

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

WELCOMING THE DOUBTER

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Sunday 11th April 2010

Hebrews 10:19-25

John 20:19-31

The days after the resurrection must have been very strange. The disciples began the week by being terrified. They hid themselves away in the upper room, in case the authorities decided that having dealt with Jesus they should deal with his followers as well. And then Jesus came and talked with them, and even commissioned them with a job to do. They are sent "Even as the Father has sent me."

We might think that having found the happy ending to the story of Good Friday, things would have gone back to normal for the disciples. But obviously that isn't so at all. For one thing, Jesus wasn't constantly with them, the way he had been before. This is an odd little interlude in the life of the Church - the never-to-be-repeated time between Jesus' constant bodily presence and the giving of the Holy Spirit. The disciples were left to feel how much they needed God's help as they contemplated their commission.

And then there was a doubter in their midst. The group, now shrunk from 12 to 11, is no longer united. Not that they always have been united. How often the Gospel pages we find that the disciples are squabbling - arguing about who is the greatest; or cross with James and John for wanting to reserve special privileges in heaven, or simply unable to agree on what they think Jesus means by some of his statements. But still, they had always had the person of Jesus as a focal point. They were all agreed that they were a group simply because they were following Jesus. Whatever other differences they had, they never fundamentally disagreed about him.

And now they do. Thomas had not been there when Jesus came to them. I wonder why not? Where was he? Out on an errand? Or was he not so afraid as the others? Or was he trying to put together some sort of life for himself, now that following Jesus was over? We don't know.

I wonder what sort of week Thomas had. The rest of his friends were happy, assured, full of praise and maybe even making plans. He was dubious. He could not quite believe what they all so sure about. Like most of us, he wanted to know for himself. He wanted to know first hand. He must have felt like an outsider.

There is nothing like being around a group which share a common belief and aim, to make you feel cast out. Has it ever happened to you? Have you ever felt yourself to be on the outside of a group, trying hard not to be left behind. Have you tried to laugh at jokes you don't understand, or don't find funny? Have you tried hard to overcome the unseen barrier which you feel to be so insurmountable? This is why people sometimes find the church inapproachable. We can give the impression that not to believe as we do, not to share our faith and experience, is to be odd. By speaking in codes that are hard to understand, by using Christian shorthand or jargon in our worship, we can inadvertently be raising signs which turn others away. *'Keep off the grass', 'No Hawkers', 'Members only'*.

The thing I really respect about Thomas is that during that week he hung around. He wanted to believe. He hoped against hope, against all common sense, that what the others told him was true. But he couldn't be sure. After all, it seemed so unlikely. Have you ever mused upon the unlikeliness of our faith? It often strikes me. When it does, I know that it is only through the working of the Holy Spirit that I or anyone can come to accept and believe the wonderful good news of the resurrection.

Thomas hung around. It can't have been comfortable for him - or for the others. It may well be that in his confusion Thomas would act aggressively or give himself superior airs. It may be that in their insecurity the

other disciples laughed at him. Maybe he caused offence - after all, why shouldn't he believe what all ten of them agreed on?

No, it can't have been easy for the ten either. Judas was gone - Judas, who had been so respected a member of the group that he had been treasurer. But he had proved false and now he was dead at his own hand. Thomas was doubting their word. They may well have wondered how long it would be before he too went the way of Judas and betrayed them to the authorities. Jesus was no longer constantly with them, and though they believed he was alive, they didn't know what he was doing, or what might happen next. The ten believers could well have closed ranks and expelled the disturbing whisper of doubt from their midst. They could have said that you had to believe what they did as they did to stay with them.

The Church has often taken that attitude. We have often acted like a closed-shop union. And even when we manage not to act that way, too often we are still perceived that way. Too often the Church has failed to open the doors. We have hidden away, neither saying what we believe, nor inviting others to hang around with us and find out if it is true. We have hidden behind closed doors, as though we too had reason to fear. We could learn a thing or two from the disciples in that first post-Easter week. They stuck to the sceptic. They gave a welcome. They let him say what he thought, and didn't impose a party line.

Anyway, Thomas hung around. His was a healthy scepticism. Instead of cutting himself off, he hung around, so that when Jesus came again, he was ready, waiting. And his waiting pays off. And the welcome and patience of the ten pays off too. For when Jesus comes to them, a week later, there are no words of condemnation. There's not even a hint of "Why couldn't you believe" in what Jesus says. He knows Thomas' need, so he singles out the doubter and gives him the assurance he craves.

All of the disciples learned something on that Sunday, a week after Easter. Thomas, of course, learned. He learned that Jesus was alive and learned to respond from the his heart "My Lord and my God". He learned just who Jesus is.

The other disciples learned as well. They learned that all of us have different experiences of Jesus. We learn and grow at different rates, through these different experiences. They had heard Thomas express his doubts. Now they heard him give an expression of faith which none of them has yet voiced. They see him grow in a moment from someone of weak faith, to the most certain believer in their group. And they realise that Jesus knows that we are all different. He praises Thomas for the understanding which has dawned on him, through seeing. And he praises too those who can believe without needing to use their eyes.

I am glad that this story is in John's Gospel. I think John included it for several reasons. He wanted us to see that even in the earliest days of the Church, not all had the same experience, not all believed in the same way. There is no pattern of how our faith should work. So long as we hang on in there, Jesus will come to us and give us what we ourselves need to achieve faith or grow in it. And so we need to be like the ten disciples. We, who have, in our different ways, come to find faith in Christ as our risen Saviour, need to hold open the door of welcome to those who would like to find it. We need to be prepared to tell what we know, and how we know it, and then we need to be prepared to wait. Some people come gradually to discover that they believe, others have a moment, an uncanny moment when they suddenly discover that it all makes sense, and faith has been born in their hearts. There is no prescribed way to come to faith in Jesus. The Church, this church, needs to be a place of waiting and of welcome. So John put in this story to teach those of us who are like the ten believing disciples.

And he put it in because there may well have been some of his readers, members of the Church of the turn of the first century, who were apt to consider their own faith inferior. They wished that they were like the twelve - like John himself - who had actually seen the risen Christ. Some of us may feel that way too, even with the gap of centuries separating us from them. And John wants us to hear that while Jesus has no words of condemnation for Thomas; while he has been willing to give Thomas what he needs, yet he does have words of affirmation for those of us - by now far, far the majority - who believe without having seen.

The writer to the Hebrews urges his readers living in the light of the resurrection to work hard at worship - however we feel, God is always worthy; he urges them to work hard at encouraging each other to live lives of

love and good deeds - we all need encouragement. And he urges them not to stop meeting together - "As is the habit of some."

Jesus could have come to Thomas in some other place, at some other time. But he chose to come when the disciples were together. The risen Christ can and does meet with us in many situations. But if we are meeting together regularly in worship, then we are far more likely to be attuned to recognising him when he comes.

Amen.