

Thomas: an image of hope

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Easter 2: Hoping Thomas – John 20 19-31

There's a long-standing negative perception in the Church about 'Doubting Thomas'. The wonderful thing about this story is that even though John the storyteller might be disgusted with Thomas, he can't stop Jesus simply offering Thomas what he needs for faith.

If you think about it, Thomas's need is a gift to us. We see his unbelief proved wrong. True scientific method is applied; Thomas expounded a theory of unbelief that he wanted to test by a repeatable experiment. The result; unbelief swept aside; bodily resurrection proven by scientific method and Thomas, a sceptic converted by empirical proof.

The other disciples use the same words as Mary Magdalene when she came from the tomb. *"We've seen the Lord."* Like Magdalene, it took a tangible experience of their risen Lord before they could say *"We have seen the Lord."* All Thomas asked was an experience of his own. *"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."*

And Jesus gave him what he needed. *[Jesus] said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not be in disbelief, but believe."* Thomas's need was more important to Jesus than any noble reasons we might want him to have for unquestioning faith. Jesus doesn't run him down; he gives Thomas a sign to enable his belief.

Jesus had done the same for Mary Magdalene at the mouth of the tomb. He said her name to help her break through her incomprehension, and the result was dramatic; she seized hold

of him. When he offered Thomas what he needed, the response was every bit as dramatic; it evoked from Thomas the most powerful, complete confession of Jesus anyone had given in the Gospel: *"My Lord and my God!"* His faith saw Thomas go on to establish churches as far away as south India.

Jesus spoke to Thomas, but actually, his words are very much addressed to you and me; *"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

That's us, isn't it! We are blessed. Jesus reaches out those hands through the Gospel to you and me so that *[we] may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing [we] may have life in his name.*

These are stories of *the* transforming moments in the lives of Jesus' earliest followers. When we read a story and someone touches another, our hand goes out and touches them too, doesn't it. The gospel today is about a transformation that starts with a profound need being met.

So I believe Thomas is an image of *hope*, not of *doubt*.

The other two times we meet Thomas in John's Gospel, we see in him the loyal realist; rather like Puddleglum in C.S. Lewis's book, *The Silver Chair*. We meet Thomas first when Jesus finally turns to that dangerous place, Bethany, where Lazarus is entombed. Thomas... said to his fellow disciples, *Let's go too so we may die with him.* ^{Jn 11:16} He knows how foolish it is to go to Judea, but he won't be left behind.

The next time we meet him is at the last supper. Jesus is saying good-bye to his friends, and he re-assures them: *... if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.*

⁴ *And you know the way to the place where I am going.* ⁵ Thomas said to him, *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How*

can we know the way? Jn 16.3-5

Trying to get it straight: trying to make sure. But not because of doubt. Thomas needs clarity and he needs to understand. What he does is done out of loyalty. Again, to him it all sounds like foolishness, but he won't be left behind.

What drives this determination? Thomas *needs* to **see** to believe – he wants help with his unbelief. But when the opportunity of proof is right under his fingertips, suddenly it seems that he doesn't need to go through with it. The Gospel doesn't tell us that he touched Jesus's wounds in the end. Jesus challenges him: believe, don't doubt, and all at once, Thomas answers "My Lord and my God!" This doesn't spring from doubt: it comes from hope fulfilled at last.

What Thomas manages here is enormous. He moves from his habitual realism and reluctant optimism to genuine hope. What do I mean? Another Palestinian, Marguerite Abdul-Masih says that hope is different from optimism. Hope is centred on God, while optimism is just focussed on reality. Hope says that no matter how bad things may get, every moment we are closer to the coming Kingdom of God. Optimism, on the other hand, just denies facts until it can't any more, then collapses. (Sabeel –

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Thomas stopped having to rely on good old empirical evidence because he could recognise in his Jesus the goodness of God. Suddenly as he looked at his finger above that outstretched hand, he saw his hope poised above the wound. When you know God is so committed to you, you can hope. And that means everything.

When you know the depth of God's commitment, and you hope in that, you will be transformed into a champion of that hope for other people who suffer. You will be able to teach people with integrity that the God who is to be trusted knows the betrayal that they know. You can point to the wounded hands that were

raised and nailed with that betrayal. You can say that those hands seized that betrayal in hope. They and their bearer were raised and honoured by the God to whom they were lifted in hope. And now those hands are our hands: the hands of Christ. Let's look at our own hands for a while in silence.

Amen

St. Thomas the Apostle

"We do not know... how can we know the way?"

Courageous master of the awkward question,

You spoke the words the others dared not say

And cut through their evasion and abstraction.

Oh doubting Thomas, father of my faith,

You put your finger on the nub of things

We cannot love some disembodied wraith,

But flesh and blood must be our king of kings.

Your teaching is to touch, embrace, anoint,

Feel after Him and find Him in the flesh.

Because He loved your awkward counter-point

The Word has heard and granted you your wish.

Oh place my hands with yours, help me divine

The wounded God whose wounds are healing mine.

Malcolm Guite