

Sunday 30 April

My Lord and my God

Heavenly Father, may the words of my lips, and the meditation of all our hearts be always pleasing to you our Lord and Redeemer, Amen

There is always one in any group, isn't there. The one lagging behind the others, head down, grumbling or just chuntering away. The awkward one, the one for whom the glass is always half empty. The one who takes things too literally, the 'doubting Thomas'.

Well, I think that Thomas has had a bit of a hard time. And I think that Thomas deserves a much better press than he usually receives. So I want to try to 'rehabilitate' Thomas by looking more closely at the reading we have just heard as well as other encounters in the gospels. And I think all of this may help us understand – or see more clearly – what this means for us as disciples of the risen Lord who can call him, as confidently as Thomas did, my Lord and my God.

The first thing that struck me as I read through today's passage more carefully – from a Thomas perspective – is that the way we (or at least I) have usually made the comparison between faithful disciples and doubting Thomas is rather unfair. In the first part of the reading vv 19 -22 we learn of Jesus' appearance to the disciples and Jesus' commissioning. For some reason about which we are never told, Thomas was not present, so the others come back to tell him about it. And, it seems, he was a bit sceptical. Unconsciously therefore we

tend to make the comparison between faithful and believing disciples and doubting Thomas. But to be fair to Thomas, the disciples had actually seen Jesus and interacted with him. So their experience was completely different to that of Thomas who was being asked to take their word (literally) as gospel. I don't think we can necessarily blame Thomas for asking for a bit more evidence. Comparing the disciples' experience to that of Thomas is not really comparing like with like, it is an 'apples and oranges' comparison.

In fact, if you look at the other gospels' account of this period after Jesus' resurrection, a rather different picture emerges, not least since neither of the other three evangelists single out Thomas at all. It is only John who focuses attention on him. The importance that John ascribes to these encounters of the risen Lord with the disciples is much greater than in the other three gospels, none of which contain anything like the detail provided by John and in all cases 'lump' the eleven together, all of whom are effectively criticised for not believing, and in particular for not believing what the women say they have seen.

Why then is John's version so different? Why is this encounter so significant? After all, this scene has been immortalised subsequently in art, poetry, music because it speaks so profoundly to us. But why? Remember, nothing in John's gospel is casual, no narrative is accidental. Mark is writing in a hurry, Luke is writing for the Gentiles, Matthew for the Jews. But John is uncompromisingly complex. Everything has significance.

In his commentary Tom Wright points out that this passage provides a mirror image of the opening words of the Gospel. Everything has been about the word, the word incarnate in the person of Jesus. 'All these things are written that you may believe that the Messiah, the Son of God is Jesus.

And this is brought into stark relief in Thomas' recognition of Jesus. Up to this moment, no-one has called Jesus God. But Thomas, doubting, dogged, disgruntled Thomas, is the person who appreciates the true significance of what he is able to see and touch: My Lord and my God. This is the climax of John's gospel, and it is for this that Thomas should be remembered. He 'sees' and understands what God has done through the incarnation and resurrection of his only Son for our sake. And this is why this dialogue is practically the culmination of John's gospel.

And I think there is another reason as well for its importance in John's mind. This is widely regarded as one of the later Gospels, so it is highly likely that by this time there would have been few if any left who had met Jesus or even seen or heard him speaking. In this context there is an even more powerful message in the dialogue. And that is to highlight the 'blessing', the privilege if you like of those who have *not* seen yet believed. The contrast is not between Thomas and the disciples (after all they too had not believed until they had seen the Lord), but between Thomas and everyone else. It's perhaps worth remembering that even Paul had to encounter Jesus face to face before he believed!

So John here is trying to encourage and to give confidence to the later generations who believe without seeing, who have not needed to touch the side or the hands of the crucified Jesus in order to proclaim like Thomas, my Lord and my God. A similar message to that in the letter of 1 Peter to build up Christians in northern Asia Minor who were undergoing persecution: verse 8: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy." It's almost as if he is saying how much deeper must your faith be given

that you have not had the first hand witness that we were lucky enough to enjoy.

In these early years, at the beginning of Christianity, some claimed particular prominence on the basis of their witness of the actual disciples. Somehow their teaching was more authentic because they had heard it first hand. Yet what Peter writes in his letter is that there should be no shame in not having seen or witnessed the living Christ. Quite the opposite, the Christians in Asia Minor were having their faith tested in the fire of persecution and yet still held to their faith. Is this not more remarkable?

And what of us? What are we to make of this pivotal encounter? What are the implications for our life as disciples of the risen Lord? In our age, many popular expressions reference this episode – ‘seeing is believing’, ‘I’ll believe it when I see it’ and so on. But these often are used in a context of scepticism – ‘I’ll believe it when I see it, because I don’t think I’ll ever see it and so won’t have to believe – a common problem for football fans for example and also often used by parents in relation to unco-operative offspring...

At the other end of the spectrum is that wonderful scene in the Great Escape in which the near blind Donald Plesance, desperate to be part of the escape, tries to convince the others – “I can see, I can see, I can see perfectly. I think all too often our seeing is of that kind, a rather dim, glaucomic, misty seeing – or as Paul beautifully puts it in 1 Corinthians, we see through a glass darkly.

Instead I think our vision should combine the dual meanings of the word, both the ability to see in the present, but also the imagination of the future – the vision of things to come. Or as one theologian put it, the ability to see the beyond in the midst of life. For as Christians we see things differently. To

paraphrase a familiar prayer, where others see despair, we can see hope; where others see darkness we can see light, where others see doubt, we can see faith. And it is our responsibility to live so that others see why and come to believe. We need to reflect the gospel in our witness every day, as outward and visible signs of the inward and spiritual truth of Jesus as Lord.

Some people come to faith through a blinding revelation – Saul on the Damascus road - , some through a personal encounter with the risen Lord. But that is not the only way to come to faith; it does not have to be love at first sight! We should not expect that or encourage others to expect that.

God is in all things, God is in all of us and it is our responsibility to show God working, to represent the signs of the kingdom so that others can come to share our vision, to share our confident cry that Jesus is our Lord and our God. We need to reflect the light of Christ crucified to others in our relationships, in our daily life so that others may also come to know the glorious transformation of being able to say like Thomas, Jesus is My Lord and my God.

Let me end with a prayer:

Be thou my vision O lord of my heart

Naught be all else to me save that thou art –

Thou my best thought by day or by night

Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light

Be thou my wisdom, thou my true Word

I ever with thee, Thou with me Lord,
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son;
Thou with me dwelling, I with Thee one.
Amen

(MP 51)