

Sermon for the 2nd Sunday of Easter: 19/04/2020

John 20: 19-31

When we are small, we listen wide-eyed to stories, scarcely questioning their truthfulness. We are drawn into the world of the story itself, enchanted by elves and giants, dragons and even hobbits! That species other than our own can talk and think, as in *Watership Down*, or that some people might fly or have x-ray vision, seems not even remotely odd and doesn't spoil our appreciation of the tale. But that credulousness does not last. As we grow older our imaginative ability and willingness to suspend disbelief seem to be steadily eroded.

Perhaps Thomas' disbelief is not the same phenomenon. No one was asking him to clap his hands if he believed in fairies! It was something far more ridiculous. As we age, the harsh realities of our world, including the fragility of life, impinge more upon our consciousness. They seem to crowd out our ability to believe. In first century Palestine, illness and death, with their air of hopeless finality, were closer to home. For Thomas who may have seen Jesus die, there can have been no doubt: Jesus was dead. Why are we surprised that he could not believe what his friends told him?

Behind locked doors the disciples fear a similar fate, but Jesus himself appears. Bearing the wounds of crucifixion, he breathes upon them – a sure sign of life – and bids them be at peace: how could they calmly make sense of this? Yet John says, "They rejoiced when they saw the Lord," The absolute certainty of his death is shattered, their aching emptiness healed. But not so for Thomas, his life-conditioned certainties are untouched. He is not there.

A week passes before Thomas can share the reality of the resurrection. Although we have a perfect view of what he has missed, we would also be asking for concrete proof, wouldn't we? Not the mass hallucinations of people who never quite lived up to expectations. While they are excitable as children after a Harry Potter film, taken in by the special effects, Thomas knew Jesus was dead and death is death.

How hard it must have been not to have a share in the joy of his friends. When Jesus appears to Thomas, it is exactly the same way as he did to the others. Knowing what Thomas has demanded, Jesus offers him the chance to place his fingers in his wounds. However, it appears that seeing was enough to remove Thomas' doubt and reveal something remarkable to him, that Christ was divine. Thomas' confession brings us full circle, reminding us of the opening words of John's Gospel (chapter 1 verse 1) "the word was God," and reflecting the kind of faith the author hoped his work would inspire.

The passage ends by moving from the faith of Thomas to the wider church, saying that those who have believed without seeing Jesus are more blessed. This need not be a criticism of Thomas. After all, the author later goes on to say that the reason we can safely believe without seeing is because of the testimony of those who, like Thomas, witnessed these events.

Thomas is often criticised for his doubts, yet it was his doubts which led him to see the risen Christ for himself. This experience made him a man of great faith. Tradition has it that he took the gospel to India and Persia, further than any of the other disciples and ended his life a martyr.

Thomas shows that faith can grow when doubts are faced and addressed. On the other hand, it's also true that dwelling upon doubts can damage our faith. So how should we approach doubt? The Christian writer C.S Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity*, says it depends upon what form our uncertainty takes. As there is rational evidence to back up our faith, intellectual doubts can be faced by looking into the arguments others have given in favour of the beliefs we struggle with. For instance, if we have doubts about the resurrection, reading a Christian book on the subject will be of great benefit.

However, Lewis also says that our minds are not “completely ruled by reason” but also by our emotions and imagination. Not all doubts have a rational basis but can stem from change in our mood and circumstance. He illustrates this by saying that although we knew that anaesthetic knocks us out, we may start to doubt it just before undergoing an operation! This is not because our belief has been proved untrue, but simply because we are afraid. Similarly, we may doubt our faith not because it has been challenged by any new rational argument but for emotional reasons, perhaps because we're going through a testing time. In those circumstances Lewis suggests that we do not dwell on doubt, but operate faith “holding on to things our reason has once accepted in spite of our changing moods.”

Times are really hard at the moment life is very difficult for many and the outcome of the crisis is unknown. This is where doubts in the things we believe in can creep in. That's why it is imperative we should hold on to our faith and hopes. We need to rely on the knowledge that God is always present with us. It may feel sometimes as if he isn't there, but he is always right behind and beside us.

May God give us wisdom in dealing with our doubts so that, like Thomas, we may grow deeper in faith assured of the rational reasons for our belief. So we can persevere in faith through changing moods and circumstances.

Amen