

First Sunday after Easter
22/04/2020
Based on 1 Peter 1:3-9 and John 20:19-end

Reflection

The reading from 1 Peter today rings true. We certainly find ourselves in a time of trial. I don't know about you, but in this past week covid-19 has come closer to home. Two of our close friends have been seriously unwell with it, another has lost his brother and another is facing the loss of several friends who are currently in intensive care. It is a time of trial for sure and, when we find ourselves in circumstances such as these, it can be difficult to rejoice in the hope of the resurrection as Peter urges us to.

As I've prepared my reflections for last Sunday and this, I've been struck by how the key characters in our Gospel stories speak so powerfully into this difficulty. Last week it was Mary Magdalene and this week it's the apostle Thomas, the one who is commonly known as the doubter; the one who has been judged for his struggle to believe.

In today's passage, we find Thomas unconvinced by what the other disciples had told him about the sightings of the resurrected Jesus. We know that some who had heard these accounts believed, albeit a little tentatively, but Thomas hadn't seen for himself. We don't know where he was at the time, all we know is that he missed out on what the other disciples had seen and heard.

When Thomas does finally get the news, he struggles to believe what the others tell him without witnessing for himself. And it is the need to see for himself, that got him the name 'Doubting Thomas'. Some have taken this need for proof as a failing and, as a consequence, many Christians have come to see doubt as something to be avoided; to associate a sense of certainty with a strong faith and doubt with a shaky or weak faith. And as a consequence, many of us tend to bury our doubts, best we can, so to avoid the kind of judgment that has been piled on Thomas.

I guess we all know deep down that believing is not always as clear cut as we might like it to be. When difficult and devastating things happen in the world, as there are right now, or when life brings personal suffering our way, we can face the fragility of our believing and the discomfort of what it is to doubt.

To experience doubt of any kind is hard; it's not something we choose and, despite our best attempts at burying it, it has the capacity to creep over us like a fog. When it does descend, it can leave us feeling that the

way ahead is no longer clear; the familiar landmarks that guided and supported us in the past when our belief was clear and strong fall away leaving us feeling lost and alone. And to add insult to injury we can judge ourselves for what we perceive to be a failing on our part.

I think the story of Thomas, if we drop his judgement laden nickname, shows us something different. Yes, Thomas struggled to believe, I'm sure, as one of Jesus' close friends and followers, he wanted to trust what he had heard with all of his heart, but he didn't. What surprises me most in this is that, acknowledging his doubt, he didn't try to bury it. Instead Thomas chose to share his struggle to believe with Jesus himself. And it's moving to see how Jesus meets and accepts him in this; accepting the challenge made by Thomas without complaint or criticism. Through this honest encounter, Thomas shows us that both believing and doubting are integral parts of faith and, if we have the courage, we can share them with a God who will meet us right where we are.

We learn here that, contrary to popular perception, belief and doubt are not polar opposites that should be categorised as 'good' and 'bad'. We discover, through Thomas, that the two are intricately woven together and that God, who is present in both, invites us through our believing and our doubting to draw close and, what's more, when we do God enables us to bear spiritual fruit.

Shaking off the idea that belief and doubt are conflicting opposites is not easy; trusting that God does not condemn us for doubting and is present with us is not easy; allowing ourselves to be open about our doubts is not easy and remaining open to God in our doubting, as well as our believing, is not easy. To doubt at all is not easy. However, Thomas shows us that doubt might be the very thing that ultimately drives us deeper into God and, through it to bear spiritual fruit, so perhaps it's worth trying to embrace its threads.

Thomas' response to the news of the resurrection is so authentic and courageously expressed that it hardly seems fair that he has carried the label 'doubter' for so many years, with all the judgement associated with it. For me, it doesn't quite fit with who Thomas is. When all evidence pointed to the contrary, Thomas remained there with the other disciples. He waited in the fog of his own disbelief to see if Jesus would return and reveal the hope of the resurrection to him personally. This, for me, is more difficult and more daring than the simple act of believing; for me Thomas shows through his action the very definition of faith.

On reflection, I think there are better describing words for Thomas, perhaps brave, Honest, bold or dauntless are better words to use when we speak of him. Maybe it's time to reclaim him for who he really is and what he has to offer us. So, may we all find a way to meet God, in both

our doubting and our believing, in this time of trial and, in doing so, may we find our way to a place where we can rejoice that, in the words of Peter, *'By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection'* and join together in saying:
Christ has risen: he has risen indeed. Alleluia!