

SERMON – EASTER 2 YEAR B – 8th APRIL 2018

John 20:19-end

I've been on the Cathedral staff for just over a year now, and yet I have to admit there are times when I am still getting to grips with our processions! It's an unfortunate fact that the more junior you are in the ranks, the nearer the front of the procession you have to be – and that means that, if you don't know what you're doing, there is no one in front of you to follow. Worse still, there are several very experienced yet helpless people behind you who know exactly what you should be doing but are unable to save you from yourself! Very often, of course, there's a verger to lead you, which works a treat until for some reason you're not supposed to follow him anymore! And just when you think you've got to grips with one configuration, the service is held at a different altar or in another chapel and everything changes.

None of that would be so bad if I had the sort of personality that just shrugged off my mistakes. But I'm not like that, I'm afraid. If I get it wrong, it's bad enough that I look like a complete idiot. Far worse for me is knowing that I have messed it up for the rest of the team. So it's for that reason that I've probably developed a bit of a reputation by now for being the one who says, "I'm sorry if this sounds stupid, but what happens when...?"

It's amazing how often it then transpires that no one else had quite worked it out either, so my question ends up helping the whole team. Just hold that thought as we move on.

During his homilies for the Triduum, from Maundy Thursday to Easter Day, the Dean was very careful to stick only to Mark's account of the events leading up to and during the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. He pointed out that it is very easy for us, having all four Gospel accounts, to meld them together, thereby losing the particular focus of each Evangelist.

This morning, I want to try and be just as forensic using John's account, especially in the way in which he portrays the disciple Thomas. We all think we know who Thomas is – or at least, we all know his nickname, Doubting Thomas. But if we pay more careful attention to John's Gospel we see another side of him.

Thomas appears four times in John's account, and it's only in this Gospel that we actually hear him speak. The portion we've just heard is the third time that we encounter Thomas. So what are the previous two and why do they matter?

The first occasion is in chapter 11, when Jesus and the disciples are told that their friend Lazarus is ill, but Jesus won't go to see him. Earlier in the passage we are told that Jesus is under threat of being stoned to death if he returns to that area. When he tells the disciples that Lazarus has died and that he is going back to Bethany, Thomas says,

'Let us also go, that we may die with him.' (John 11:16)

It's ambiguous as to whether Thomas means they should all die with Jesus (who is likely to be killed) or with Lazarus (who has already died). Either way, what is noticeable is the language he uses – it's all "us" and "we". Thomas speaks as a team-player, someone who is more interested in the well-being of the whole team than he is in himself.

The next occasion we come across him is at the beginning of chapter 14, after Jesus has washed the disciples' feet on Maundy Thursday. In that famous passage, Jesus tells them:

'In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?... And you know the way to the place where I am going.' (John 14:2,4)

Thomas replies, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' and gets the response, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.' (John 14:5,6)

Notice Thomas asking the question on behalf of the whole team. The collective language is there again: we do not know – how can we know the way? The whole team might fail if I don't pluck up the guts to ask.

So now we come to this morning's Gospel reading. And the first thing to notice, of course, is that Thomas isn't there. This episode is later on Easter Day, and things have turned rather nasty outside. The missing body of Jesus is causing a bit of trouble. So the disciples have locked themselves in a room for safety's sake – but where is Thomas? We have no idea and we never get to find out.

Jesus appears, speaks to them, shows them his wounds and even breathes the Holy Spirit on to them – the very Advocate he promised them back in chapter 14. And Thomas isn't there.

When Thomas comes back and the others excitedly tell him what has happened, his language gives away what he is feeling inside. Every personality type has a shadow side – the way someone reacts negatively if they are put under pressure or made to feel uncomfortable. If you want to see the shadow side of a team-player, exclude him or her from the team, and then watch as everything becomes deeply personalised.

That's what we see here – no longer is Thomas talking about “we” and “us”. Now it's all about “me”.

‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’ (John 20:25b)

Thomas is desperately wrestling with having missed out on seeing the risen Christ. The rational part of him is telling himself that it was just unfortunate timing, that he couldn’t help it if he wasn’t there. The irrational side is feeling that Jesus deliberately excluded him and that he is no longer one of the gang – even though no one is treating him any differently.

It’s a whole week later before Jesus appears again and we can only imagine how this has been eating away at Thomas in the meantime. But this time Thomas is the sole purpose of visit. Or is he?

No one else has been allowed to touch the risen Christ – in fact, Mary Magdalene was expressly told, ‘Do not hold on to me.’ (John 20:17) But now Thomas is invited to do exactly that. He puts his fingers into the wounds which no longer bleed but will never heal. And what follows is a deeply personal expression of faith, ‘My Lord and my God!’ This is Thomas responding to Jesus for himself alone, because in the end that is all that matters. Never mind the team - what do you believe, Thomas?

So is this second appearance in the room only in order to mend Thomas? Somehow I don't think so. There's a big hint at the end of our Gospel passage. We are told:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. (John 20:30)

The inference is that the risen Jesus needs to show himself many times to the disciples before he finally ascends into heaven. For all his teaching them about what will happen, Jesus' resurrection is still so unimaginable that seeing him once is not sufficient, especially in a politically volatile and dangerous situation in which the disciples are under pressure simply to disband and run away.

Their faith in his resurrection needs to be consolidated and this appearance to Thomas has a vital purpose. It confirms absolutely to the rest of the group that this is no ghost in front of them. Jesus has died and is still dead, yet he is also risen. Thomas the team-player is given the privilege of finding that out on behalf of the rest of the team. No one else is offered that opportunity – but seeing Thomas put his hands in Jesus' wounds is sufficient for all the rest to believe it is true. Thomas' relationship is put right with Jesus and he is rehabilitated to the team. Indeed, the last time John tells us about him, he is one of the seven there on the beach in Galilee when Jesus commissions Peter. (John 21:1,2)

So what can we take away from this today?

Firstly, through the consolidated experiences of encountering the resurrected Jesus, this ordinary yet extraordinary bunch of people committed themselves to following him even when he was no longer there to see. Their testimonies and actions have been documented and passed on, in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that two thousand years later we are just the current generation of Christians who have come to believe for ourselves.

Secondly, although we may learn our faith through our families or at school or by being part of a church congregation, ultimately each of us has to have a moment of personal revelation – a point at which we encounter the crucified yet risen Christ for ourselves and confess “My Lord and my God”. It is only then that belief in Jesus Christ becomes truly life-changing.

Finally, we can take strength in Jesus’ assertion, ‘Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’ (John 20:29b) We are those people and our task is to be witnesses to the truth as we experience it. In our words and our actions we can show that Jesus Christ is our Lord and our God. And in that way we play our part in passing on the Good News of his Kingdom.