

SERMON FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER – YEAR C

Heavenly Father, give us faith to receive your word, understanding to know what it means, and the will to put it into practice; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This week we celebrate the second Sunday of Easter which is often referred to as ‘Low Sunday’, not because our congregations can be quite low in numbers this weekend, but because our celebration of Easter is somewhat subdued compared to the rousing nature of our celebration on Easter Day itself. In our three-year cycle of readings on this Sunday we have the same Gospel reading and it’s the well-known story of the disciple Thomas and his coming to faith and belief in the risen Lord. Unfortunately, throughout the ages, Thomas has been given something of a bad name I believe, because while Thomas has come to be known to us through the title “Doubting Thomas”, I would like to suggest that he is in fact anything but.

If we look at our Gospel reading for today, we see the second and third appearances of the risen Jesus in John’s gospel. The first appearance in John was to Mary Magdalene in the garden outside Jesus’ tomb, where Mary thinks Jesus is the gardener. In the reading before us, Jesus appears to the disciples on the evening of Easter Day and he appears amongst them, assures them that God’s peace is among them and also bestows on them the gift of the Holy Spirit in John’s version of Pentecost.

We are told that Thomas was not with the other disciples when this second appearance happens, which always leads me to wonder where Thomas was. We’re told that the disciples are locked in a room together for fear of the Jews and they were probably quite right to be a bit frightened. Not two days before they had seen their leader betrayed, tried and brutally executed, and they were no doubt wondering whether the authorities, both religious and secular, would be coming after them next.

But Thomas is not there. I often wonder whether Thomas might have been out seeking information, trying to find out whether in fact the authorities were coming after the rest of Jesus’ disciples. Or perhaps he was out getting food and provisions for the remaining disciples. Or perhaps he was hiding too, just not with the other 10. I would like to think the best of Thomas and would hope that he wasn’t frightened and that he was out doing something. Given that Church tradition holds that Thomas travelled all the way to India with the gospel, further than any other Apostle, I wonder if doubting Thomas was perhaps brave Thomas.

When Thomas does come back the other disciples say to him, “We have seen the Lord”, but Thomas refuses to believe them until he sees the risen Lord for himself and sees the physical proofs of Jesus resurrected body. And so, he doubts, or more accurately, lacks faith. And yet if you look at the other disciples, they were no different. All the gospels suggest that the disciples struggle to come to believe in the resurrection.

In fact, in Luke it says that even when the disciples saw Jesus, some still doubted. And if we look at John's account, the other 10 disciples have already been told by Mary Magdalen that the Lord has risen, so they are absolutely no different to Thomas. Thomas hears the word from the other 10 disciples and doesn't believe, but the other 10 disciples heard the same word from Mary and didn't believe themselves, so Thomas is no greater doubter than any of the other disciples.

But when he sees the risen Lord and when Jesus offers Thomas the opportunity to put his fingers in the holes in his hand and put his hand in Jesus' side, Thomas comes to a greater statement of faith than any of the other disciples when he exclaims, "My Lord and my God." So perhaps Thomas shouldn't be called doubting Thomas but actually confessing Thomas. One interesting thing to note is that we're not told whether Thomas put his fingers in the marks of Jesus' hands or put his hand in Jesus side, even though has often been depicted in art through the centuries. And an interesting aspect of John's exclamation, "My Lord and My God" is that John's Gospel was written during the reign of the Emperor Domitian, who required people to address him as "My Lord and my God." So it has been suggested that Thomas and John the Evangelist are perhaps making a rather pointed political statement about who truly is "Lord and God" and it isn't the Emperor or anyone or anything else who we might give our allegiance to and that only Jesus is worthy to be called our Lord and God.

The other thing that I really enjoy about the story of Thomas is that he is portrayed as being a good disciple, even though preachers throughout the centuries have not been as kind to him. His unwillingness to acknowledge the witness of his fellow disciples, his determination to see Jesus himself and his coming to faith later than the other disciples have often been described as spiritual failings and as signs of feeble faith.

But like Thomas, I think all of us have doubts along the way and often our doubts and our questions can eventually lead us to a stronger and more profound faith. Thomas shows us that faith isn't always straightforward and that it's okay to have questions and it's okay to search and to look for answers. Thomas is a reminder coming to faith is a journey, not a destination, and that all of us are at different points on that journey of faith. And that's okay. And the other aspect of Thomas' story that I'm thankful for is that Thomas' faith community allowed him to doubt. In spite of his doubts, Thomas was allowed by his fellow disciples to answer his own questions in his own time.

So, today's gospel reading, coming a week after our great celebrations of Easter, is a wonderful reminder to us that we need to be exploring and discovering our faith all the time. We need to be walking with God in the knowledge that the presence of the risen Jesus is with us, even at times when faith is a struggle but also at those times when faith comes to us just like it did for Faithful Thomas.