

22 April 2017

Doubt and the Path to Hope (John 20: 19-31)

© Kerry Jacobs

Now we get to the good end of Easter – the chocolate eggs – and the resurrection of course. Christ has risen – he has risen indeed. But let's stop for a moment and bash Thomas – the doubter – the questioner – the unbeliever.

However, I think Thomas has much more to teach us than we normally consider – a path to hope in a world that has lost hope and a form of faith that moves beyond a simple answers faith that guarantees no suffering, pain and a Mercedes Benz – or the more intellectual form– if we work hard enough and protest long enough – we can bring the kingdom.

Thomas normally gets bad press – doubting Thomas – who did not believe and did not have faith – and only if we have blind belief that we are truly a Christian. What a load of rubbish. Thomas has much more to teach us than that – we do not get to the resurrection without facing death. Refusal to face death – and experience the tomb is denial and delusion.

Therefore I would like to propose Thomas as the saint for the modern age – the patron saint of Academics, civil servants and all kinds of trouble makers. Thomas shows us that doubt is not the path from, but the path too faith.

The underlying and fundamental fear of our society is of death. As such one of the key lies that the serpent tells in the creation story is that you will surely not die. The baddy in life and fiction is always obsessed with prolonging their own life – be it Hitler and his 1000 year Reich or Voldemort in Harry Potter. And fundamental to this is the illusion that we are in control of our own lives and the world around us.

When this illusion of control is shattered – many people lose faith in their God (be it government, money, family, their own abilities and even higher beings).

Dealing with cancer – and having an autistic son – I have often been asked how I can reconcile that with a belief in a loving God.

This is equally challenging as we look at the world around us. Wars and rumours of wars – the innocent killed – the weak detained and imprisoned – the poor getting poorer and the rich getting richer – destruction of the environment – and of course – Donald Trump as US president – now what kind of God could allow the Donald to get elected!

All of these challenges require a kind of death – in one sense a sharing in the death of Christ – clearly my life and my world is NOT run the way I think that God should – and in that sense - death is accepting that I am not in control of the party!

With the death of Jesus all the disciples were confronted with a sense of loss and failure – hiding in upper rooms, scarpering back to outlying villages – with the shattering realisation that all of their hopes and dreams for a messiah – a political leader and liberator from the Roman oppressors – was well and truly dead and buried.

However, Thomas already had a step up on the other disciples who still thought in terms of earthy kingdoms and personal power. Thomas started to let go of his own illusions, his notion of control, prior to the Easter week - back in chapter 11.

In chapter 11 of John – Jesus sets himself to going to visit Mary and Martha in Judea following Lazarus death – Thomas declared – let us also go that we may die with him.

Thomas has come to a realisation that Jesus was not going to be the political and kingly messianic figure that the other disciples wanted. As such this was a death of his own hopes and beliefs – about his longing for political and religious liberation and restoration for his people. However, there was also a confrontation with his own mortality and death

Let us also go that we may die with him

Thomas recognised and accepted his own death – and death of his notion of Jesus as a messianic nationalistic political leader. A notion that has a strong basis in Old Testament prophetic teaching.

However, Thomas' relationship with Jesus was so strong that it transcended both his loss of his agenda for what the messiah should be and the normal fear of his own death.

Now, **we** know how the story ended – and after Friday – then Sunday comes – after death the resurrection and by the time we get to John 20 we have a different story altogether. However, this was a difficult journey for Thomas.

When Thomas is told of the resurrection – he concludes that the other disciples were still stuck at the denial stage of grieving – possibly even delusional! Still stuck in their dreams of national restoration and eviction of the Roman occupiers. Time to grow up, to get real, to face the loss and get on with life. Thomas replies with the response of academics, rationalists and scientists– show me the evidence! Show me the hands – the nail holes and the wounds. Don't you love Thomas – just like us when we suffer and face crises – we have lost our hope – we have lost our security – where is God? And everyone else is going mad!

However, this is never the end of the story

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you"

Jesus appears – reaching out to Thomas and says – put your finger here in my and your hand in my side – stop doubting but believe.

Our hope is not despite the evidence – it is beyond the evidence – the evidence that we are not in control of our life, of those around us and of the world we live in. As we

follow the call to die with Christ – we die to our belief that we are in control of the world and rise with the understanding that we are held in the hands of God. Our faith is relational – found in hands reaching out to us.

The journey of the Easter week forces us to confront our notions of ourselves and of God – see these die and, living through that death, re-encounter God in a deeper more relational form. Our hope for ourselves and for our world is not in a doctrinal statement or even a body of evidence but in a relationship – in a God who reaches out to us in the hands of a risen Christ. This is why we turn to the silence, the stillness – beyond our own need for evidence and certainty - into hands that reach out to hold us – the hands that reached out to Thomas with scars in his palms.