

## **Sunday 27 April – Second Sunday of Easter**

### **Christine Newmarch**

Late in the evening on Easter Day, the first Easter Day, Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room, but Thomas was not there.

I wonder where he was, whether he had gone out on an errand for the others. That is one possibility, since Judas, who had held the common purse was no more. Or maybe he was in hiding elsewhere. We do not know, but it seems that the others were all there, even those who Luke and Mark tell us had set off to Emmaus, and then rushed back after walking on the road with the man whom they later recognised when he blessed and broke bread with them.

I wonder too why Jesus appeared to his disciples when Thomas was not there. Surely Jesus would have known? My thought is not that Jesus would have wanted to exclude or test Thomas, no, but that he wanted to reassure his disciples as soon as he could, to show them his hands and his side, to bless them with his peace and commission them for service.

As he greeted and spoke to the disciples, there was no hint of recrimination from Jesus, no question of him asking these disciples why they had deserted him, no question about why they were hiding behind locked doors. Jesus understood everything, and simply longed to pour out his love on them afresh.

Jesus' forgiveness for these men was unspoken, implicit and unconditional as he breathed his peace upon them.

The very men who had run away, who could be said to be deserving judgement, who were in need of forgiveness, were now being empowered and commissioned to forgive others.

We are not told how much later Thomas returned. The account reads as though he had only just missed seeing Jesus, only just missed receiving his peace.

No wonder he was rather churlish; it is a very human reaction. Unable to rejoice with the others that Jesus really was alive, unable to accept the news, he must have felt very alone, very much the outsider at that moment.

Little wonder then that he also needed to see and even touch Jesus so he could believe.

Jesus would have known this, would have longed to encourage Thomas, to bring him back into the fellowship of believing with the others, but a week passed before Jesus returned to

invited Thomas to put his finger in his wounded hands and to reach out his hand and put it into his gaping side.

Such a generous invitation to touch his painful wounds.

We are not told whether Thomas did touch Jesus, whether he did put his hand in Jesus' side, or whether the invitation alone was enough to increase his faith. That does not matter. What matters is that Jesus invited Thomas, to be part of him.

[I made a reference here to John's account of the Last Supper where Jesus told Peter that unless he washed his feet he would have no part with him]

And what an invitation. At once, Thomas believed, crying out: My Lord and my God.

[At this point I showed a print and discussed Caravaggio's painting 'The incredulity of Christ']

Amidst this remarkable incident, it is good to notice that there is no rebuke for Thomas, who has been honest about his difficulty in believing. Jesus is gentle with him, and says 'do not be without faith (apistos, in Greek) but with faith (pistos).

Being without faith is quite different from having doubt; doubt is not a sin. Thomas was not asked to repent of his doubt, but encouraged to have faith.

We too are allowed to have doubts and fears, and to bring them to Jesus in prayer, knowing that Jesus longs to breathe his peace on each of us wherever we are in life, however we feel.

The disciples were enlivened and empowered to preach in Jesus' name, and in this morning's account from the Acts of the Apostles, they had become so bold that they refused to stop even when instructed to do so by the temple authorities.

[I made a short reference here to John's mission to the Seven Churches]

Thomas himself travelled far beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire preaching the Gospel, and is traditionally thought to have evangelised the area now within the modern-day state of Kerula in south India.

[At this point I showed a print of Ruben's picture of Thomas as an old man]

Thomas' story shows him crossing the void between not believing and believing, and devoting his life to help others do the same.

Watching the funeral of Pope Francis yesterday, we heard of his humble beginnings and his love for the poor, the marginalised, and all for God's creation. He travelled the world to

encourage the faith of others and to bless them. In return crowds of ordinary people came from far and wide to honour him. Of course, he was a world leader, and it is right that heads of state and their representatives were there, but I suspect that it was the prayers of ordinary people accompanying his coffin on its final journey which means most to him.

And who knows how many of that crowd receiving the sacrament in St Peter's Square may have found renewed faith in that moment.

There are many things we can take from Thomas's story but maybe the most important is that God is always ready to meet us in unexpected ways and give us his peace.

Amen.