

## The Sermon at St Bene't's on Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2017 Second Sunday of Easter



Caravaggio: *The Incredulity of St Thomas*, 1601-2, Sanssouci Museum Potsdam

St Thomas the Apostle is commonly known as “Doubting Thomas” because of the story we have just heard. Thomas said, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into mark of the nails and my hands in his side, I will not believe.” So important is the part Thomas plays in the Resurrection stories that today, the Second Sunday of Easter, is in the Eastern Church actually called Thomas Sunday. And rightly so, for today’s gospel reading from John 20 contains the climax of the whole gospel: the words of Thomas crying out to the risen Jesus “My Lord and my God.”

The conversion experience which Thomas underwent that day certainly transformed him. No longer a doubter, he became a proclaimer. After Pentecost, when all the apostles dispersed to begin the mission of the church, Thomas alone travelled beyond the Roman Empire. He took the route down to South India, to the present day states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. There had been a flourishing Jewish community along the Kerala since antiquity and a well-used trade route south from Jerusalem and the Middle East. Tradition has it that he reached the city of Muziris in AD52. He began immediately to baptise and founded the church still known today as St Thomas Christians, or Marthoma Nazranis.

He went on to found seven other churches, and became known as the Apostle to the Indians. Remains of some of his church buildings, influenced by Greek architecture, indicate that he was a great builder. For this reason he is often depicted carrying a carpenter’s square, and is honoured as the patron saint of architects. He died on 21 December AD72 in Chennai in Madras, and his relics were translated to Edessa in Mesopotamia 150 years later.

But he has another name, and we heard it in the gospel reading. He is known as “*didymus*” the twin. In fact the Aramaic name Thomas is *Thoma* – which means twin. Thomas was a twin, but we have no record who his twin was. I don’t know how many twins we have in our congregation today. Twins have the special experience of feeling, thinking and sensing together, even when separated. Today, on this Thomas Day, we might well wonder what twin of Thomas could share his sensations of doubt followed by faith in facing the risen Christ. We’ll come back to this later.

Thomas appears three times in the Gospel of St John, and in John's way of composing his gospel Thomas has a special part to play. He is used to prepare the ground each time for Jesus's self-proclamation. We meet him first in Chapter 11 following the death of Lazarus. There is Thomas, named, among his fellow disciples. Jesus has told them plainly that Lazarus is dead, and says to them all "Let us go to him". Thomas said to the others "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Here is the doubting Thomas. Whatever Jesus is preparing for Lazarus is bound to lead to death, if only the metaphorical death of shame and embarrassment. But this exchange prepares the way for the account of the raising of Lazarus, a kind of prefiguration of Jesus's own resurrection.

Then Thomas's second appearance comes in Chapter 14, a favourite passage read at Church of England funerals. Jesus says to the disciples "You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas responds "Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" This is not just doubting Thomas, but Thomas the agnostic. "We do not know" is quite simply the only thing we can honestly say when faced with death. But Thomas's question allows Jesus to reply with the unforgettable teaching "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me".

Then Thomas's third appearance comes in chapter 20, the resurrection story we heard today. The story has been specially constructed to place Thomas in his sceptical, doubting position. We learn that Thomas was not there at that first resurrection appearance. He was not in that locked room. He missed Jesus's words of peace and the sight of Jesus's hands and side. He missed the breath of Jesus and the words, "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*" So when the fellow disciples tell him, "*We have seen the Lord,*" he says, "*Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into mark of the nails and my hands in his side, I will not believe.*"

So the following week once again the disciples are all together, and this time Thomas is with them. Once again Jesus comes through the locked door; once again he utters the words of peace. But this time Jesus speaks directly to Thomas "*Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.*"

This is the subject of the painting which you have in front of you. This painting is Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St Thomas*. Caravaggio was an Italian baroque artist of formidable talent. He specialised in painting religious scenes with great realism, and perfected the technique of chiaroscuro, where bright directional light from one side of the painting casts deep shadows on the other.

In this intense, concentrated picture Jesus and three disciples are clustered intimately together. I think it is Peter and John in the background, since they were first at the tomb that first Easter morning. Thomas is clearly in the front. A shaft of light falls from over Jesus's shoulder, illuminating the tactile focus of attention. Jesus is holding back his tunic with his right hand and with his left he guides Thomas's forefinger to penetrate into the very breach in his skin, the light catching the folded cut flesh. You can almost hear Jesus saying "*Put your finger here. Do not doubt but believe.*" This is a passionate picture, shocking in its fleshly carnality. There is no escaping the bodily resurrection of Christ in this painting. It was moreover painted by a passionate and troubled artist, who has poured his own longing for faith into the painting.

But who is this Thomas? Art historians tell us that, for the figure of Christ, Caravaggio had a young man to model him, his pupil Mario Minniti. But he had no model for Thomas. The figure of Thomas is in fact a self-portrait of Caravaggio himself. He has painted his own furrowed brow, his own thinning hair, his own incredulous expression and indeed his own sturdy finger making this discovery. I particularly like the way he has painted the fraying seam on his shoulder, a sign somehow of his sinfulness, yet at the same time echoing the torn body of Christ.

The painting describes the search for faith in the midst of doubt, and the artist has literally put himself into the place of Thomas. So we come back to *didymus*, the twin. When we ask the question "*Who was Thomas's twin?*" Caravaggio

has provided us with an answer. He is himself Thomas's twin, rendered in passionate oil paint. As the twin of doubting Thomas, the artist longs for a similar experience of conversion, his doubt turned to faith. By pushing his finger into the wound, Thomas is coming to the inescapable reality of the resurrection of the Lord. He really is risen from the dead.

Looking further into this painting we can see Thomas about to utter those momentous words "*My Lord and my God!*" These words comes as the climax of the Gospel of St John. "*My Lord and my God*" is an exclamation which is recognition and penitence, understanding with the mind and praise with the heart. Praise twice over to the two natures of the incarnate and risen Christ, my human Lord and my God divine. Those five words are a good prayer to use.

And once again, as in the two previous times in the gospel, Thomas opens the way for Jesus to teach. Jesus responds to Thomas's outburst by saying "*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.*"

And so the gospel narrative moves beyond the disciples in that locked room, out to encompass us all. All of us are blessed by the risen Christ, for all of us are among "*those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.*"

In coming to believe in the Resurrection of Christ we have defied our own scepticism and ignored the sceptical, secular world we live in. Our doubt has been turned to faith. We have thus become twinned with Thomas.

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