

The first reading is taken from the Book of Acts, Chapter 2, starting at verse 14.

^{14a}Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd:

²²“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.

²³This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

²⁴But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

²⁵David said about him: “I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

²⁶Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, ²⁷because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay.

²⁸You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.’

²⁹“Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. ³⁰But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne.

³¹Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay.

³²God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The second reading is taken from 1 Peter, Chapter 1, verses 1-12.

¹Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia,

²who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

⁶In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

⁷These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

⁸Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

¹⁰Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow.

¹²It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Second Sunday in Easter: The Story of Thomas – Faith through Recognition

Have you ever had a nickname? I played cricket at school until I was about 14 years old. As an opening bowler, my batting wasn't particularly refined. Thus, I got the nickname Crossbat Colton due to my innate inability to play with a straight bat, regardless of the ball I was facing. My single digit batting average attests to the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of this approach!

Some nicknames can be cruel. One poor kid at my school had two ears that stuck out, so he was known by everyone as wingnut. Some are self-appointed, such as the five-foot nothing Air Force officer I once met who used to introduce himself to everyone as Beast. Then there are the more amusing nicknames, such as blister – the guy who only shows up when all the hard work is done, or noodles – someone who thinks all jobs only take two minutes!

So, spare a thought for Didymus, also known as Thomas. One of Christ's original twelve disciples, Thomas is credited with establishing the Christian church in India, southern Turkey and Sri Lanka, is mentioned in primary sources as having preached the Gospel in China, and who is thought to have died for the faith in Chennai after been speared to death.

So how is St Thomas remembered in history? As Thomas of India? Thomas the Evangelist? Thomas the Apostle or maybe Thomas Martyr?

No. He is generally remembered as Doubting Thomas, a nickname that for almost 2,000 years has become synonymous with scepticism and the refusal to believe anyone without also having a direct personal experience. This has led some to argue that Thomas lacked faith. As we just heard, Jesus said "Because you have seen me, you have believed: blessed are those who have not seen but have believed". Thus, these verses are often used as an example for all of us today to have faith in Christ despite not having seen him ourselves.

Yet there is a danger that we, as post-Pentecost 21st century Christians, may fall into the trap of taking today's Gospel reading out of context. Christ's interaction with Thomas is more than a simple exhortation for blind faith. So, over the next few of minutes I would like to examine Thomas in more depth and ask what does his story really mean for us.

Although Thomas only appears three times in the Gospel of St John, his interactions with Jesus are significant and reach a climax in today's reading. Thomas first appears by name in John, Chapter 11. Jesus says he is going back to Judea to treat Lazarus. The other disciples appear to try and persuade him not to go, saying "But Rabbi, a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?" It is Thomas who says to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Thomas alone is ready to follow Christ to the grave. Hardly the words of one who lacks faith.

We next meet Thomas in Chapter 14 when Jesus says to the disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God^[a]; believe also in me.² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going."

I can imagine the silence, perhaps even confusion, among the disciples before Thomas eventually has the courage to pipe up in verse 5, "Lord, we don't know where you are going,

so how can we know the way?" Christ replies, "'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know^[b] my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

Some scholars and theologians have argued that this exchange reinforces the motif of doubt associated with Thomas. But in the very next verse, Phillip says, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus' answer appears to be much more of a rebuke than his answer to Thomas. "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" ¹⁰ Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?" Doubt, that could be assuaged through *seeing* proof, seems to be more widely prevalent across the group of disciples than just Thomas.

The third part of Thomas' story in the Gospel of John is his absence from Christ's first post-resurrection appearance to the disciples in Chapter 20. We do not know why he was not there but as the rest of the disciples were all together, behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish leaders, his absence is notable. At that first appearance, Christ first says "Peace be with you". And then, in verse 20, "After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord."

Now imagine you are Thomas returning to the disciples, having avoided arrest outside by the Jewish authorities, only to hear them all tell you that they have just seen Jesus, a man you *know* to be dead. And not only that, but that Jesus appeared to all the disciples – all of them except you. Thomas had already shown himself to be a loyal disciple, willing to follow Jesus at the risk of death, courageous enough to ask how they can know the way to the Father's house. And now, he was being told that he was the only one not to have seen the risen Christ! Little wonder that he exclaimed "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." Can any of us, with hand on heart, say that we would be any different? All Thomas is asking for is what the other disciples have already received.

Which is what Christ gives him. A week later Jesus returns. This time Thomas is with the disciples. When Jesus shows Thomas his hands, and invites him to touch his side, Thomas simply replies "My Lord and my God". Interestingly, John does not write whether Thomas does reach out and touch Jesus' wounds, something that has been debated for centuries. But Jesus says "Because you have seen me you have believed" not "Because you touched me", so in this case I tend to think seeing really was believing. It is what I like to think of as faith through recognition.

It is faith through recognition that I believe is at the heart of this story. When Thomas was struggling with his faith, Jesus reached out to *him*. Thomas recognised Christ and his faith was strengthened. So it is today. Christ still reaches out to us when we struggle with faith. In a post-Pentecost world he does this not in the flesh, as he did with Thomas, but through the Holy Spirit. As Christians, it is for us to open our hearts to the Spirit that we might recognise Christ so that *our* faith might be strengthened. Our challenge then is to live out this faith every day. St John Chrysostom wrote, "the person filled with the Holy Spirit will see the icon of Christ in the face of all others." If we can learn to see Christ in everyone, then we allow Jesus to reach out through *us* to strengthen the faith of others; to the stranger, or the prisoner; the sick or the hungry; the poor or the homeless, those we love and those we find frustrating, and, perhaps most importantly, to those who still doubt that Jesus is our Lord and our God.