

Sermon 11 April 2021 'Doubting Thomas'

John 20:19-31

I want to begin with a comment on John's Gospel, from which our reading comes. John is quite different to Matthew, Mark and Luke, referred to as the Synoptic Gospels. To put it quite simply, they are essentially a record of what Jesus said and did. John's Gospel is more of a statement of the identity of Jesus as the Messiah. This is apparent right at the beginning of these books. We have the Nativity narrative at the beginning of Matthew, Mark and Luke, whereas John goes straight into a declaration on the divinity of Jesus. *'So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Son of God.'* John 1:14. This sets the tone for the rest of John. Why is this relevant to today's story?

When Thomas is confronted with the risen Christ, when he sees for himself the wounds in his hands and in his side, he exclaims, 'My Lord and my God!' I think I am right in saying that this was the first time any of the disciples had actually addressed Jesus as 'God,' certainly in John's Gospel. So in a sense, this completes the circle of John's Gospel. It begins with a statement of Jesus's divinity and here, near the end of the Gospel, we have a statement by one of his disciples on the divinity of Jesus.

Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus first appeared to them, and when they tell him about Jesus appearing to them, his response is, 'I won't believe until I have seen and touched the scars of the nails in his hands and the spear in his side.' I believe Thomas speaks for so many of us. He wants tangible proof, and without that tangible proof he is reluctant to believe.

Of course, that is what faith is, believing in something you cannot prove. It can be very difficult. Faith is a lot like life. It too has mountain-top moments and valley moments. The nature of faith is such that no matter how faithfully we live God's word, there will be times when our faith will be like the faith of Thomas in today's gospel reading. It will seem to flicker and threaten to go out on us.

Faith is a lot like the sun. Sometimes it is big and bright and clearly visible in the sky. At other times we can't even see it. It has disappeared behind a layer of clouds and seems to have vanished. We know from experience, however, that the sun is always there. It's just that we can't see it all the time. So faith is born out of experience, and I will come back to that in a moment.

Just a brief comment on Thomas. There is no doubting his love for Jesus. He was the one, who, when Jesus told them that Lazarus was dead and that the disciples should come with him so that he could give them another opportunity to believe in him, said, *'Let's go, and die with Jesus.'* John 11:16. These were words spoken with a sense of foreboding for what's to come.

Thomas was devastated by the death of Jesus. We are not sure why he wasn't with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them. Perhaps he was doing the grocery shopping but more likely he was dealing with his grief on his own. He was an independent character. Independence is fine but we do need others for our succour and support. We cannot either receive or give love in a vacuum, and to paraphrase Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, without love we are nothing.

Part of Paul's independence was that he needed to see for himself; he needed to actually experience the scars of Jesus rather than rely on the word of his fellow disciples. That is quite human. I think many of us would relate to that. I think many of us could attribute our faith to an experience, or even a number of experiences, either of a dramatic nature or not so dramatic. I want to share with you a true story of faith that was born out of quite a dramatic experience.

One of the most remarkable stories to come out of the Second World War is the story of a US Air Force plane that crashed in the Pacific. On board were Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, the famous World War 1 fighter pilot, Lt James Whittaker and a crew of six others.

All eight survived the crash. For the next 21 days they floated in three tiny rubber rafts without food or water. Their only source of strength was a daily prayer service. It consisted of reading from a pocket Bible and praying to God. Lt Whittaker was the only atheist in the group, but not for long.

On the sixth day the men were growing weak and needed food and water badly. After their evening prayer service, they fired off a flare, hoping to attract attention of a ship or plane. But the flare was faulty and fell among the rafts. As it did, it attracted a school of fish. In their excitement, two fish jumped into one of the rafts. The men had their first meal in a week.

The next afternoon the men prayed for water. Shortly after, they were deluged by a rain storm. From that point on, Whittaker became a believer.

On the tenth day, something special happened. After their prayer service, the men confessed their sins aloud. It was a beautiful display of faith and humility.

On the 13th day another remarkable thing happened. A heavy shower of rain passed by, missing the men by some distance. For the first time, Whittaker led the others in prayer. He prayed the rain would return. What happened then he describes in a book he later wrote.

'There are some things that can't be explained by natural law. The wind did not change, but the receding curtain of rain began to move slowly towards us against the wind. We drank and caught a store of water.'

On the 21st day they spotted land. Whittaker manned the oars of his raft. Seven hours later they reached land. As soon as they landed, they knelt down and gave thanks to God.

When Whittaker returned home he wrote a best-selling book about the experience. He also toured the country, sharing his faith with live audiences. The man who started out as an unbeliever became the most ardent believer of all.

Whittaker was very much like Thomas. When he saw the tangible evidence for himself, he no longer doubted. I just love that verse from our reading where Jesus says to Thomas, 'You believe because you have seen me. Happy are those who haven't seen me and believe anyway.' No verse could speak more directly and emphatically to us today than that verse. I am sure Jesus has us in mind when he spoke those words.

I want to finish with a few words from last Wednesday's Word for Today. In addressing this passage about Thomas, it says, *'Your doubts can lead you to a deeper relationship with Jesus. The testimony of others will only carry you so far; ultimately, you need your own personal experience with the Lord. And you can have it. Just ask for it!'*