

“Jesus said to Thomas, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’”

Throughout history, poor old Thomas has had his name prefixed with the word “doubting”. From this post-resurrection appearance in the upper room onwards, Church tradition has saddled him with this somewhat pejorative character attribute. In doing so, Thomas is set apart from his fellow disciples as the only one, apparently, who did not have sufficient faith to believe in the risen Christ.

But is this fair? And is this almost universal interpretation of the incident an accurate representation of what actually went on? If we examine other Gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances, it quickly becomes clear that Thomas is certainly not the only disciple who had problems in accepting the reality of Jesus’ resurrection. In Luke 24:1-11 the women who visited the tomb were told by “two men in dazzling clothes” that Jesus had been raised from the dead. But when the women returned and gave the amazing news to the apostles the men were dismissive: “these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (24:11). Granted, in their culture, the testimony of women would not stand up in court; they were considered to be fanciful creatures at best, but the disciples knew these women well, so clearly, Thomas was not the only one who needed physical proof to convince him that Jesus was alive. It is not right to say that Thomas, alone amongst the apostles, doubted. So what else might be going on in this passage that left the unfortunate Thomas with his “title”?

In his book *The Mystery of Christ*, the American Trappist monk Thomas Keating suggests another, all-too-common, human experience. We are not told why Thomas was absent when Jesus first made himself visible to the apostles (John 20:19-23); only that at Thomas’ next meeting with his brothers he was greeted by their joyful excitement: “We have seen the Lord!” Thomas’s reaction, believes Keating, is more suggestive of hurt pride and a sense of personal rejection than of genuine doubt (“Why didn’t Jesus come when I was there? Aren’t I as good as the others?”). For Keating, Thomas reacts to the hurt of his supposed rejection by making petty conditions the price of his belief (“Unless I see the mark of the nails...”).

Jesus appears to the apostles a second time, and on this occasion Thomas is present. Jesus takes Thomas at his word, inviting him to place his finger in the nail prints and his hand in His side. By appearing when Thomas wasn’t there, Jesus was giving Thomas the opportunity to believe without seeing, which carries an even greater blessing, but the newfound faith of Thomas once he had seen Jesus, verbally at least, surpasses all the other disciples. He is the only disciple we hear of who openly addresses Jesus as God. Wow, what a turn around.

It is possible that we could feel uncomfortable resonances with Keating’s interpretation of the reason for Thomas’s so called doubt. Childhood experiences of feeling slighted, of being “left out”, of not being “chosen”, when others seem to have been, can be devastating, and such feelings are still capable of tripping up the otherwise mature adult. I have known churches, especially during the charismatic movement in the late 80s, where church members who have been present when there has been a tangible presence of the Holy Spirit at a service, have been frowned upon by those who were not present at the time. “What’s so special about them? They think they’re better than us” when these people were actually upset at having missed out on the experience and found the joy of the others hard to handle, especially if the joy wasn’t tempered with tact and sensitivity.

In this passage, Jesus challenges us to look for our security and happiness, not in any instances of physical “proof” of His presence, but through putting down strong spiritual roots which are plunged deeply into the mystery of God and the truth of His word. My challenge to you (and me) is not to be jealous of the spiritual experiences of others, but to rejoice in them, knowing that we are actually more blessed when we can believe without seeing. It’s not so much about our reaction to those who have had deeply moving experiences, it’s about our reaction to the grace of God which brought about the experience. Let us be encouraged and uplifted by anyone’s experience of God, it should enrich us all and help us to recognise the God who loves us all, equally. Amen