Thomas' main concern is to question the detail, *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* Thomas wants everything clear - black and white. He wants the details before he goes anywhere or does anything. He is so very human, so much like many of us, and to me that is reassuring - Jesus choose ordinary people, people with questions and people with doubts that hold them back, to be his disciples.

On that first Easter evening when the other disciples are gathered in the upper room, and Jesus appears in there midst with the words "peace be with you", Thomas was not there. What he was certain of was that Jesus had died on the cross and he was not going to be misled into believing some farfetched story to make himself feel better. He wants concrete evidence to back the claims of his fellow disciples. *"Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe."*

I wonder how many of us, when we see a piece of advertising offering something that is free, accept what it says at face value. Where is the catch? is often our first thought. It may look like a good offer but what about the longer term? Will it in fact cost us even more? Often, the answer is yes it will, and we approach things with a degree of caution. Thomas is doing the same – this is too good to be true!

John's inclusion of this story in his gospel emphasises for us the way the disciples did not all immediately accept the reality of the resurrection. Rather, those like Thomas questioned it deeply before accepting; they needed some convincing. That to me is positive; it underlines

the very reality of the resurrection. If those who were skeptical at the time were convinced enough to be prepared to lay down their lives because of the resurrection, it must have been more than just a lovely story.

Finally, a week later Jesus and Thomas meet face to face, the doors again being locked. Fear is obviously still gripping the disciples - fear of the Jewish leaders despite it now being a week since the resurrection. Jesus, who cares for his followers, extends his hands in Thomas direction and offers him the evidence he seeks. Not seeming to mind that Thomas was not present at his earlier appearance or that he had not been convinced, rather Jesus seems to understand Thomas' weaknesses. Again, this is something positive – Jesus knows Thomas' weakness, yet he still looks to help and encourage him. The same should be true of us within the Christian community. We should not be about knocking each other's weak points but accepting them and seeking to nurture and build up each other.

For Thomas, though, this encounter is much more than an exercise in overcoming his doubt. The fact of Jesus rising from the dead says more about Jesus' identity than any word or action during his ministry. Only God could do this! It emphasised that Jesus was, God's Son. At that moment Thomas recognised more fully than ever who Jesus was saying "You are my Lord and my God" Words alone could never have convinced him of this, only a personal encounter with the risen Christ - an encounter that changed his life forever. So, the most skeptical and outrageous doubter of Jesus' resurrection utters his greatest confession.

In accepting Thomas' recognition Jesus looks beyond Thomas to those like us who will not have the same physical encounter with the risen Jesus That Thomas did *"Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!"*

For me, three things stand out from this resurrection story.

Firstly, it underlines the struggle the disciples themselves had in accepting the resurrection and how their struggles should encourage us - should help us to see the reality of the resurrection, This is no mere story - this is a living reality.

Secondly, it illustrates the way the resurrection and the Christian faith as whole are not always accepted on face value. Words are not always enough. The Christian faith is about have a living relationship with the risen and ascended Lord who died to save us. Like Thomas, we need to have an encounter which changes our lives forever. It is about making the jump from fact to faith - faith that turns things upside down. Thomas ceases to be that that man full of doubt as he makes that jump: for us, it needs to be the same.

Thirdly, Thomas reminds us that it is OK to ask questions, to look at things rationally, to require convincing. Walking the way of Christ is not just about accepting, it is also about struggling. It is often through those struggles that we grow and become stronger.

I am sure that Thomas' faith and his great confession "My Lord and my God!" would not have happened, or had the power it did, without the doubt and questioning that went before. His faith, and those of his fellow disciples, was stronger for his struggle.

In his doubting, Thomas helps us to see the reality of the resurrection more clearly. We many not see the marks of the nails as he did but, through faith, we can still proclaim aloud *"My Lord and my God!"* and live in that light.