

Thursday 16th July 2020

“Now Thomas (also known as 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.’

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.’”

John 20:24-27

Thomas – “Doubting Thomas” as posterity has dubbed him – refused to believe the other disciples when they told him that, shortly after his death, Jesus had appeared to them in person. Let’s be honest, his was a perfectly sane and normal reaction – a very human reaction with which I am sure many of us can identify. Rather than criticising Thomas for his lack of faith, let us look back to earlier in the Gospel of John to the point when Jesus announced that he was going to Bethany to “awaken” Lazarus. It was clear that this was a potentially dangerous move, as Jesus was likely to meet a hostile welcome from Jews who had recently tried to stone him (John 11:8). Thomas’s reaction, “Let us go, that we may die with him.” (John 11:16), shows faith and courage.

Now put yourself in Thomas’s shoes a short while later, soon after Jesus has been put on trial and crucified as a criminal by the Romans. The Messiah, the hope of the world, in whom Thomas had so much faith, was no more. One thing that we sometimes tend to ignore, is that Jesus’ death was a huge shock to the disciples. It is very easy for us, with the benefit of hindsight, to view Jesus’s death and resurrection as a “package”, inseparable from each other, the resurrection following on inevitably as foretold by scripture and referred to by Jesus. But the apostles were not Christians; they were Jews looking for a Messiah – the promised leader who would usher in a new kingdom. His death must have absolutely shattered them. In that sense, Thomas’s reaction is the most credible, the most human reaction of all.

Thomas is not some gloomy Eeyore – this is a man who trusted and followed Jesus; he was a man whose world had completely fallen apart. He dared not believe that Jesus was alive again lest he suffer the disappointment of losing him again should the rumours prove not to be true.

And how does Jesus react? Does he chastise Thomas for his lack of faith? No, he meets him where Thomas needs him and offers Thomas what he asks for: his hands and his side to feel. When he does, Thomas believes again and joyfully cries “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas, I am sure, wanted to believe but could not. Jesus, in his compassion, reached out and helped him to believe once more. Faith is a gift from God. It is not something we can muster up for ourselves. It is only when we realise our inadequacy, when we reject any notion of self-sufficiency, that we allow God to work in our lives.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Ephesians 2:8-9