

20140720StThomasSermon

May I begin this sermon by thanking Fr Keith, the Churchwardens and Parish council for inviting me to preside and preach at this auspicious occasion – the start of your 160years celebrations? As you most probably all know, St Thomas was a chapelry of St Paul's parish until 1947. So we at St Paul's, being your mother church, tend to look at you as one of our three successful and independent daughters; the other two being the Parishes of St Mark's Athlone and St George's Silvertown. And we look at you with pride at what you have achieved, the way you have adapted over the last 160 years from being a missionary chapel and school for farm workers to a highly successful family church you are today. Well done and may the Lord continue to bless you.

I'm not sure if Peter Hart in his historical research has come across any thing which speaks of why this chapelry, now parish, was dedicated to St Thomas. Our Gospel reading this morning was also part of the Gospel reading for the Second Sunday of Easter this year. At that time I saw a cartoon on Facebook. [show cartoon]. For those who perhaps can't see it clearly because the copy I found is not a high quality one, I'll briefly describe it. There are three obviously biblical characters in the cartoon and the one is saying to the other two: "All I'm saying is that we don't call Peter 'Denying Peter' or Mark 'Run-Away-Naked Mark' so why should I be saddled with this title?" and one of his companions response: "I can see your point Thomas, but it is really time to move on."

Nicknames are something that some of us are saddled with. Teachers, certainly at boys' schools in my day, perhaps being the biggest victims. We give nicknames to people we respect and love; these often relating to their physical attributes. Tall people are called 'Lofty' while I had a Maths master who was short of stature and needless to say he was called 'Shortie'. Reasons for some nicknames are lost in the mists of time. My English master, Alf Morris, was known to four generations of schoolboys as 'The Kid', quite why I never discovered.

Thomas's nickname has become proverbial. 'Doubting Thomas' is what he has been saddled with and perhaps his companions are right, it is time for him to move on. And one of the best ways of moving on is to find another nickname. Just looking at that short Gospel passage I can see three nicknames that are more positive than "Doubting".

The first one is one that I can relate to because it relates to my character traits too. Why don't we call Thomas 'Questioning Thomas'? Thomas was not willing just to go along with the crowd. Others might **tell** him that Jesus had risen from the Tomb but he wanted proof. He questioned things until he had satisfied himself about how things worked, how they happen. Before I was ordained I worked for over twenty years in a Chemical Pathology Laboratory as a Medical Technologist. It was our job to do blood and urine tests to assist doctors to make diagnoses on their patients. Did the patient have a heart attack? We in the laboratory never saw the patient but the elevated cardiac enzymes answered the question for us – yes, he most probably had had one. Had Jesus risen from the Tomb? *'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,'* said Thomas.

Another nickname we could saddle Thomas with is 'Faithful Thomas' because with the appearance of Jesus, Thomas moves from Doubt to Faith. A few chapters back in St John's Gospel, we find Thomas encouraging the other disciples to stay faithful to Jesus. Jesus had said that he wished to go to Bethany to see Mary and Martha, sisters of the recently departed Lazarus. The disciples tried to discourage the visit because it was too close to Jerusalem and the Pharisees might have Jesus and his disciples arrested and perhaps executed. It is Thomas who says *'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'* Because of Thomas's faithfulness, the disciples agree and even though it may have meant death for them all they go and they witnessed Jesus raising Lazarus from the grave. And even after Jesus' death and the post resurrection appearance that he missed, Thomas remained faithful. He stayed with the other disciples, even with his doubts and a week later he was rewarded - not for his doubt but for his faithfulness. He saw the risen Jesus. I think Thomas's faithfulness is much stronger than his doubt.

A final nickname we can give to Thomas can be deduced from his response to Jesus' appearance in the upper room. As Thomas's questioning is answered by Jesus presence, he responds, *'My Lord and My God'*. He worships Jesus as Lord and God. 'Worshipping Thomas' is so much more positive than 'Doubting Thomas'. Thomas is filled with awe and wonder – a response we all should have when we come to worship God. We, like Thomas, are here today to encounter Jesus. We encounter him in word and sacrament. We encounter him in our prayers. Is this your experience? If not, then perhaps you are like Thomas, doubting.

Prayer can be such an area open for our doubt, can't it? How many of us haven't prayed to God for something, the healing of a loved one only to find that the loved one is not healed and dies; for a job only to find that our application was not successful; assistance out of our depression, our financial straits, our relationship problems – yet we feel that God hasn't heard our prayers. We begin to doubt whether God is really interested in us, in our problems, whether God even listens to prayers at all!

I'm reminded of a poem by the Welsh poet and Anglican priest in the Church of Wales, R S Thomas. He describes prayer as gravel thrown by a lover at the window of his beloved hoping to attract his beloved's attention. As he peers up at the window he wonders if perhaps he saw a movement of the curtain. Let me read you the poem:

Prayers – like gravel

Flung at the sky's window

hoping to attract the loved one's attention...

I would have refrained long since

but that – peering once through locked fingers –

I thought I detected the movement of a curtain.

The more I thought about our Gospel passage, the more I came to realise that the message of this passage is not about Thomas's movement from doubt to faith. I believe that Faith and Doubt are all on the same continuum and we move up and down that continuum depending on our current situation as we journey through life. Did you notice how Thomas is called 'the Twin'? I suspect that this title implies that he has a twin brother or sister. But I would like to think that this presents the two sides of Thomas's character: Thomas the doubter; Thomas the model disciple.

If our Christian Communities were only filled with people of undoubting faith, it would imply that our Christian communities are all about creating a place where everyone is perfect where everyone has faith. Tennyson said *There lives more faith in honest doubt, Believe me, than in half the creeds.* No, a Christian Community should be a place where we can show our scars and our imperfections, our doubts.

I found this rather fascinating interchange in the Celtic Daily Prayer,

Question: What are the only human-made things in heaven?

Answer: The wounds in the hands, feet, and side of Christ.

We humans need to have a God with scars. Scars are physical reminders of struggles we have endured, bodily and emotionally, but they are also an essential part of the healing process. For Thomas, his healing had to be proof of those scars which he wanted to feel. John never tells us whether Thomas did put his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in his side but the artist Caravaggio has a magnificent picture of Thomas with his forefinger right in that wound in Jesus' wounded side.

The scars of Jesus dignify the pain of all of us. Every person is precious and beautiful to God, even if that beauty is scarred or locked behind layers of fear, chaos, and sin. Jesus appears at the door of our locked panic rooms of defeat and says Peace, I'm here! He comes, not to turn our failures into success nor to make us immune to failure, or even take away the danger of failure. He does not come to make the loved one well, ensure that we get the job that

we've applied for, remove our depression or our anxiety – whether it is financial or relational. No, he stands at our side in the hurt, to empower us in our discouragement, to strengthen us in our self-doubts.

My next door neighbour, the Rev Reeve has told me of some of the plans you have to celebrate your 160th Anniversary. I'm please it is not only a celebration looking backwards but also looking forward. Small groups have been allotted tasks and areas where Church-growth can take place. These small groups will be commissioned later in this service. As you work on these groups and committees some of you will succeed, some may not. Perhaps for you, God does not seem to be answering your prayers and doubt will start to creep in.

But then remember your Patron Saint. In the cartoon I showed at the beginning of this sermon Thomas's friends said they understood his point but it is time to move on - it is time for you at St Thomas, Rondebosch to move on from Doubt to those other more positive nicknames for Thomas - Thomas the Questioner, Thomas the Faithful one, Thomas the Worshipper, Thomas who has felt the scars of Jesus and knows that he is still alongside you through your hurt and your discouragement.

Let us pray:

Most Holy Jesus, sight of your wounds removed the doubt Thomas had, enabling him to worship you as his Lord and his God. By our remembrance of those same wounds, help us in our fears and anxieties, our hurts and discouragement to see and understand our patron, Thomas as a well-rounded person worthy of imitating as we journey through our life. Amen.