

Today's Gospel reading describes the disciples meeting with the Risen Jesus behind doors that are 'shut and locked' because of 'fear'. It has a striking resonance with the situation many of us find ourselves in today, in this period of lockdown. But whilst the disciples huddled together for self-preservation today's locked doors are for the safety of our whole community.

This resonance does, however, probably mean that we are well able to imagine what the disciples felt like being locked in that room. I'm sure the disciples would have been in a state of shock at the events of the previous few days which had culminated in the horrific death of Jesus, their friend and teacher. They would also have been fearing for their own lives as followers of Jesus. So, how mind-blowing, how comforting, how wonderful, how affirming to have Jesus appear in their midst and greet them! But this is a story of two halves – you see in the first half there is someone missing – and that someone is Thomas, one of the disciples. For some reason we do not know, he wasn't there.... Whatever the reason, and we could speculate indefinitely on what that reason may have been – I am sure that Thomas must have felt that he had really missed out. He had missed out on the encounter the women had had at the tomb. He had missed that first encounter with the risen Jesus that the rest of the disciples had experienced in that locked room. And when the other disciples told him what they had experienced how do you think Thomas felt? Do you think he was sceptical? Did he not want to appear gullible? Or, do you think he was just feeling really left out, even hurt?

We are told that Thomas states that, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hand, and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe"; and this statement is often portrayed as proof that Thomas lacked faith. But Thomas was not asking for special treatment. His friends testified that Jesus was alive because they had seen those very wounds! They testified to Thomas on the basis of their personal encounters with the risen Jesus. Thomas merely asked for the same proof.

Thomas has sometimes been pilloried for his supposed lack of faith. The epithet 'doubting' has been attached to his name throughout history so most people recognise him as 'doubting Thomas', but I would like to suggest that this really isn't fair. The NT word translated as faith has a wider meaning than we perhaps understand today – it meant 'to be persuaded'. So I can say that I am persuaded that God loves me and you, that I am persuaded of the reality of who Jesus is and what he has done for me, and that somehow, miraculously, he can be with me even in a locked room and that his presence helps me to overcome my fears So, does this mean that I have faith? Well yes, I think it does – I do have faith, I would say a strong faith - but that doesn't mean I never have questions or doubts. Can we ask the question, "Is it ever right to doubt God?" and, "Is there any place for honest doubts and questions?" I think the answer is yes, yes when we don't understand what is happening and where is God in this situation that is challenging us..... for example when we are in the midst of a catastrophe, a natural disaster, an unexpected bereavement, a serious, debilitating illness..... or Covid 19.

But asking questions of God doesn't mean we have lost faith in Him but rather that we don't understand; just like Thomas didn't understand. And, I believe we don't

need to worry about this. You see Thomas didn't **need** to understand, because Jesus **did** understand. And Jesus knew exactly what Thomas needed – so he graciously and gently allows Thomas one of the **biggest 'penny drop' moments in scripture**. Jesus appears again in that locked room and this time Thomas is there, and he says to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe".

Suddenly, all of Jesus' teaching and conversations and actions make sense to Thomas and he is literally bowled over by the enormity of what he has come to understand as he exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" This is perhaps the climactic moment of John's gospel, as Thomas acknowledges who Jesus truly is.

But we do need to understand that Thomas was able to express this because he had listened well to what Jesus had tried to teach his disciples. He had heard Jesus say, for example, "I am the resurrection and the life"(11:25), and, "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me"(14:11),he had asked questions like, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14:5) and hears Jesus' answer, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (14:6-7). All these words must have suddenly really made sense to Thomas; the **'penny finally drops'** and the understanding of the reality of who Jesus truly is must shape everything else in Thomas' life.

Indeed the impact of Thomas' encounter with the risen Christ in this story was enormous and twofold: –

1. Jesus gave him the gift of faith – and it is a gift that we too can ask for or for an increase in.
2. Thomas' encounter gave him belief, confidence and courage.

And, the result was that Thomas, goes on to spend the next 40 years of his life spreading the gospel message as he travels eastwards all the way to India where he finally died (probably martyred) in 72AD.

Perhaps most significantly to us is that in his willingness to be honest about his doubts about the resurrection of Jesus, Thomas has given us this wonderful story of encouragement. **We** have not got the opportunity in this life to see the resurrected Jesus in the flesh and to put our hand in his side ... but Thomas' did this for us, as Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

In Thomas we have a story of encounter, of pilgrimage, of spiritual journey. And I believe that if we are prepared to let the mystery of the story enter our souls, we too can encounter the sacred. This is a story about Thomas opening himself to the possibility of that encounter even in doubt. This is a place we have all been and all return to, and thank goodness we don't call one another by that epithet 'Doubting'. It's sometimes through doubt that we can chew over problems and question tragedies which in turn can help us arrive at new places of possibility. This story cannot be contained. It's a story that breaks through our fear and locked doors and reminds us that we are loved and forgiven and that our lack of faith won't keep Jesus out. Amen