

Easter Two: Thomas

It is such a pity that today is Low Sunday. Not only because it was so very lovely to be bursting at the seams with visitors last Sunday but because the readings are so very important. This morning's gospel story is one of my many favourite stories. Of all the wonderful exciting things that could be drawn from the Scriptures this morning there are three that I will share with you.

Firstly that the doubts or questions that Thomas expressed – on behalf of us all – were not only allowed by the resurrected Christ but were rewarded! And from this I would conclude that doubts and questions are central to the growth of faith and to be allowed and even encouraged. Let's look a little bit closer. Thomas is not there when Jesus first makes himself known to the disciples so in his defence his need for proof is no greater than theirs. They got to see for themselves and he wants to see for himself. And his need for proof is rewarded by Jesus the resurrected Christ. I believe we are to read from this that questions are a normal sanctioned part of the way we come to faith and how we grow in faith. For Thomas was someone who had an existing relationship with Jesus and obviously Jesus thought questions were not a relationship ender! The faith that Thomas had the other side of those questions and the answers to them was stronger and would support him through all that

was to come. So let us take heart and not be afraid to have a real relationship with the resurrected one.

Secondly that whatever sins we forgive or retain are taken by Christ as forgiven or retained. That is, what we do has eternal consequences for others. We effectively determine whether others experience release and liberty or punishment and guilt, heaven or hell. In Matthew's gospel St Peter is told that he is given the keys of the kingdom of heaven and that whatever he binds on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever he loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven. But here it is said to all the disciples gathered – it is a core task given to the gathered believers. And in many ways this is the clearer statement that one of the gifts/responsibilities/consequences of being a person of faith is to choose to free or loosen those who are bound by sin – starting with those who are bound to us by sin and its consequences.

What might the world, and our particular world, look like if we applied this commandment? Has not so much of the history of church and individuals of faith been to use our doctrine and teachings to condemn others? What would happen if we looked for opportunities to forgive? To forgive our parents for being too human and ordinary. To forgive our children for being no more perfect – and in different ways – than ourselves? To forgive our siblings for making different choices – the usual

mixture of good and bad, wise and foolish? To forgive our friends and colleagues and neighbours for the capacity to disappoint and to betray, to outshine and to disappear at vital moments? To forgive those who are too different and those who are too much the same? To forgive the well known and the nameless “others”?

Thirdly I want to point out that the resurrected Christ still bears the scars of his experience of being human – that God’s own self is changed by becoming one of us. And I appreciate that in some ways this is a scandalous claim. Although no more scandalous than the original claim that God the almighty eternal one would deign to take on human flesh, indeed it is the logical outworking of that same claim. Just as Jacob who wrestles with God or the unnamed angel and was struck in the hip socket and forever after walked with a limp, is wounded and changed forever by the encounter, so too is Christ.

We can understand this in a number of ways which need not detract one from the other. Firstly that it is offered as a “proof” to the doubters hearing the story – through Thomas’ questions and reassurance they/we too can be reassured and convinced. That Christ still bears the scars of sacrifice after his resurrection can be understood as some measure of the enormity of his suffering for us and the greatness of his gift. And as I have come to understand it, the scars are a measure of the power

and enormity of the encounter of the divine and human. The divine becoming human was not a simple one way process but a deep realignment of heaven and earth, of temporal and eternal matters, of life and life eternal that has forever changed our relationship with the divine. As God said through the prophet Isaiah "I have carved you in the palms of my hand", so now, with Thomas we see that the hands of Christ are scarred by the experience of being human and of carrying the love of humanity into the tomb of death and the day of resurrection.

Was there ever any love so passionate, or enduring, or life giving? Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.