

Second Sunday of Easter

JESUS APPEARS TO THOMAS

+ In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

PERSONAL REFLECTION

In your own words ask God to be with you in this time of prayer...

Then take a few moments to reflect on your life in the last few days, and in your own words speak to God about it, asking him to amend what is wrong, and to affirm what is good.

Then say:

Holy God,
holy and strong,
holy and immortal,
have mercy on me.

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Risen Christ,
for whom no door is locked, no entrance barred:
open the doors of our hearts,
that we may seek the good of others
and walk the joyful road of sacrifice and peace,
to the praise of God the Father.
Amen.

READINGS

Read: Acts 2.14 & 22 – 32

Reflect on the reading, imagining the scene, and the change in Peter and the other apostles, no longer frightened and hiding behind closed doors, but bold and confident, challenging the very authorities of whom they had been in fear for their lives.

Say: Psalm 16

Read: John 20.19– end

Reflect on the reading, imagining the scene.

MEDITATION

‘Doubting Thomas’ has become a figure of speech, often used pejoratively to denigrate someone who is reluctant to believe, a sceptic. Today’s gospel reading is, of course, the origin of the phrase. Thomas is one of the twelve who actually gets a mention in the gospels – we’re not told much, but it’s more than we know about most of them. All we know of Thomas personally is that he was a twin – from his nickname ‘Didymus’, meaning ‘twin’. He makes three brief, but important, appearances in the story, and only in St John’s account. His first appearance is when Jesus is about to go to raise Lazarus. Referring to Jesus’ destiny in Jerusalem, he says to the others: ‘Let us also go and die with him.’ (*John 11.16*)

Secondly, after the Last Supper: when Jesus says that he is going to prepare a dwelling place for them in his Father’s house and will return to take them to himself, adding that they know the way that he is taking, Thomas responds, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?’ And this draws from Jesus those wonderful words, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me.’ (*John 14.1-6*). Maybe John gives Thomas space in the story to assure the reader that the apostles were ordinary men, struggling with the kind of questions and doubts that

everyone else has. Thomas seems to say what the others were probably thinking.

And, thirdly, at end of the story he appears again to show that the resurrection is something in which ordinary people can believe. He was missing when Jesus appeared to the others on the evening of Easter Day. Despite their repeated testimony in the upper room with the disciples he says that he will not believe without physical proof – much the same reaction as the rest when they first heard Mary Magdalene’s story. ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will never believe it.’ (*John 20.25*)

William Temple, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, commenting on Thomas’ words about going with Jesus so that they may die with him, describes him as ‘literal, prosaic, tending to see the gloomy side of things. His faith,’ he says, ‘is real, but in need of confirmation; but he is utterly loyal.’ And now, after the resurrection his doubt proceeded from his loyalty and goodwill. Such rigour of disbelief springs from ‘a strong urge to believe, held down by common sense and its habitual dread of disillusionment.’ Thomas wanted to believe – it meant so much too him to believe – that he had to be sure before he gave all.

But on the eighth day, a week after the resurrection, when Jesus again appears to the disciples, seeing was enough. He did not have to touch; seeing how Jesus was now was all the proof that he required, and he responds with a wonderful declaration of faith, ‘My Lord and my God!’

The very ordinariness of the apostles is one of the things that makes the story of the resurrection convincing, and Thomas in a way is Everyman. Many people feel like him – in the Church as well as outside. I think the need to believe, to have faith, is basic to what it means to be human. Without faith life can feel empty and without purpose. Something is missing. I think many people want to believe in God, but aren’t sure. It’s too important to get it wrong, so we wait on the edge, wanting proof. And then there’s the feeling that faith is

a package deal: all or nothing, no room for doubts. The story of Thomas should speak to a cautious generation, to those who want to believe, but aren't sure. Doubt has its part in faith; honest questioning is part of the process of believing. To believe is not to blot out one's doubts, nor to overlook the questions that we all have, but instead to accept that doubts and questions are a normal part of belief, and to work with them. In the parable of the Sower, Jesus talks of the different types of soil into which the seeds of faith fall; it is the good soil that brings forth the harvest – that is, lasting faith, and good soil, where the roots go deep, has to be dug over and prepared if it is to be fruitful. In the same way the ground of our faith has to be prepared, and this includes holding on to our doubts and questions, and not trying to bury them.

Doubts are normal. Both Archbishop Michael Ramsay and Cardinal Basil Hume spoke of their own doubts, and Cardinal Hume saw 'doubt' as the instrument to purify his faith. 'It is only when I begin to doubt,' he said, 'that I really make an honest act of faith.' An act of faith is an expression of commitment, not of intellectual certainty. We may not be sure about every article of faith – who hasn't found themselves wondering about miracles, prayer, life after death – but this does not stop us making a commitment to Jesus, trying to live by his teaching and his values, and seeking to serve our neighbour as he served others.

Faith is making a journey, taking our doubts with us. Staying still nothing changes; if we want to believe we have to take a step. Belief is about commitment and practice, not about a set of propositions with which to agree or disagree. Faith is the accumulation of habits – habits of the heart – that are learnt and reinforced by doing. Belief is more like craftwork than a process of reasoning; often repetitive, simple tasks done again and again: kindness, friendliness, generosity; trying to enrich, ease and aid the lives of others; practising patience and forgiveness. These steps take us along the way of faith, and as we travel we may find that our doubts recede, or are resolved; or we may simply learn to live with them. Either way

they remind us of our limitations and frailties as human beings, of how little we can ever know, and of how wary we should be of unquestioning certainty and the arrogance and intolerance that often goes with it. Taking our doubts along with us as we travel helps us to grow in humility, the most basic, and most Christ-like, of human virtues.

The end of the story of Thomas is lost in legend. It is said that he was an evangelist in India and died there a martyr's death. So in the end perhaps he did die with Jesus, to whom he had committed himself as his Lord and God. Thomas doubted because belief was so important, and he teaches us who also want to believe not to deny our doubts, but to take them with us on our journey. To us, Jesus says, 'Blessed are those who have not seen but have come to believe.'

Pause and reflect.

PRAISE

Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!
He has given us new life and hope.

He has raised Jesus from the dead:
he has claimed us as his own.

He has brought us out of darkness:
he has made us a light to the world.

Christ once raised from the dead dies no more:
death has no more dominion over him.

In dying he died to sin once and for all:
in living he lives to God.

See yourselves therefore as dead to sin
and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

PRAYERS

A time of free prayer and intercession. You may like to use the traditional five-fold pattern:

For the Church

For the World

For family, friends, neighbours and the local community

For the sick and all in need, near and far

For those who have died

At the end:

Merciful Father,
accept my prayers,
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

CONCLUSION

Our Father...

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, now and for ever.
Amen