

## Thomas: Witness of the Resurrection

The amount we know about each of the 12 apostles varies hugely. At one end of the scale is Peter, who features prominently in all of the gospels and is well known as the forceful though fallible pillar of the early church. At the other end of the scale is Bartholomew: we know his name but pretty well nothing else about him. Then in between is, someone, like Thomas – about whom we just get a few glimpses, but enough for to make him seem quite an individual, intriguing and for me anyway a very human and sympathetic character.

To start with there is his unusual name: Thomas called Didymus, in older Bibles he's referred to as Thomas Didymus. Didymus is a Greek word that means Twin. But that's strange because Thomas is also a Greek word derived from the Aramaic word Toma whose root means 'twin'. Thomas Didymus is a tautology. It makes him sound like a copy of himself: twin twin.

We first meet Thomas the twin in John's gospel chapter 11. Jesus has just heard of Lazarus's death and is proposing to go to Bethany to meet with the sisters Martha and Mary. It is a dangerous situation, where the disciples know Jesus will face opposition, and Thomas says to the others: "let us also go that we may die with him." What sort of a statement is that, I wonder? Is he being courageous: "if Jesus is in danger we will fight for him?" Or is he being pessimistic: "it's all going to end in tears so let's just get it over with!" "Let's also go that we may die with him."

Thomas's voice is heard a second time in chapter 14. The occasion is the last supper, and Jesus is explaining to the disciples that he must leave them to go to the Father. Jesus tells the disciples that they know the way to the place where he is going. But Thomas interrupts: "Lord we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Is Thomas the only one bold enough to speak out? Or is he just slower to catch on? There's this mixture of seeming yes, unafraid to say what he thinks, but on the other hand the sense that he hasn't got quite as strong a grasp of it as some of the others. "Lord we don't know where you are going so how can we know the way?"

But Thomas's most famous appearance is in our passage tonight. Verse 24 tells us that for some reason, Thomas the Twin wasn't with the other disciples on that crucial first evening of the new week, the evening of resurrection. Again, I wonder why not? What made him the odd one out? Was he braver than the rest...and so didn't feel he needed to hide behind locked doors for fear of the Jews? Or did he feel that his pessimistic intuitions about the whole Jesus movement had finally come true?

The other disciples tell him plainly: "we have seen the Lord". But Thomas is characteristically unimpressed. "Unless I see the nail marks and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." And here, Thomas elicits our sympathy. Because most of us would have said something similar. We can well understand that he wants to see the evidence. Thomas demonstrates a commendably modern scepticism towards stories of people rising from the dead.

A week later, the disciples are back together in the same house. It is another Sunday evening, and this time Thomas is with them. Again the doors are locked. And again, just as he had done on Easter Sunday, Jesus appears among them. He gives them all the same Easter greeting: "peace be with you". But then he turns to Thomas the Twin.

I am struck by just how generously Jesus speaks to Thomas. He doesn't say: "so where were you last week then pal?" or "isn't it about time you caught up with the others?" No he simply addresses Thomas's request for evidence. You wanted to see the nail marks – here they are. You wanted to touch the holes in my wrists, go ahead. You asked to put your hand into my wounded side – here it is. Stop doubting and believe. Jesus addresses the particular needs of this man Thomas with his mixture of loyalty and pessimism, courage and doubt, faithfulness and scepticism – he attends personally to this very individual Twin.

I'm intrigued by what happened next. Did Thomas actually touch Jesus's nail wounds and did he actually place his hand in the wounded side? There is no evidence that he did. Maybe in the company of the risen Jesus, the actually touching turns out not to be so important after all...perhaps what matters is responding to Jesus's remarkable, healing, challenging and transforming presence.

Because that is what Thomas actually does. He falls down and worships: "my Lord and my God". These are heartfelt words of loving acceptance and humble obedience. And they are the strongest affirmation of faith in Jesus that we get anywhere in John's gospel or indeed anywhere else in the four gospels.

That is really where the encounter of Thomas with Jesus ends. But it is followed by some words of Jesus which are said not so much to Thomas as to those of us that come after him. "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Now you could read this as a rebuke to Thomas. Jesus could be heard as telling Thomas off for having demanded physical evidence of his rising from the dead. But this would be out of character with Jesus's warm acquiescence to Thomas's request a little earlier. I think this is simply a recognition by Jesus that that later generations of disciples will not be able to have the first hand visual confirmation of the resurrection that the first generation of disciples were privileged to have.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Now this calls for a bit of reflection. Because suspicious readers of the biblical text will smell a rat here. It could seem as if St. John is writing up his account in such a way as to encourage from his readers a faith and a trust for which they have no adequate grounds. To paraphrase it a bit, "Thomas saw and believed, you aren't going to see anything, but how wonderful if you believe like he did." And then faith starts to sound like belief in things that are unlikely, or unreasonable or downright impossible.

Well that's the kind of criticism of the whole Christian enterprise that is articulated by some of today's new atheists. So Richard Dawkins, for example, says: "Faith is the great cop-out, [it is] the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence...Faith is blind trust, in the absence of evidence, in the teeth of evidence." For Dawkins, there is pure reason on the one hand, and blind faith on the other. Faith is the perverse decision to trust things that are unreasonable, like believing that a dead man has risen from the dead.

But let's be clear. That isn't what Christians mean by faith. Faith for us is knowing and believing the truth about Jesus Christ and committing oneself to him. Faith begins with the conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence. It goes with the data of our senses and experience not perversely against it. That is why Thomas the Twin is a model of faith. He is genuinely open to allowing his beliefs to be formed by the

evidence of his eyes. As a result, he's able to respond to Jesus with a level of trust and commitment that exceeds that of his fellows. Thomas's faith completes his reason; it doesn't negate it.

Of course, we weren't there to see the risen Jesus with Thomas. But our faith builds on the testimony of Thomas and of the other disciples. It takes into account the circumstances of the empty tomb. It takes seriously the convictions that inspired the early Christian martyrs. It attends to the inner witness of our own spirits. Amongst other things, St. Thomas became the patron saint of architects and builders. I don't know what that says about physical buildings, but it suggests a faith that is built on well constructed foundations. Christian faith is not at all the blind, unreasonable faith that Dawkins caricatures and then critiques.

Yet, once we do believe, when we do have faith in Jesus, it will transform us, it will transform the whole of us, it will even transform the way we reason and what we think is reasonable. Believers see the world differently. We no longer see this earth as a place that is left to its own devices to run according to its own laws with no particular purpose or meaning or goal. Instead, belief in the resurrection leads us to see that God is at work in our world to restore and re-create all things. Once, like Thomas, we believe, we will start to experience a very profound turning around morally, spiritually, intellectually. Our faith will work on our imaginations to purge them from illusions that see this world as orientated only towards death. It will free us to see to perceive the world as it really is, as the arena of God's extraordinarily creative and life-giving resurrection power. As the apostle Peter puts it so beautifully: "though you have not seen him, you love him, even though you do not see him now, yet you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy".

Well we must begin to draw to a close. Tonight we have been thinking about Thomas, the quirky, individual Thomas, doubting Thomas, surprisingly modern Thomas. We've been thinking about how Thomas encountered Jesus on a Sunday evening after Easter. And so perhaps, you and I might encounter Jesus tonight, another Sunday evening after Easter many hundreds of years later.

Whoever we are, Jesus longs to meet with us. It doesn't matter whether we are a Thomas, or a Peter or a John, or a Martha or one of the Marys. What matters is that you come before Jesus as you are...as you know yourself. As with Thomas, Jesus is interested in your real self...the self that is less than perfect, with a chip on its shoulder, the self that always feels a bit left out, the one that wishes it was better than it was but isn't. This is the self which God longs to meet and to heal and transform.

It is significant, perhaps that the words Jesus says to Thomas are not "proof to you" but "peace to you". Peace, shalom, the richness and fulness of life. In the Jewish understanding, Peace connotes 'completeness'. It is mediated by the kind of 'completing' that you might find in the best 'one to one' relationship – which seems appropriate for Thomas the Twin. It is that peace which Jesus breathes upon his disciples in the upper room, that he invites them to share with the world, and that he wants to share with us.

Thomas's encounter with Jesus is a profoundly transforming experience. So is an encounter with the risen Christ for any of us today. Thomas's words to Jesus are profound, powerful and humble, "My Lord and my God". Blessed are all those, all of us, who can say those same words today. Amen.