

The British Philosopher, Bertrand Russell once said that the trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt. So, it is reassuring to know that Rev Jon and I together with so many of our friends and families are really intelligent – and what's more we have a fellow traveler in faith called Thomas – and it's the figure of Thomas that I want to talk about today.

Today's gospel passage has led to Thomas being given the unfortunate and somewhat negative moniker 'doubting Thomas'. I think that's a little hard on him, particularly if you remember that Mary Magdalene, despite seeing first-hand that Jesus' tomb was empty, did not believe Jesus had risen until he spoke to her directly and revealed himself.

Nor did the other disciples. They hadn't believed Mary when she told them that Jesus was alive on the evening of Easter Sunday; it wasn't until Jesus appeared to them in person inside that locked room that they believed. We don't refer to doubting Mary or doubting Peter, James or John.

Thomas is mentioned by name only in the other three gospels, but in John's gospel we read about Thomas in some detail.

First there is loyal Thomas, or perhaps that should be courageous Thomas. Initially, he alone out of the disciples was prepared to go with Jesus to meet his dying friend, Lazarus despite the prospect of death in doing so – remember someone had just tried to stone Jesus. He says to the other reluctant disciples “*Let's go....that we may die with him*”

Next there is honest Thomas, or maybe even confused Thomas. During the last supper when Jesus was telling his disciples that he was going to prepare a room for them in His Father's house it is Thomas who interrupts by saying “*we don't know where you are going*”.

Then there is doubting Thomas who becomes believing Thomas when he expresses one of the strongest declarations of faith and belief in response to Jesus' invitation to touch his wounds. We aren't told whether or not Thomas actually does touch Jesus' wounds, but his words resound with faith when he calls Jesus “*my Lord and my God*”

Put all that together and I think we can see that Thomas shows that questioning or doubting is part and parcel of a mature faith. His actions and words are an encouragement to all the subsequent generations including our own generation that without having seen the risen Christ for ourselves, we nevertheless can believe in him. This is illustrated in *Praying through Life*, a book by Stephen Cotterel, the Archbishop of York.

He says that faith is not holding out your hand in the dark and *knowing* it will be held but holding out your hand in the dark and *believing* it will be held. Otherwise, faith becomes a certainty and that, as Thomas shows, is not the Christian way.

Faith and doubt are two sides of the same coin; they belong together. Doubt is not the opposite of faith; doubt is the opposite of certainty. Doubting is part of believing.

Faith is a relationship, just like a marriage and as in any marriage there will be times of un-knowing and uncertainty, times of doubt and despair as well as times of joy and happiness. There will be times in our lives when we feel as if our hand is not being held; being made redundant, a serious illness, divorce or the death of a loved one and it is times such as these when our doubts sometimes challenge our faith.

Indeed, facing up to our doubts and fears during the past year of lockdown has tested many people's faith and I see a parallel to the mindset of those disciples, before they met the resurrected Jesus, shielding in fear and uncertainty behind their locked door.

Doubt has also been reflected in many of the conversations I've had with families when planning the funeral of their loved one during lockdown. But even in these blackest of times the liturgy, the songs and hymns they choose so often reflect that deep down they believe their loved one's hand has been held and will continue to be held. They don't know this for certain, but they somehow trust and hope that this will be so.

Just like Thomas perhaps, but this time, faithful Thomas; the believer who subsequently goes out into the world to spread the good news as Jesus had commanded.

He was a Thomas who would have held out his hand in the dark not in certainty but in faith that it would be held; a faith that we can all share in from the good news of today's reading.

Loyal, courageous, honest, confused, doubting but also believing and faithful Thomas.

Jesus responds to Thomas' declaration of His divinity by saying: "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*". And that means we are all blessed because none of us have seen, yet we believe.

Of course, we have two things which Thomas did not have – the gift left to all believers – the Holy Spirit - and the written New Testament. By the power of the Spirit and the wisdom of the Word, we have come to believe.

These gifts are always available to help us in our questioning, doubts and struggles so that we, like Thomas, can come to a place where we can acknowledge Jesus as "My Lord and my God".

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

Alleluia.

**Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 11 April 2021**