

Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

In the 40 days following the revelation of the risen Jesus at Easter, there's a distinct pattern to the behaviour of the disciples familiar to anyone who has been through a time of shock or trauma. It begins with numbness, moves through a kind of denial towards an awakening discovery of the wonder and the power of what happened. For the disciples who will receive the power of the Holy Spirit there is a dawning realisation, not just of the fact that Jesus had risen, but of what that resurrection meant. From the cowering, uncertainty of the upper room, trembling in their isolation, they move to an explosion of evangelism such as the world has ever seen.

It was probably the most exciting period in the whole of Biblical History. Although the disciples also visited Galilee, most of the action takes place in Jerusalem and in the upper room where Jesus comes to them. He had met with two of their number on the Emmaus Road and they returned full of wonder at all they had seen and heard. Now He comes among them in person with the familiar word of Peace. Thomas was determined not to accept the truth until he had seen it with his own eyes. Somehow he had been the one disciple who had missed it all! We don't know why but can surely appreciate his frustration. How come, he of all of them had been bypassed?

Did he perhaps feel guilty because he ought to have been present but was off on some errand of his own or was he simply desolate because he had not seen or heard what the others had? You can understand his frustration when everyone else is talking about a wonderful experience of meeting and speaking with someone who was dead and buried but who now was alive and he just doesn't get it all.

What a dampener on the rest in their enthusiasm, what pain and disappointment for the one left out. It's only natural that Thomas would be resentful, critical or angry. The accounts of Jesus' appearance seemed so impossible, so beyond understanding and I think we all recognise the frustration of hearing people enthuse about some wonderful, experience which left us cold and excluded. ***"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."***

They tell us in the media that no one goes to church now and yet last Sunday it was a thrill to see the church packed for Easter worship. I recently had a conversation with someone who didn't think we ever needed to come. "I get more from walking by myself in the hills around Peebles." I

suppose many would agree with that but if God has called us to meet together, offered His Holy Spirit of power, promised to be there in our midst whenever we gather in the Name of Jesus is it not a crowning arrogance for us to prefer our own company or to look elsewhere for Him, other than the Cross or the empty tomb. It is almost as if we say, *Lord thank you for all that you have done and all that you have promised but we prefer something a little less demanding where no change is required of us. Being in Your company is not as attractive to us as being in our own.*

Imagine the frustration however if we discover that great things have been happening in our absence and we have missed them. We weren't there. Of course you don't need to be absent to miss out on what is going on. You can be sitting right in the middle of it all and still be left absolutely unmoved while God is pouring out His power on the church. One of the most incredible experiences of my life took place during the long University summer vacation when I was working in a psycho-geriatric ward of a hospital. It was around 1970 and men were walking on the Moon. The pictures were beamed back to our TV sets. I had gathered about 20 patients around the TV for the evening and was so excited by what I was seeing.

Yet here I was in a room with 20 other people none of whom got the significance of it. It's quite possible in a church to be so determined that prayer or spiritual blessing has nothing to do with you, that it passes you by. You don't know what all the fuss is about and cannot understand why lives are changed, prayers are answered and people are blessed. You might well sympathise with Thomas' hard headed response. ***"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."***

Maybe out of resentment, maybe out of a naturally thrown character, Thomas was determined not to accept without proof, without personal experience the joy which the others had been given. It takes a particular kind of stubbornness to be in the midst of so much blessing and be left unmoved and the phrase *Doubting Thomas* has become part of everyday speech. Some claim the title with pride and we all know folk, in families as much as in churches who like to stand on the edge of things looking in; critical, unyielding, unmoved, cynical and hard of heart. The wonderful thing is that Jesus in His infinite patience and love comes to Thomas, stoops down to meet his stubbornness, ***"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."***

Whether by temperament or circumstance Thomas was a hard man to reach but Jesus, standing before Him stretched out his wounded hands. It was a gesture not so much of final proof, offering him the evidence of the marks on his body but rather of the wounds themselves. *Look Thomas, you say you will not believe unless you see the marks, I offer you the wounds of love. This is how much I have loved you.* It is a remarkable patience and Gracious Love that brought Him to offer

Himself to Thomas like this, an accommodation to his hardness and frustration. If he could not accept the testimony of his brothers and sisters, so lovingly offered why should God bother with him any further and yet in love for him Jesus came to him. He had no right to expect such a gesture but Jesus had come amongst us to take upon Himself our sinfulness.

He came into our world to suffer and to die so that our sins, our hardness of heart might be taken away and lovingly He showed the wounds inflicted upon Him for Thomas' sake. Thomas had really fallen into the most common trap of all, setting conditions for God's love. Do this for me and I will believe. The people around the cross had shouted to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, save yourself and us," In other words: "*You can be our Saviour but only on our terms, under our conditions, if we approve*" but, you know, when we set conditions for God like that, inevitably we are disappointed. God simply will not fall neatly into our categories and the plea, "*Lord if you do this for me, then I will believe*" simply doesn't wash.

Just as the crowds had continually asked Jesus for signs, just as John the Baptist had asked Jesus if he really was the One who was to come or should they look for another. Jesus reminded him of what had been said and done. The evidence is there if only our eyes will see and our hearts accept, the wounds are visible, His body is broken, His blood poured out. ***"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."*** Only then, recognising all that Jesus has done, he is able to say ***"My Lord and my God!"***

That declaration is found in John's Gospel because it is precisely what the whole Gospel is about. John Himself testifies, vs. 30-31 ***these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*** John would know that the other three Gospels were written, He would already have many of Paul's Epistles and the book of Acts on his shelf. His stated purpose in writing the Gospel is that we, like Thomas, like the other disciples might know Jesus as He is and believe in Him. For such a belief is life itself. Not just convinced of his teaching, not just to experience His power but to be in Him.

This is the whole Gospel that Jesus has come and called us to Himself so that we may acknowledge Him as our Lord and God!

There is no other way given to us to come to God. We cannot climb up into the heavens to meet Him, we cannot find Him for ourselves in the Hills, as if he was a precious metal to be mined out of the human soul. We cannot discover Him by looking for signs and wonders for He has come to us Himself, and invites us to belong to Him.

In some ways Doubting Thomas has become something of a hero for modern thinkers. It's fashionable to air your doubts and, of course it's not difficult for we are all beset by them. We

never lose them, nor should we, for there will always be many questions in our minds but, as one commentator has written: *"We do not come to faith by having all our questions answered. Faith sets its mind and heart on things unseen and eternal."*

Jesus' words to Thomas are something of a challenge, not to get bogged-down by our fears not hide-bound by our human frustrations or anger, not to miss out on the blessing through carelessness, envy or pique but in love and in grace to hear the Good News shared by those to whom Jesus has come and made Himself known. These words are for us, now, today. ***"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*** We read the testimony of the witnesses and we are invited to receive the good news and like Thomas to say, not just with our lips but with our whole hearts and lives:
"My Lord and my God!"