

I have long thought that it is slightly unfair the way Thomas is defined by that one moment of doubt. He first speaks in John Chapter 11 when word reaches Christ that Lazarus is gravely ill. Jesus wants to go to his dear friend but some of the disciples are scared to return to Judea for fear of the Jews who threatened to stone him when he was last there. But not our Thomas - he declares with great courage, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.' Far from having any doubt, this suggests an extraordinary level of loyalty, faith and devotion - he is willing to give his life for Christ. Based on his remark I think we can assume that he travelled to Bethany and witnessed Lazarus emerging from the tomb - a clear pre-figuring of Christ's resurrection. Whether he was there or not, Thomas was a first-hand witness to Jesus' ministry, His teachings, His miracles - but in spite of all that experience, when it comes to reports of the final miracle, he simply cannot accept, however much he might want to, that Christ has conquered death.

But how does our Lord react to Thomas' doubt; He is sympathetic, patient and willing to do whatever it takes to make His disciple believe. He appears in the upstairs room, despite the doors being locked, and in a moment of gory pragmatism he places the doubter's finger on his wounded hands and in his side, thus answering Thomas' conditions for believing, to the letter.

That moment is powerfully depicted in this Baroque masterpiece by Caravaggio. For me the power of this painting is in its extraordinary realism and immediacy; the canvas itself is roughly 40 by 60 inches meaning the figures are not far short of life size; the perspective, with the characters shown only from the waste up means, as the viewer, we are standing just a few feet away from this seminal event. There is nothing in the background to distract us. The men behind Thomas, generally considered to be Peter and John are, like us, entirely focused on the same spot. There is no halo above Christ's head - he is a human being with human flesh and human wounds. We are left with an overwhelming sense that we are all being shown the reality of the risen Christ.

I think it is important to remember that Thomas is by no means the only disciple to display human frailty. Just consider Peter; He walks on water but just as he is doing so, fear gets the better of him. He, along with James and John, are the disciples who are too tired to stay awake and keep watch in the garden of Gethsemane, and finally, even though Christ gives him a direct warning, Peter denies Him three times.

Any journey of faith has moments of doubt, moments where earthly fears and demands get the better of us. But there is surely something hugely comforting in the fact that those closest to the living Christ, struggled in exactly the same way. And there is therefore a great and Godly irony in that Thomas' doubt...Peter's fear and denial, all their human weaknesses, actually help alleviate our own.

But it is, of course, far from the end of their stories - Thomas went on to spread the gospel beyond the borders of the Roman Empire into the far corners of India, while Peter was the rock on which the church was built. For me this is powerful evidence that God's forgiveness, and mercy and patience are infinite and therefore, despite all our failings, it is not the end of our story either. It echoes that hugely inspiring verse from Jeremiah "I know the plans I have for you".

One of the plans God has for us all is to share his word. And to do so, just as he did; with patience and understanding and compassion, particularly with those whose journey of faith is yet to begin. God, the resurrection, heaven...these are all monumental concepts which

people will inevitably doubt and question. But accounts such as those of Thomas and Peter provide a very simple and reassuring answer; far from being airbrushed from the gospels, they are given huge prominence, and the clear message is that it is okay to doubt and question because working through such doubts and questions can be exactly what creates the sure foundation for a lasting faith.

It very much reflects this series of sermons where people have, often with great courage, shared very personal feelings; people have made themselves vulnerable, and it is precisely that vulnerability that makes them, and what they have said, so authentic.

Such authenticity can take numerous forms. My personal journey of faith began in the idyllic Norman church of All Saints, Woolstone in the Vale of the White Horse, where I was lucky enough to spend my childhood. One particular stalwart of All-Saints was the splendid George Packford whose family had lived in the area for generations. A broad-shouldered man with magnificent sideburns, George was not only a long-serving warden of but also the church organist. One evensong, the reverend Jim Tilliard announced the first hymn. George pressed the keys but no sound came out; he tried again and still nothing and he then announced at the top of his voice 'I'm very sorry vicar I haven't got any wind'. As you can imagine, returning to the liturgy after a remark like that was challenging to say the least, particularly as reverend Jim had tears of laughter streaming down his cheeks.

But the point is, I believe God was as present in that moment as He is in the most profound sermon, moving prayer or roof-raising hymn; as present as he was in Thomas's doubt, and Peter's fear; as present as he is throughout our lives particularly in our moments of vulnerability.

I have never been more vulnerable than when, back in 2001, my father, aged just 58, died very suddenly of a heart attack. I was living and working in London at the time; I got to my parents house as quickly as possible and I remember standing outside the room where he had died, grieving, and in shock and terrified of what awaited me on the other side. But in the moment that I saw his body, I was assured beyond **all** doubt, by the existence of our immortal souls – I absolutely knew that that loving, wise and God-Fearing man was no longer in the room; he was, as one letter of condolence quoted 'on another shore, and in a greater light'.

So if you find yourself doubting God's promises and uncertainty gets the better of you, if you fall short of his will despite your best intentions, if the demands of this life leave you exhausted and fearful, or for reasons you cannot explain you simply run out of wind - take heart, because you are truly in the company of the greatest saints. Just keep going, and let our gentle Saviour show himself to you, restore you and achieve in you all His purpose.

Amen.

**Michael Grist, 6 Nov 2022**