

Easter 1 2023: St Thomas on The Bourne.

St Thomas is such an elusive character. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke his name only appears in a list of the disciples. And that's it. But in John's Gospel, Thomas has a bigger part to play.

In fact, he appears eight times: firstly, he appears in the story of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, where he is quoted as saying 'Let us go with Jesus and die with him...' Then he appears in the account of Jesus declaring himself to be the way, the truth, and the life, and asks Jesus: 'Lord we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' And then he appears in the story in today's Gospel-reading where he plays a very significant role...and is mentioned no fewer than five times.

So, why did John give him such a big part in his gospel compared with the other gospel writers? And the answer is that neither I, nor anyone else, knows... perhaps he was the original source for the stories in which he features. Maybe the author of John's gospel knew him, or did John get his story from someone who was one of Thomas' friends?

But let's leave that aside and examine the story we heard in today's gospel reading more closely...

It is like a jewel box with many layers.

First layer: the story begins with a reference to the disciples' fear of the Jews. John takes a strong anti-Jewish stance in his gospel...it is a running theme... and, tragically, it was used in the medieval church to justify anti-semitism. Terrible. Some Biblical scholars suggest that John wrote his anti-Jewish verses at a time when Christian churches were beginning to break away from their Jewish matrix. It was a way of distancing themselves from Judaism...a way of expressing their Christian uniqueness.

Second layer, there is a strong connection with the Old Testament Creation stories. When Jesus breathes on the disciples it is a deliberate echo of God breathing life into Adam. In other words, John implies that Jesus is breathing life into a new creation. ...a new age has begun, there is a new beginning...

Third layer, by breathing on them, in-spiring them with the Holy Spirit, Jesus declares that the disciples now share in God's own nature in being able to pronounce the forgiveness of sins...

So, there we have at least three obvious layers in the story.

But it is even richer than this, there is a fourth layer: John wanted his readers to recall a previous moment in his gospel when Jesus talked about peace. (It is in John 14, 26-27): *But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid...*

In that passage John links the word 'peace' with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and now, in this story, he ensures that the connection between Peace and the Holy Spirit is made once more.

And then, there's a fifth layer: the extraordinary encounter between Jesus and the disciples when he reveals to them his wounded hands and side. It is a way of declaring that the one who is risen is the same as the one who was crucified...and therefore, the wounds of suffering are not a mistake, they are an integral part of Jesus' life and are now carried by him into the Godhead...

It is such a haunting, beautiful, and breath-taking idea and is one of the reasons I believe in the resurrection of Jesus. If you were making up the story the chances are that you would have written about a perfect human being coming back to life, unmarked except by a kind of heavenly glory, but

instead, the wounds of crucifixion are drawn to our attention. They are a revelation about the very nature of God.

And the sixth layer in the story is the mysterious nature of the Risen Christ...one who can walk through locked doors but who still has physical characteristics...he can talk, he is recognisable, but he also transcends the physical.

And now, the final and seventh layer: the moving account of doubting Thomas...and his cry of wonder and faith 'My Lord and my God...' Thomas recognises that the one he has followed as a disciple is in truth the Messiah but a Messiah whom he did not fully comprehend until this moment of startling epiphany... when suffering and sacrifice and glory are woven together before his very eyes. He can now see, as if for the very first time, who Jesus truly is.

I love this jewel box of a story. I absolutely love it.

It has fewer than 300 words but contains, as we have seen, at least seven layers of meaning. Isn't that an amazing literary feat? And look at the richness of its theological construction; it's about the old Creation story of Genesis and a new Creation in Jesus; it's about the inspiration and gift of the Holy Spirit; it's about human doubt and awe-filled belief; it's about the mysterious wonder of the risen Christ; it's about sin and forgiveness; it's about death having been conquered; it's about the continuous, compassionate, peace-giving nature of God...

And, here is the miracle of this story...we ourselves are in the centre of it ...each of us a St Thomas; each of us a mixture of doubt and faith; each of us struggling to comprehend the meaning of the Resurrection, each of us as disciples trying to walk in the Way of the Risen Christ...each of us carriers of that peace which comes to us from God.....each of us, like the author of the Gospel, trying to make sense of the life of Jesus and trying to live with forgiveness on our lips and in our hearts...

And, as if that were not enough, in the very centre of our souls, deep within our hearts, and deep within our community, there is the Risen Christ himself...calling us and leading us to be part of his new creation, cooperating with him in redeeming the world through his love.

It truly is a stunning story in which we, as a church dedicated to St Thomas, are blessed beyond measure...alleluia.

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