

PEACE BE WITH YOU, THOMAS

Sermon at the Church of the Transfiguration, New York City, 23 April 2006 (Second Sunday of Easter)

TEXTS: Acts 4:32-37; Ps. 133; 1 John 1:1 – 2:2; John 20:19-31

Let me declare my position right up front. I feel thoroughly put in my place by people who tell me that they have no doubts at all about God. I'm never sure what I'm supposed to say to them. Oh really? How nice? Nothing seems right but I say it anyway. The only certain thing is that they make me feel about as flat as a piece of chewing gum trodden on the sidewalk. Given that I do harbour doubts, clearly I am lacking in some major way, I think to myself. I must be spiritually immature, inadequate or just plain wrong.

Which may be true, of course, but my spiritual backbone is never strengthened by hearty assurances about doubt-free faith. I find myself getting self-defensive and muttering silently about 'spiritual snobbery'. Other people's, of course. Not mine. I try to convince myself that these faith-filled souls are unwilling to engage in healthy debate about the nature of faith and belief. That they're indulging in blind, sentimental unquestioning faith or hunkering down behind rules and regulations that define God safely. I slink away, tongue-tied and miserable, afraid I've been busted as a fraud and a hypocrite—if not by them, then at least by God.

Nevertheless, when I get the spring back in my step, I believe as strongly as ever that doubt and faith are not an impossible combination. That they are natural companions who would play happily together if given permission. I read the story about Thomas and his doubt and I hear words

about Jesus and faith. In Jesus' words I don't hear criticism or condemnation, just understanding and encouragement. '*Peace be with you,*' he said¹, and I wonder whether the centuries haven't been unfair to Thomas. 'Doubting Thomas', as he's dubbed, and it's pretty clear that that's not a good thing to be called in the Christian world.

It wasn't as if all the disciples hadn't had doubts about Jesus. Matthew, Mark and Luke all say they did². And it wasn't as if Jesus hadn't shown his wounded hands and side to the rest of the disciples when he'd appeared among them a week earlier when Thomas hadn't been with them. John says he did, but he doesn't say whether the disciples were talking about the dreadful events of the previous days, or about Mary Magdalene's report that she had seen the risen Lord³, or what they thought about that. Only that they were locked away in a huddle *for fear of the Jews*⁴, afraid—as they had every reason to be—of being arrested as associates of an executed criminal. And suddenly there was Jesus among them, showing them his hands and his side. Did they cry out? Did they touch the wounds? Did they fall down in terror until the evidence of their eyes quieted their pounding hearts and they realised the impossible had happened? That Jesus was not dead as they knew he was, but alive in front of them, wounds bleeding, but peace in his heart and his voice? Well, we don't know. John doesn't tell us so we can only imagine.

And where was Thomas on that extraordinary day when the resurrected Jesus appeared to the others? Why wasn't he there, quivering with fear along with the rest of them? Again we don't know. Perhaps he was the practical one who knew somebody had to keep a cool head. Maybe he'd

¹ John 20:26

² Matthew 28:17; Mark 16:14; Luke 24:11, 25, 37 & 41. Only John singles out Thomas.

³ John 20:18

⁴ John 20:19

slipped out and hurried through back alleys to buy groceries. They had to eat, didn't they? If they weren't discovered and executed like Jesus then someone had to make sure there was bread to eat and wine to drink. If that was what he was doing, he missed the moment. The great moment when Jesus appeared and settled the other disciples doubts.

On the other hand, perhaps Thomas was someone whose grief was so great, whose faith was so shaken, that he simply wanted to be alone. Jesus was dead. All was lost. Thomas' hope for the kingdom of God lay smashed in pieces at his feet and he was wracked by what a friend of mine calls 'inconsolable sobbing doubt'⁵. Perhaps he slipped away to the local bar to hide in some dark smoky corner where he could mull over his disappointment in a God who could allow such dreadful things to happen. Where he could dip his doubts in a few too many cups of wine and pour out his confusion and woe to the understanding barmaid. Maybe that's where the others found him and told him excitedly, 'We have seen the Lord!'⁶ And just maybe he turned wine-bleary eyes on them and dismissed them scornfully. His 'I'll believe it when I see it' response is as old as time and as familiar as our faces in the mirror and it's easy to imagine him angry with his friends for barging in on his sorrow with fanciful tales about things impossible to believe. 'Yes, and I'm the Queen of Sheba!' he might have flung at them, telling them to clear off, and leave him in peace. Poor Thomas. Going off alone he'd missed the moment when he could have had just that. Peace. *'Peace be with you,'* Jesus said.

⁵ Peter Llewellyn, in an unpublished sermon on Isaiah 55:13, preached at St Mark's National Theological Centre, Canberra on 18 October 1994

⁶ John 20:25

All this is imaginary, even if possible. But there are two definite things we can deduce about Thomas and they are important in assessing his doubts—and our own. First, Thomas was a man of courage. When Jesus had heard Lazarus was ill he determined to return to Judea despite the danger from those who thought him a blasphemer. Thomas said to the rest of the disciples, *‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’*⁷ He knew the Jews had tried to stone Jesus and they might well try again. It would take courage to return. Thomas was no coward. Second, Thomas was a man who wanted to understand. When Jesus had tried to reassure the disciples about what would happen, that he would be leaving them but that they knew where he was going, Thomas begged to differ. ‘No, we don’t!’ he cried. ‘We know nothing of the kind!’ *Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*⁸ Thomas was not afraid to question—even his Lord. He wanted answers. He wanted to know.

Courage and the willingness to question. To explore. Two things necessary to live in the tension between doubt and faith. There is a third. Community. It is community that breeds tradition and, if tradition is to be believed, I think Thomas learned the value of community. Tradition says he took himself off to evangelise India—a church still exists there which claims Thomas as its founder. What’s more, tradition—and history—show us again and again that those we think of as ‘spiritual greats’ in the community of the faithful experienced, just like Thomas, the ‘untidiness’ of faith and doubt. In the fourth century, we find St Augustine bemoaning, ‘I have become a puzzle to myself, asking my soul again and again “Why are you downcast? Why do you distress me?”’ But my soul had no answer to give.’ But he also said, ‘I believe in order that I may understand.’ In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther wrote of a time when ‘for more than

⁷ John 11:16

⁸ John 14:5

a week, Christ was wholly lost. I was shaken by desperation and blasphemy against God'. But he also gave us that great hymn, 'A mighty fortress is our God ... his kingdom is for ever'. Then in the nineteenth century, Dostoyevsky in his monumental novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, has his character, Ivan, rebelling against God because of the suffering in the world. 'I cannot understand why the world is arranged as it is,' he says. ... 'And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket.'⁹ But Dostoyevsky also wrote that doubt was an angel, not a devil. 'My hosannas,' he declared, 'have been forged in the crucible of doubt.'

For our sakes, thank God Thomas wasn't with the others on that day when the resurrected Jesus appeared to them. And thank God also that doubt has beset the mighty souls who have gone before us. '*Peace be with you,*' Jesus said. It gives us all—like Thomas—another chance. It's a chance we throw away every time we let 'inconsolable sobbing doubt' overwhelm faith, leading us to inevitable despair and spiritual paralysis. It's a chance we are given to try again, not to fear failure but to accept the challenge to take hold of Thomas' courageous 'exploring doubt' and make it our own. It's a chance we are given to remember that it is the way life wounds us that breeds our doubt but the wounds of Jesus that build our faith.

But courage and the willingness to question are not quite enough. I spoke of community. Faith is hard to sustain alone and is very vulnerable to the doubt that cripples. We need community to sustain us. 'Giving back the ticket', as Dostoyevsky's Ivan urges, is not much use in the long run. If we want to say 'I believe'. We need to keep coming to be together as church, as a worshipping community, clinging to our tickets now matter

⁹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, The Modern Library, New York, 1929, pp. 299 & 301.

how much our hands tremble, or how great the temptation to tear them up and throw the pieces to the winds. We need to put down our bags of doubts at our feet and worship, breathing in courage from the one who shows us his wounds. *Peace be with you,*’ Jesus said.

Once, when I was in a dark place and prayer seemed a hollow sham, a priest friend said ‘light a candle, put an icon in front of it, and say “now you pray for me till I can believe again”’. That’s what we need to be for each other—the ‘pray-ers’ who can say for us ‘we believe’ when, in our hearts we are saying like defiant children, ‘well, I don’t!’ We need to hear the community praying ‘we believe’ for us, over and over if need be, until we can whisper it again ourselves. Until we can add ‘Holy God, Holy and immortal, *I believe: Help my unbelief!*’¹⁰ Do you know—there isn’t a word in biblical Hebrew for ‘doubt’. Did you know that? But there are lots for ‘wonder’. That’s what will get us all through if we can just hold on to it—‘wonder’. Wonder before something that hovers just beyond the horizons of our minds. The holiness of God. Our God who reaches out hands, wounded but gentle, to hold us. There was no reproof in Jesus’ words to Thomas. Nor is there to us when we struggle to say ‘My Lord and my God. I believe’. Only love, and welcome and understanding. And he says to us, *Peace be with you*’

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¹⁰ Mark 9:24