Dealing with Doubt.

John 20:24-29

Holy Communion.

Emmanuel Youtube.

Sunday April 26th 2020

John 20:24-29

1. *Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.*
2. *So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”*
3. *A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”*
4. *Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”*
5. *Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”*
6. *Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

Have you noticed how words or phrases in our language are often used carelessly or unthinkingly so that they change their meaning, often to the impoverishment of the language? I have to admit, it’s one of the things that irritates me. I love the English language and want to use it correctly. As Winston Churchill once famously said, “This is the kind of English up with which I will not put!” Here is an example of what I mean. Wow oftenHhen someone says something which begins with “with respect”, you know jolly well from the tone of voice as well as from the words that what they’re about to say is going to be anything but respectful!

It’s the same with the word ‘doubt’. A week or two ago when I was writing housegroup material on this theme I posed the question, ‘Doubt is the opposite of belief – true or false?’ Or ‘Doubt is the same as unbelief – true or false?’. Properly, the word doubt means, ‘I yet need to be completely convinced – I’m not quite there yet’. But that’s not what ‘doubt’ usually means these days. If I say “I doubt the lockdown will be lifted next week”, what you’ll understand me to say is not “I doubt”, but rather, “I’m pretty jolly sure the lockdown won’t be lifted next week!” In that case I’m using the word ‘doubt’ wrongly. Let’s transfer this to poor old Thomas in today’s reading. What do we know about him?

The answer really is ‘very little’. We know he was a twin (he was known as Didymus – means twin), but nothing beyond that. His twin never appears, we don’t even know if it was a brother or sister. Apart from lists of the disciples, Thomas is only mentioned on two other occasions before this, and both of them still in John’s Gospel. In chapter 11, when Jesus has just said he will go to the family at Bethany where the brother Lazarus has died, we read:

1. *Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”*

That seems an odd thing to say; some commentators suggest it’s a comment of resignation or frustration rather than anything else. The other reference to Thomas is in chapter 14. Jesus is trying to prepare the disciples for his death and assures them that one day they will follow him. We read this:

1. *Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”*

This leads to the famous verse where Jesus declares himself to be ‘The Way, the Truth, and the Life’. We learn from this, perhaps, that Thomas is someone who thinks things through, wants to get all his ducks in a row; questions things rather than just accepting them at face value. He doesn’t just jump straight in like impetuous Peter.

So at last, let’s come to today’s passage. My whole point in this somewhat long-winded argument is simply that I don’t believe it’s fair to accuse Thomas of a lack of faith and to use the term ‘Doubting Thomas’ as a derogatory label for him. Let’s be a bit more sympathetic than that. Let’s just remind ourselves for a moment of what he (and the rest of the disciples) had been through over the past week or so. Their whole lives had caved in. They had given up everything to follow this man, believing him to be the promised Messiah, even if they had misunderstood what that meant. Then he had apparently deliberately walked into a trap which led to his death. Judas, one of their own band, had betrayed, yes, Jesus, but actually he had betrayed the rest of the disciples too.

Then, in the passage just before the one we have read today, the others tell him that Jesus is alive again, but he’s missed him because he had ‘popped out’. We don’t know why Thomas was missing that previous week; perhaps he had just gone to buy some groceries! Of course, he desperately **wanted** to believe that Jesus was alive, but perhaps he was just so hurt and confused that he dared not until he had received a little more reassurance. Matthew tells us that others of the disciples had doubted earlier on (Matt. 28:17). I wonder: we pick on Thomas, perhaps, but what if it had happened to be a different disciple who had been absent that previous week. Would any of them have reacted any differently? I wonder. And how would we have reacted in that situation? How would I? I wonder.

Actually, rather than criticising Thomas, I feel very encouraged by this story. I believe that doubt (in its true sense), is not the opposite of belief, but part of it. In that passage from Matthew 28 (have a look at it today when this is finished) it also says that the disciples worshipped Jesus. Verse 17 says, *When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.* Here’s the important point, doubt didn’t stop them from worshipping. So if, as I suggest, doubt is part of belief, what does it contribute to our faith in a positive sense? I’ve recently been reading Paula Gooder’s book, ‘This Risen Existence’ which was recommended to us this time last year. She says this:

 *We worship, not out of our certainty but out of our response to God. Fortunately, we don’t have to comprehend everything about God and God’s relationship with the world before we worship. In fact, sometimes it is our doubts that can draw us deeper into the mystery of God, and from deep within the mystery of God the only possible thing to do is worship.*

That makes a lot of sense to me, and I hope it does to you as well. The bottom line for us today is **it’s ok to doubt** (as long as we know what we mean by the word), in fact doubts, handled properly, and within the context of worship, will actually strengthen our faith. And so our response? Just the same as Thomas’s. It’s worship: “*My Lord and my God*”.