

DOUBT AND FAITH

John 20:24-31

Our reading today is all about doubt and how that doubt can turn into faith and belief – belief in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ after his crucifixion on Good Friday and belief in who he is, the Son of God. I think that these events show that the evidence for the resurrection was overwhelming, indeed incontrovertible. So as we look at this scripture together you can find the main text on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

Jesus's encounter with Thomas here is fundamental to our understanding of the way that first Christians came to know and understand the resurrection. Some writers have suggested that the post resurrection appearances of Jesus were visions or hallucinations, but large groups of people don't simultaneously share exactly the same hallucination. Other writers suggest that at first there was no thought of a resurrection, but that bit by bit the apostles became familiar with the thought. It's suggested that eventually they built up more and more circumstantial tales until the whole church was convinced. Of course the disciples at first had no idea of a resurrection. That is perfectly clear. But there was no gradual acceptance of the idea of the resurrection with more and more "appearances" being manufactured. The plain fact is that all told we read of five appearances on the one day (to Mary Magdalene, to the women, to the two on the way to Emmaus, to Peter, and to the ten disciples). Then there are five more appearances spread out over forty days, and after that no more with the exception of the appearance to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road.

This is no gradual building up of "appearances" but rather the reverse. Appearances were progressively restricted, not built up. Moreover, as Thomas makes abundantly clear in today's reading, the appearances were not at first welcomed. They were resisted as idle talk, and those who had not actually seen Jesus for themselves refused point blank to

accept the stories. Only the plainest of evidence could have convinced a sceptic like Thomas and indeed the other disciples. But convinced they all were, including Thomas, which shows us that the evidence was overwhelming.

So, let's look at this passage in more detail, beginning with verses 24 and 25:

“Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."” (verses 24-25)

Verse 24 sets the scene. Thomas is described as one of the Twelve, and as the one called “Didymus” which means “twin”. We’ve come across him before when we were looking at chapter 11 of John’s Gospel when Jesus was going to raise Lazarus, at which time he was apparently willing to die with Jesus (John 11:6). We’re told that he was not with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared to them. No reason is given, and there is neither praise nor blame for his absence.

In verse 25, the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen Jesus, and found their statement met with blank incredulity. Thomas demands both visual and tactile proof before he will believe. Unless he can both see the nail prints and put his finger into them and feel Jesus’s side where the spear thrust pierced him, he absolutely won’t believe. No scepticism could be more thoroughgoing than this, and it is perhaps worth noting that nobody else in the New Testament makes demands quite as strong as these before believing. Although we must remember that the other disciples didn’t really believe that Jesus was actually the resurrected Christ until they saw his hands and his side as Giles told us last week.

Thomas’s demands are often taken as indicating that Thomas was of a more sceptical turn of mind than the others, and, of course, he may have been. But another possibility is that he was so shocked by the tragedy of the crucifixion that he did not find it easy to think of its

consequences as having been completely annulled. His preoccupation with the wounds of Jesus tends to support this view. In any event his demands for a very high standard of proof have led to him being forever labelled ‘doubting Thomas’.

Do you ever have doubts about your faith? Before I became a Christian I had lots of doubts and questions, but I found these were answered by confronting the evidence from God’s creation all around us and the evidence of the historical reality of the Gospel accounts. For me, the evidence these offer was so overwhelming that I could no longer continue in my doubts and I encountered the risen Lord.

Let’s move on to look at verses 26 and 27:

“A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."” (verses 26-27)

So, if we ever have doubts about our faith, we need to go to Jesus and ask him to reveal himself to us, just as he did to the disciples in our reading today. We need to come face to face with the reality of our risen living Lord and be convinced by the evidence contained in Christ’s revelation to us – His word, the Bible.

As we saw, the disciples were meeting together again on the next Sunday evening after the first Easter Day. The disciples were again gathered indoors, exactly as on the first Easter Sunday, except that this time Thomas was part of the assembly. As before, the doors were locked – the text uses the same expression as in verse 19, so the disciples are obviously still scared of the Jewish authorities. As before, Jesus came among them and gave them the usual greeting. John seems to be at pains to make clear that all was just as it had been on the first Easter Sunday.

After the greeting Jesus addressed himself to his hard-headed and sceptical disciple Thomas. With some rather unexpected vocabulary he invites Thomas to carry out the tests Thomas himself had specified, to put his finger into the nail prints and his hand into the

side. Jesus concludes by urging Thomas to cease being an unbeliever and to become a believer.

Let's see what happened in verses 28 and 29:

"Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (verses 28-29)

So, Thomas wasn't such a sceptic as he thought he was. At the sight of Jesus all his doubts vanished and he acclaimed Jesus as his Lord and God in a very personal confession of faith without needing to apply any of his tests. It's very possible that it was the words of Jesus more than anything that convinced Thomas, for they showed that Jesus was perfectly aware of what Thomas had laid down as his demands whilst Jesus was not physically present. How could Jesus have known apart from his supernatural powers, powers that are only manifest in our Lord and God.

Thomas gave utterance to his newfound faith in the memorable words, "My Lord and my God!" If, as many scholars think, chapter 21 was added by John as a later afterthought, Thomas's words are the last statement of Jesus that John originally recorded, and it fits well with the way John begins his gospel:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1 NIV)

John's account has come full circle in his pronouncements of who Jesus is.

So, let's put aside any doubts we might have, accept the evidence before us and believe – believe that Jesus is the Christ, our Lord and Master.

Thomas is the first person to address Jesus as "my God". It marks a real leap of faith. In the moment that he came to see that Jesus was indeed risen from the dead Thomas came to see something of what that implied. Mere men don't rise from the dead. Jesus, the One who was now so obviously alive, although he had died, needed to be addressed in special terms of adoring worship.

In verse 29, Jesus addresses a word of approval to Thomas, but one that goes far beyond Thomas to those who had not required so much evidence before believing. Thomas believed on the basis of sight: he saw Jesus and believed. Some scholars think that Jesus's words are a rebuke to Thomas. I believe that's correct, but it's not a harsh rebuke, rather a gentle admonition.

After all Thomas has believed on the basis of what he has seen, but this is also true of the rest of the disciples as Giles told us last week. They were reluctant to accept the testimony of Mary and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and only really believed when Jesus appeared to them. But, Jesus does pronounce a blessing on those who have believed without seeing. At the time the words were spoken this would not have been a large number, but perhaps not all the first Christians were as sceptical as Thomas or even the other disciples. And, of course, the words will refer as well to all those who in the future would follow in the same way. There is a special blessing for those possessed of a faith that can trust absolutely and that does not need to "see" or "touch and feel" at every turn.

Let's move on to look at what were perhaps the final words of John's original draft of his gospel:

"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (verses 30-31)

In verse 30 John makes it clear that he has been selective. He has not by any means written all that he knows about Jesus. There were many other "signs" or miracles that Jesus did. John has written what served his purpose, but he has deliberately omitted many things. He speaks of the signs as having been done "in the presence of his disciples"; that is to say, the disciples were witnesses of them. This way of putting it reminds us of a characteristic emphasis throughout this Gospel. Though John does not choose to use the term "witness" in this verse, his choice of words reminds us that adequate "witness" is borne to the things of which he writes.

In verse 31, John gives us the purpose of his book, the purpose that he has had firmly in mind from the beginning. He tells us that the purpose of his writing is that people may believe. His purpose is evangelistic, he wants to bring people to faith in Christ, although I think he's also intending to deepen and nourish the faith of those who are already believers. John doesn't mean that this faith should be a vague trust. No, he means that we must have faith that Christ is the Messiah, the Son of God. John believes and asserts that Christ is the very incarnation of God, that's why he finishes with the words of Thomas proclaiming the divinity of Christ. John believes and asserts that faith is not an end in itself but a means of bringing people life, life in Christ's name. For John real life is something which is only available to us through Christ. This life is an abundant life only available to us in and through Christ, it is Christ's gift. As John has already recorded in chapter 3:

“that everyone who believes in [Jesus] may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:15-16 NIV)

and

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.” (John 3:36 NIV)

So as we move beyond Easter Sunday, let's remember and take to heart these words of Jesus recorded by John. We can be sceptical like Thomas, but we have before us the clear evidence for Christ's death and resurrection recorded in the gospels and in secular writings, so like Thomas nearly 2,000 years ago let us believe, let us turn to Christ in faith, real true faith, and fall down in worship of our Lord and our God.

Lets just close with a few words of prayer. Father open our eyes even now this morning to see the truth about your son Jesus Christ and who he is – our Lord and our God. Let us turn to him in a complete and true faith and accept the gift which he uniquely brings – eternal life in your eternal kingdom.