

***Faith and Doubt***

“What's that actor called?” “No idea.” “But they're in lots of things. You know that programme with Judy Dench and they were in that film with Hugh Grant” “No sorry, can't put a name to them but you're right they're in loads of stuff.”

Today's readings feature two characters Peter and Thomas. They've been appearing with Jesus for three years now. One we're very familiar with - Peter. He's played a starring role in this drama, from the moment when as Simon, he is singled out by Jesus and renamed Peter to the scene described in today's reading from Acts when, filled with the Holy Spirit, he preaches his first sermon which will have spectacular results. In our Holy Week Readings, he once more played a **central part** - protesting that Jesus shouldn't be washing his feet, proclaiming vehemently that he would never leave Jesus and then hours later denying all knowledge of him. Then we've seen him be the first to enter the empty tomb on that first Easter morning. He's a complex character and you might say a **star player**.

As for Thomas, well he's been there in most scenes but generally in the background. He too was called by Jesus and has been a faithful follower. He's been learning from him, carrying out his instructions, distributing bread and fish to the five thousand, he's been present at the raising of Lazarus and has accompanied Jesus on his last journey to Jerusalem despite his conviction that this could lead to him being killed alongside his master. But until the event described in today's gospel we couldn't really put a name to him. And sadly, he's remembered not for his courage or his faithfulness but for that moment when in his grief, he needed his **own** experience of Jesus, when the words of his fellow disciples were just not enough. Yes, history has turned Thomas into a one dimensional character known for posterity as Doubting Thomas, as if that sums him up.

Poor Thomas! He missed out on the big event when Jesus appeared to the other disciples, showing them his hands and side. I'm sure we can all identify with that experience of being in company and listening to everyone talking about some wonderful event that somehow we missed out on. Thomas must have felt excluded. Whatever the reason for him not being present with the others, he must have been kicking himself. They're expecting him to share their excitement but he doesn't want a second hand experience. Unless I see him for myself, I won't believe!

These words of Thomas have led to him being labelled a skeptic but I see them as a cry from a human heart. *I* want to see Jesus too. I want him to come to **me**. I don't want to just take your word for it. This is a man who is grieving the loss of a dear friend, The man he's trusted and followed for three years, brutally executed. The ground has been taken away from under his feet. Nothing is certain any more. How **can** he trust again? He needs **proof!**

And the wonderful thing is that Jesus listens to Thomas - *'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hands in his side I will not believe'* - he hears those words as a prayer from the heart and he answers that prayer.

Because the next appearance of Jesus in that room seems to be especially for Thomas's benefit. He tells him 'Don't doubt but believe' and invites him to touch and see. And Thomas responds with a moment of great insight! 'My Lord and my God' . The first person recorded as giving Jesus the title God.

Later on in John's gospel, Peter, we're told, also has a special encounter with the Risen Christ when Jesus, understanding the guilt he carries for his denial of him gives him the opportunity to declare his love three times. Do you remember? When Jesus shared breakfast with them on the beach? When

he asks him three times 'Do you love me?' This little encounter finishes with Jesus saying 'Follow me' an echo of that first call. Jesus hasn't given up on Peter. He *will* be the rock on which the church is built.

Peter and Thomas, two very different men – one quick to believe, eager to take the lead but at times a bit headstrong, leaping out of the boat and then panicking as he starts to sink – the other much more measured, in the background a teamworker. He's someone who needs to understand '*Lord we do not where you are going, how can we know the way*'....., but he's also a man of courage '*Let us also go that we may die with him*' and discernment. '*My Lord and my God.*'

Notice Jesus doesn't say to Thomas 'You should try and be like Peter. He's full of faith.' Or to Peter 'Calm down! You should be more like Thomas.' No, Jesus loves them for who they are. He comes to them and gives them *each* what they *specifically* need to grow in faith and trust and to reach their potential as children of God.

I wonder do you identify with either of our characters this morning?

Perhaps like Thomas, you find it hard to accept other people's testimony, you want your *own* experience of God. Maybe like Peter, who wept bitterly when he heard the cock crow, you feel ashamed, that somehow you've let God down. But the fact is we are not Peter or Thomas. We are Liz, Andrew, N and N . We each have our *own* stories and what today's readings teach us is that God meets us all *where* we are and loves us *as* we are. God wants to give us each what we need to help us grow into the people he created us to be.

Scholars believe that John's gospel was written for an early Christian community who, like us, had not had a physical encounter with Jesus. Immediately after the account of Jesus appearing to Thomas, the author tells us what the purpose of this book is. '*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing in him you may have life in his name.*'

So how does the story of Thomas help us when we struggle to believe (and let's face it, who doesn't?) Well Thomas was honest about his difficulty with belief but nonetheless he was gathered with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to him. Likewise with us, continuing to practice our faith when belief is difficult can lead us through the darkness of doubt to a place of revelation. Thomas needed to see Jesus, he needed that encounter and Jesus came to him. Let us pray that as individuals and as a congregation we will have our own encounters with the risen Jesus. In the words of the chorus .....'*Open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus, to reach out and touch him, to say that we love him. Open our ears Lord and teach us to listen, O open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus.*'