

Lent Compline Talks 2019

St Mary's Kidlington

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Lent 5: Jesus and St Thomas

Last Compline, when we thought about the ten disciples to whom Jesus first appeared in the locked upper room, we did not consider Thomas (Thomas didymos (the twin)), because he was not present. Tonight, I want us to think about Thomas, in particular because of his nick-name “doubting Thomas”. In looking at all the negative emotions felt by the disciples immediately after the crucifixion, it seems particularly important to think about doubt, which we often consider a negative emotion. I guess that there are few of us who have not, at some time, experienced doubts about our faith. Also, as we saw last week, we have very little incontrovertible evidence about the events that occurred at the passion and resurrection. It is, therefore, perfectly rational to have doubts about exactly who did and said what and when at that time. So, what can we learn from ‘doubting Thomas’ and how he overcame his doubts to become one of the apostles engaged in preaching the gospel? And what does this tell us about how we should deal with our own doubts?

We know nothing about how Thomas became a disciple of Jesus. He is not mentioned in the first call of the fisherman disciples in Matthew, Mark or John, so we have no idea what his occupation was before becoming a disciple. Thomas’s name appears first in Luke when, after a night in prayer, Jesus called his disciples and, from among them, chose twelve he named Apostles. It is here that Thomas appears in the list where his name is linked with that of Matthew, so perhaps they were friends or of a similar background?

The only other references to Thomas are in John’s gospel. The first comes when Jesus was told that his friend Lazarus was near to death. When Jesus announced that he was going back to Bethany the other disciples tried to dissuade him saying “It’s not long since the Jews there were wanting to stone you!” But it was Thomas who said to the other disciples “Let us also go, that we may die with him”. Thomas was realistic - he had taken in the political scene accurately - but clearly Thomas was also nothing if not brave or even foolhardy; no evidence here of doubt as to what should be done! Those brave words were, however, hollow. Thomas was presumably among the disciples who went to sleep in the garden of Gethsemane while Jesus prayed in anguish, and presumably he was also among those who fled when Jesus was arrested.

The next mention of Thomas is in John’s account of the last supper and it is here that his questioning, doubting aspect is first mentioned. When Jesus says “Trust in God. I am going to prepare a place for you so that where I am you may be also; and my way there is known to you”, it is Thomas who wants clarification, saying “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” to which Jesus replies with the phrase we all know so well “I am the way, the truth and the life”. Whether Thomas asks some of the other questions that the disciples put to Jesus that evening is not stated.

The main reason Thomas is called “doubting”, however, is because, when Jesus appeared to the ten apostles and the women on the evening of the resurrection, Thomas was not there. When the disciples tell him that they had seen the Lord, Thomas says “Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I won’t believe it”. Here again was the realist speaking. He may have witnessed other crucifixions; he knew what happened when people were crucified! They did not visit their friends afterwards! So, like us, when told of some apparently unbelievable occurrence, Thomas wanted evidence, evidence not only of

sight but also of touch. And, of course, a week later he was offered that evidence when he was with the disciples in that same locked room. The disciples clearly had not lost their fear at this point and were still in hiding. When Jesus appeared among them, as before, he gave the traditional greeting “Peace be with you”. “Shalom”. Then he said to Thomas “reach your finger here; see my hands. Reach your hand here and put it into my side. Be unbelieving no longer, but believe” to which Thomas exclaims “My Lord and my God”. Next comes the saying of Jesus that is most important for us today, unless we have been granted some sort of vision “Because you have seen me you have found faith. Happy are those who never saw me and yet have found faith”.

Thomas appears just once more in the Bible, in the Acts of the Apostles when, just after the Ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem. The eleven, among whom Thomas is named, were again together in an upper room, where “they all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers”. Notice that there is now no hint of their earlier fear - the mission has begun. For Thomas, there is a substantial tradition reflected in an ancient text called the Acts of Thomas that by, AD 52, Thomas had travelled as far as India, where he is regarded by some as Patron Saint; there is an Indian group called the St Thomas Christians, and a St Thomas cathedral basilica in Chennai. There is also a Coptic Gospel of Thomas, written between AD40 and 140, part of the Nag Hammadi library dug up in Egypt in 1945. This is a compilation of sayings of Jesus more than half of which are familiar to us from the gospels. It’s an interesting read!

What can we learn from Thomas? It is surely not that we have to see something with our own eyes to believe it. Although we often say “seeing is believing”, it is clear that we can be mistaken by the apparent evidence of our eyes. From a scientific viewpoint, what we “see” is actually our brain’s best guess concerning the stream of information coming from our eyes. What evidence do we need to acknowledge Jesus as “my Lord and my God”. We certainly won’t see him with our eyes, but throughout our lives we catch glimpses of him and his teaching in many different ways. It may be in church, in sermons and discussions of faith, in private prayer, or in our experience of nature, of the love of others - so many ways in which we can feel the presence of God if we open ourselves to his love and teaching. For some it may be a moment of conversion, but for most, it is our whole life experience.

The disciples in the upper room were initially afraid. I find it interesting that fear involves a rather primitive part of the brain called the amygdala. Love, gratitude, compassion, empathy involve more highly evolved parts. When we are frightened we do not necessarily make good or rational decisions; short-term self-interest always predominates. Jesus second appearance to the disciples in the upper room was not just to convince Thomas, but once more to give them all his peace. To transform them from fearful people hiding away, to people whose core was at peace, confident in his love and ready to go out to preach his gospel of love to the ends of the earth, whatever the personal cost.

So is doubt helpful? Can it be good? We get so many false messages we need to be alert for ‘Fake News’ and continue to seek after the truth. Doubt is a sign of an alert mind. Doubt asks the right questions. We misunderstand the nature of faith if we think that it casts out doubt. That the more faith we have the fewer questions we’ll ask. If it does, it becomes ‘blind’ or ‘unthinking faith’. We see today far too many examples of unthinking adherence to some or other dogma. Faith and doubt are woven together much closer than we might imagine. Faith is not knowledge, but “the assurance of things hoped for”. Questioning is not the antithesis of faith, but the way faith grows.

When Jesus said “blessed are those who never saw me and yet have faith” he was not rebuking Thomas but blessing us. I suggest that we should think of Thomas, not as an unbelieving doubter, but as a model of how to become a faithful disciple. Thomas was not a credulous fool, but one who was realistic and assessed the cost. Once he had encountered the risen Jesus, his faith was as realistic as his earlier doubt. We must pray that the same will be true for us as we encounter Jesus in our daily lives.