

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 12th April 2015 11am

Revd Val Reid

John 20: 19-31

Acts 4: 32-35

I remember very clearly the first time I was invited to go and have supper with my aunt and uncle on my own.

I must have been about 8.

No parents, no grandmother or great-grandmother, no little brother – just me. I felt very important.

And I was given an important task to do.

I had to carry the bowl of fruit salad from the fridge in the kitchen into the dining room.

I can still remember the awful moment when I knew I had dropped it.

I stood frozen in horror as it hit the carpet in slow motion.

It is amazing how high a fountain of fruit salad with accompanying juice can go!

And from that moment I had my label – I was clumsy.

You would be surprised how many times over the next few years someone in the family would find the opportunity to say – oh, don't give it to her to carry, remember the fruit salad.... and then they would grin.

It is very easy to give people labels.

And very hard to lose them again.

It took me a long time as a competent adult carrying fragile things – even babies – to realise that I didn't always drop things.

In fact, because I can be clumsy – I do know that – I often take extra care with things that might cause a lot of mess.

And I also know that my unhandiness with spillable fruit doesn't define who I am.

Or not entirely...

Our gospel reading today is about someone who has been given a label – 'Doubting Thomas'.

I want to unpack that label a little.

To explore what's behind it.

And to ask what Thomas brings to discipleship that might make him a role model for many of us.

In John's gospel, we meet Thomas on three occasions.

And each time he has something interesting and challenging to say.

The first time we hear Thomas speak is when Jesus is given the news that his friend Lazarus has died.

He tells his disciples that he will head for Judaea, to meet up with Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary in Bethany.

The disciples are nervous.

'It is not long since the Jews there were wanting to stone you. Are you going there again?'

But Thomas says, 'Let us also go and die with him'.

This doesn't sound like the comment of someone who is a doubter.

This is someone who has the courage to look fear in the face.

Someone who knows the risks.

Someone who is committed to Jesus, even though he knows where that commitment might lead.

The second time we encounter Thomas is during the 'farewell discourses' – the long talks about life, death, God, the universe and everything else which John has Jesus share with his disciples at the last supper.

During this meal, Judas leaves to betray Jesus, his close friend.

Peter tells Jesus that he will lay down his life for him, though Jesus tells him that he is deceiving himself – before the cock crows that night, he will deny him three times.

But Thomas has the courage to be honest with Jesus, and with himself.

Jesus says, 'Trust in God always; trust also in me. There are many dwelling-places in my father's house; if it were not so, I should have told you; for I am going to prepare a place for you.'

I can imagine most of the disciples nodding wisely.

Yes.

Yes of course.

Nice thought.

It is Thomas who has the courage to say, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?'

It's often easy, isn't it, when someone says something that we don't understand, to look intelligent and pretend it makes sense.

I must admit I am always grateful when someone else has the courage to ask the question I was dying to ask, but was afraid to because I didn't want to look like a fool.

And in this moment, it is clear that Thomas has asked the right question.

Jesus responds with one of his great 'I am' sayings, one that has given encouragement and hope to so many people over 2,000 years.

'I am the way, the truth and the life.'

It's not about a map.

It's about a relationship.

The third time we encounter Thomas is in the passage which we heard read today. It is the evening of the first day of the week, the Sabbath, the day when Mary, Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved found the empty tomb, and Mary encountered Jesus in the garden.

But despite this, the disciples were hidden away behind locked doors, terrified of what would happen to them because they were associated with Jesus. Thomas is not with them. Where was he?

Perhaps he was one of those people who likes to be on their own when dealing with great grief.

Or I wonder, bearing in mind his courage when Jesus first set off for Judaea after Lazarus' death, whether he was the only one who didn't feel he needed to hide away from the authorities?

We don't know.

But he wasn't there.

He wasn't there when Jesus appeared, and greeted the disciples, and showed them his hands and his side, and breathed peace on them.

And then the disciples 'keep telling him' about the risen Jesus, about what he did and what he said, and rubbing it in that he wasn't with them.

He hasn't seen what they had seen.

He hasn't encountered the risen Lord.

The community of survivors is broken.

What Thomas wants to do is to share their experience.

To see Jesus face to face.

To touch his wounds.

To know.

Not just with his mind.

But with his body.

He has known and loved Jesus in the flesh.

This new relationship – this post-resurrection relationship – whatever it is – must have the authentic hallmarks of the friend he has known.

And these things are given to him.

There is no indication in the text that Jesus is annoyed.

That he criticises Thomas for his unreasonable demands.

That he thinks Thomas should simply accept what he has been told second hand and get on with it.

Jesus comes among them.
Offers them peace once again.
And then offers himself to Thomas.

In most translations, as in the New Revised Standard version we heard read this morning,
Jesus says to him, 'Do not doubt but believe.'

But the word *doubt* is not there in the Greek text.

A literal translation would read:

Do not be unbelieving, but believing.

It's the only time this pair of words occur together in the fourth gospel.

The focus is not on the doubt, but on the faith.

What does it take for you to believe?

Here – have it.

And in response, Thomas offers the most complete confession of faith in all four gospels.

My Lord and my God.

Thomas is not a doubter.

Thomas is someone who is willing to ask the awkward questions.

Someone who is willing to be honest.

Someone who is willing to make himself vulnerable in order to get at the truth.

Someone who is willing to voice the unspoken hopes and fears and demands of each of us.

I keep thinking about Thomas as I read the verses from Acts, which the Lectionary compilers
have given us to read this morning.

*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed
private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.*

How wonderful it sounds.

What a perfect community.

Everything held in common.

Not a needy person among them.

No dissent or disagreement.

The apostles were ideal leaders.

They sorted everything out.

Everyone lived happily ever after.

If it sounds like a communist fairy tale, that's because it probably is.

Commentators have been debating for years whether these little summaries of early
Christian life are 'edifying fictions' supplied by Luke.

Or whether they are idealised portraits of something that actually occurred.

You'll notice that no-one thinks that they are literally true.

And if we read on into chapter 5 of Acts, we'll discover that Ananias and his wife Sapphira tried some tax avoidance strategies.

In a response that is far more severe than even Ed Miliband has promised, both of them end up dead.

No, this picture-perfect vision of a community in which everyone is happy to share all their possessions equally, is a tad economical with the truth.

Thomas is a refreshing antidote to this.

Thomas was not willing to settle for idealistic fictions.

He wanted reality.

He didn't want to whitewash the painful truth.

He wanted to touch the wounds.

As we move towards the election – asking difficult questions, probing till we get to the truth, not being willing to settle for superficial platitudes – these are all qualities that seem important.

The papers are full of politicians making assertions.

We will restore this country to its former glory.

We will keep out unwanted immigrants.

We will slash the benefits bill.

We will reform inheritance tax.

We will save the NHS.

If we just nod wisely and accept what we are told, we will not be voting intelligently or faithfully.

We need to be prepared to look long and hard at the difficult stuff, the two – or three – or four sides to every issue.

We have a duty to ask, to challenge, to read between the lines, to research, to bring ourselves to a place where we know what we are talking about, know who we are voting for and why.

There are no simple answers in politics, and no perfect political party.

If we think it is easy we delude ourselves.

But the theology is in the wrestling with issues we care about.

In not colluding with the stories the media use to sell papers.

In being honest with ourselves.

And demanding honesty of our political representatives.

And it seems to me that this is also an important way to approach our life as a faith community.

Over the last few weeks, letters in the Methodist recorder have taken issue with the new booklet produced by the Methodist Church – ‘A gift of Easter’.
It doesn’t engage with recent Biblical scholarship.
It doesn’t relate our Easter Faith to the suffering of today’s world.
It doesn’t leave space for theological enquiry.

I think we sell our faith short if we try to present the Easter story as though it were simple. As though to affirm the resurrection just involves saying the right words. And believing them as hard as we can.
Putting a brave face on the criticisms thrown at us by the Richard Dawkins’s of this world. Just over thirty years ago, David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, tried to challenge a simplistic approach to Easter faith.
The resurrection was more than just a conjuring trick with bones, he said.

The following day, of course, press headlines quoted, scandalised:
‘Bishop says resurrection just a conjuring trick with bones.’

It takes courage to probe beneath the surface.
To speak the truth as we see it.
To ask for answers, and to wait until we receive them.

Thomas had to wait a week.
I bet that was a long week.

As members of a church facing declining numbers across the UK – and here in Hinde Street – how do we respond?
Do we pretend that everything is OK, like the ‘edifying fiction’ Luke gives us about the early church communities?
Or do we align ourselves with Thomas, and be open about our questions, our need for reassurance, our demand for the presence of Christ in our lives?

Yesterday evening saw the world premiere of a new opera at the Barbican.
Between worlds.

Based on the events of 9/11.

Is this a suitable subject for opera, the critics are asking?

Yes, says Deborah Warner, the director.

Yes, says Tansy Davies, who composed the music.

Yes, says Nick Drake, who wrote the libretto: because in facing the horror, we learn something crucial about the human condition.

There were 102 minutes between the first plane going in, and the second tower going down.

During those 102 minutes, half a million pager messages were sent.

At first, to find out what was happening.

But then when they knew there was no way out, no hope – to communicate with the people they were closest to.

Please go on living.

Please go on loving.

That's what the opera is about, says Nick Drake:

We invite the audience to confront horror and darkness, but we don't want to leave them there.

What the people in the towers really needed to say to each other in the end was: love.

The words and the music go to some very dark places, but if you go deep enough, it's universal, and there is life there.

And the music is full of that.

That is message I take from our gospel reading.

That is the resurrection story.

Honesty opens the door to God.

Thomas is not left with his insecurity.

The horror of the crucifixion.

His exclusion from the community.

Being willing to face the darkness...

And name it...

And ask for help...

He is met by the risen Christ.

Put your finger here and see my hands.

Reach out your hand and put it in my side.

Do not be unbelieving, but believing.

Amen.