

## **THOMAS**

Rev 1:4-8; Jn 20:19-31

Thomas has often been given a rather bad press in my view. As we well know, he's generally referred to as 'Doubting Thomas'. But in my mind, he was simply a realist who refused to say he agreed with something when deep down he didn't.

Earlier in John's gospel, in Ch 14, Jesus is speaking to the disciples about His departure and says to them, 'You know the way where I am going'. It is Thomas who is honest enough to say, 'Lord we don't know where you are going, how can we know the way.' And Jesus replies with those well-known words, 'I am the way, the truth and the life'. If it wasn't for Thomas, we might not have had those words in the gospel.

Doubt is generally been seen as the opposite of faith. But the opposite of faith is certainty rather than doubt. Doubt is more like the shadow of faith. Doubt is a about divided heart – some faith alongside some doubt

Doubt is sometimes considered the same as unbelief. But there is an important difference between doubt and unbelief. Unbelief can be described at the condition of the person who could believe but refuses to believe. Doubt, on the other hand is the condition of the person who wants to believe but struggles to do so.

I remember someone saying, 'If you come across a person who says they don't believe in God, ask them, 'Would you like there to be a God?' If their answer is 'No, actually not', one is dealing with an unbeliever; if their answer is 'Yes, I would like there to be a God', one is dealing with a doubter. The doubter wants to believe but struggles; the unbeliever could believe but refuses.

We are told that Thomas was also known as the Twin. That may be because he had an actual twin, but it may also refer to the two sides of his personality – the trusting part and the doubting part. And if we are honest that is true of all of us at times, isn't it?

But this incident shows us that the Lord is sympathetic to the one who sincerely doubts. Jesus doesn't write Thomas off when Thomas can't accept the statements of the other disciples that they have seen the Lord. Rather, Jesus is sympathetic to his doubts and He appears again to the disciples, specifically for the sake of Thomas. And in the end, it is Thomas who is the first person to make that great declaration of faith, 'My Lord and my God.'

So let's not be too harsh on Thomas and let's not be too hard on ourselves in our times of doubt.

But having said that, perhaps I can be so bold as to suggest that there were a couple of ways in which Thomas erred.

The first one is that Thomas failed to realise that there are some things that cannot be proved but are nonetheless very real and true. We must use our reason and common sense, but we need to allow room for mystery. Mystery is not something opposed to human reason; mystery is something beyond human reason. With God there will always be an element of mystery.

The same is true in life generally. Not everything can be nailed down and analysed and proved. Take the love between two people, for example. We all know that such love is something very real, but it cannot be proved using hard evidence. Or take the spirit in a sports team. That spirit is very real but cannot be measured or proved.

Thomas liked to be able to reason things out; to provide empirical proof for things. But he needed to realise that sometimes that is not possible. And that is where faith comes to the fore.

Jesus says to Thomas, 'Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me.' The world says, 'Seeing is believing'. In our faith its often the other way around - believing is seeing.

A second way in which Thomas erred was that he separated himself from the fellowship of the other disciples. Thomas strikes me as an introvert who preferred to think things through on his own, rather than in

the company of others. That is understandable, but the result was that he wasn't there with the others when Jesus appeared to the disciples the first time.

Jesus once said, 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' There is something significant about being together as followers of Jesus. Obviously, we need to develop our faith by ourselves much of the time, but the Lord has given us the fellowship of others as a means of grace – a means of His coming to us and making Himself more real to us. When we separate ourselves from Christian fellowship, we deny ourselves an important gift that God has given us.

Have you noticed that whenever Jesus appeared after His resurrection, it was to a group, rather than individuals on their own? The one exception was Mary outside the tomb. But for the rest it was with two or more people together – the two walking to Emmaus, the disciples in the upper room; the disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee.

If we fail to draw on the benefit that Christian fellowship provides, we are depriving ourselves of an important opportunity for growth. That fellowship may be with just one other person; it may be with a small group; and of course it can, and should, be in the larger gathering as we have here on a Sunday.

The last way in which Thomas erred was that he seems to have failed to remember – to remember all that Jesus had said and done. This was true not just of Thomas but of the other disciples as well. Jesus had told the disciples clearly that He would rise again. They had seen His miracles, particularly His raising of people from the dead. They should not have been surprised at the news that He was alive again.

'Remember' is one of the central words in Scripture. How often are the Israelites not told, 'Remember all that the Lord did for you', especially in their escape from captivity in Egypt. Jesus said to the disciples at the Last Supper, 'Do this to remember me'.

Remember...remember. But maybe the emotions of Thomas and the others were too strong and they allowed those emotions to cloud their reason and their memory. How often, in the midst of difficult times which generate strong emotions, don't we forget? Our emotions overwhelm us and our thinking and we forget – we forget God's promises; we forget God's provision in the past.

One of the best ways to keep memory alive is through gratitude. If we are constantly giving thanks and reminding ourselves of all God's goodness, we are more likely to remember. And that memory enables us to retain a more balanced outlook when we go through difficult times.

We talk about an optimist calling a glass half full and a pessimist calling it half empty. A realist like Thomas says, 'Here is half a glass of water'. But he also needs to recognize that in fellowship with others water can be shared and his glass topped up.

And he needs to remember and give thanks for God's faithfulness and provision; to remember that God is the creator of water and He can top it up at any moment. Indeed God can make it overflow for the blessing of others, as He did with Thomas and the others in the years that followed. And as He desires to do with us.