

John 20 24-29 (Hab 2 1-4 & Eph 2 19-end) St M & AA 8.30 & 10am 3/7/22

May I speak in the name of the father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Despite the fact we are now in Ordinary Time, today our Gospel reading plunges us back to Easter Sunday. Sadly this reading is used by some sections of the church as a bit of a beating stick for those who may dare to question or even doubt. However for me Thomas is of great importance and essential to a living faith, a questioning and active faith.

A question to ask is 'Do you believe in miracles?' That is, do you believe in acts of God? I hope most of us here would probably say yes to a belief in miracles. However if I were to ask how many miracles you had actually seen, then the responses would probably be something like the birth of a baby, life itself, or the wonders of a couple celebrating their diamond wedding. Maybe it's a miracle how a single mum juggles two low income jobs in order to feed her family or maybe now you've retired your so busy you don't know how you ever managed to work or maybe it's a miracle you've completed your tax form!

But when I say miracle in today's context, I mean those things which are contrary to human possibility, events which are beyond any natural explanation. We may still say yes, however most people now begin to feel a little uncertain, because this sort of miracle doesn't happen every day, in fact they are very rare and when they do happen they are hard to believe precisely because they are rare and because we cannot explain them. Even in the Bible they are very rare.

Jesus' resurrection is exactly that sort of miracle, because it is unexplainable by human or natural means. The crucifixion we talk about more freely than resurrection, in fact we can go through many theories and gory descriptions even down to the devastating biological effects on the body and it struggles to survive, but how often do we talk about the resurrection in great depth; the answer is very rarely. The pressure within a church community to say yes to miracles can be immense, but for those strong enough to admit a tinge of doubt then they are in good company, because not only did Thomas doubt, but Peter, James, Matthew, Bartholomew and Simon the Zealot were all unsure that first Easter Sunday. However the story of Thomas is more than at first meets the eye.

Thomas first appears biblically in John 11. Lazarus has died in Bethany, a village on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and when Jesus decides to set off from Jericho to Bethany the disciples remind Jesus that the last time Jesus was in Jerusalem the leaders tried to stone him to death. Despite the disciples concern and reticence, Jesus is determined to go, and who steps forwards in support.... Thomas, declaring **“Let us go also, that we may die with him”**. This is so courageous. Thomas aware of the real dangers that the Jewish leaders posed to Jesus and by association to them, never the less is saying if they kill him they will have to kill me too. Thomas steps forward and by doing so in such circumstance shows loyalty in a desperate situation and a willingness to sacrifice himself, here is total commitment, and more than anything here is love.

Thomas is mentioned one other time in John's Gospel in chapter 14 just prior to the crucifixion. On the Thursday night in the upper room, Jesus has washed the disciple's feet, Judas has left, and the remaining disciples gather round Jesus, and Jesus declares **‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also be where I am. You know the way to the place I am going.’**

Thomas listening intently to talk of coming and going to a place where Jesus is going but no name or route given to rooms in a house not yet visited by them, for Thomas there is no hiding his none understanding behind embarrassing silence, and I suspect to the utter relief of the other disciples Thomas courageously steps forward once more and speaks out **“Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”** Thomas was not going to commit himself to something he didn't understand, even if others did.

Thomas was not going to have a blind faith in anything; he was not going to be railroaded into something he didn't understand. Thomas' faith was a faith of deep thought, reflection and personal struggle. Up to the eve of crucifixion the picture of Thomas is that of a brave man; loyal, deeply committed, devoted to Jesus to the point of laying down his life; a man honest about his confusion, his doubts and his fears and who expects proper answers to his questions.

Therefore what follows is the biggest crisis of Thomas' life, and it is our failure today if we tend to forget what it really was like that first Easter morning.

Remember the question posed this morning? 'Do we believe in miracles not the human ones but the very acts of God?' Most of us here this morning will have lost a special someone to death, and understand the shock, numbness and grief that is felt. How would you have felt at that point to be told by a close friend or family members that your special someone one has been seen and is risen to new life; everyone is talking about it and seemingly you are the only one left out of the loop! Would you believe it honestly? I think my first reaction would be a deep hurt that anyone could say such things when they would know my grieving; then maybe it would feel like a cruel sick joke. You may all be feeling differently as grief is such a varied process for all of us. So the next question is ...'What would it take for us to believe?'

None of the disciples believed it at first even though Jesus had told them he would be put to death and then be raised to life, they didn't understand. Only the Jewish authorities thought something might happen that's why they got the Romans to seal the tomb. The women attending the tomb to finish off the embalming of Jesus body uncompleted on the Friday because of the imminent Sabbath; were expecting a body, not an empty tomb. Even then their reaction was that the body had either been moved or according to John stolen, not resurrected. In Mark's Gospel we are told that even after the angel explains to the women what had happened they fled in fear and Luke says that even when the women told the apostles what had happened **"They did not believe the women, for their words seemed like nonsense"**.

No one rises from the dead ...not after three days ... not after being scourged ... not after being crucified for over six hours.....not after having a sword pierce his side to check he was dead.....not after a hundred pounds of spices have covered your body.....not after being wrapped in a burial cloth.....not after being placed in a tomb. Mark tells us **"When they heard Jesus was alive....they did not believe it"**. Well come on who would have believed it with any integrity or credibility?

The Gospel of John tells us that when Jesus appeared in the midst of them on the Sunday evening Thomas wasn't present. Why Thomas wasn't present we

are not told, but all the disciples were mourning the death of Jesus, and people react in different ways to bereavement. Some people need to be with friends, to talk it through, to be near people, others want to be alone, to be with their own thoughts and memories. If as it appears from earlier that Thomas had understood more than the other disciples what was to happen in Jerusalem than it is possible that Thomas felt the pain of Jesus death even more. All that Thomas had, he had given to Jesus, yet Jesus had died.

Thomas still loves Jesus, he still cares, he still wants to believe, but his heart is broken. Thomas' doubting is not sinful, he wants to believe, but he has hit rock bottom. All of us have I expect been at this place at some point in our lives, so why should we be hard on him when Jesus wasn't!. Yes Jesus said **"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."** But Jesus didn't turn his back on Thomas, Jesus loved Thomas so much that he made a point of coming back when Thomas was there, to show him that all that Thomas had believed and hoped for was indeed true.

Thomas may have doubted but that does not make him an unbeliever. His doubts come from utter devotion for there is no doubt like the doubt of a broken heart. Thomas had no doubt in the miracles he had witnessed Jesus perform, but this one just seemed so big, and he wasn't there, he needed to see, can any of us blame him. No, for sometimes we too just need to see for ourselves, he had to be sure it was the same Jesus that he had seen die.

Some people can believe on the testimony of others, but Thomas needed to own his faith. **"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."** tells us far more than Thomas' doubt; it tells us Thomas will not be swayed by an interloper, for here is a man who has immense love and devotion devotion to Jesus. There is expressing sorrow, pain and most importantly that tiny grain of hope and for which Jesus searches Thomas out.

Thomas is a gift to all of us, and an inspiration for all of us to truly own our faith, for when we too have doubts we have the assurance that despite our uncertainties and fears if we have hope in Jesus, Jesus will search us out too.

Thanks be to God.