

St Brandon's 28 April 2019.

'Honest Thomas'

Just imagine the scene, and imagine, or remember, a time before instant messaging, phones and 24/7 communication...

It is Easter Day in the evening. Jesus' friends gather in an upper room, much as they did just a few days before when they shared the Passover meal with him.

But they are frightened: rumours are circulating and both the Roman and Jewish authorities are out to disprove them, stamp them out as fast as possible. As Peter discovered all too recently, they stand out, Jesus's Northern friends, and they will be targets for questioning, investigations and worse.

Let's pause there as we remember those friends of Jesus who this very Easter have lost their lives as they gathered to be with him in worship....

On the first Easter evening, the disciples are together and the doors are locked. Then Jesus comes. He makes himself known to them, through his miraculous appearance in a new body, but also through the evidence that somehow this is the *same* body, bearing fresh scars of crucifixion.

He is indeed Jesus, who was dead and is alive.

Who was lost to them, and is now restored.

Fear turns to love, grief turns to wonder, sorrow to joy.

He's alive!

And as Jesus breathes on them the breath of life, the Holy Spirit's power and presence become the seal, the guarantee of what they are seeing.

John's description of Jesus' actions and words demonstrates that his promises to his friends, recorded back in chapter 16, are all fulfilled. In this gospel the Spirit's power comes to the apostles directly through the risen Christ, before the greater outpouring that takes place at Pentecost.

And so, filled with the Spirit, the disciples are able to share the news: 'We have seen the Lord.'

Monday morning:

They gather joyfully to worship together, and as soon as the doors are closed, and locked, they all turn to Thomas.

'What? Anything much happen last night?'

There's an awkward pause before someone, probably Peter, exclaims, and they all join in ... *We have seen the Lord!*

Now how does Thomas respond- how would you or I respond?

One possibility would be to reply, 'Are you sure it was Jesus?'

(In the manner of the Scottish farmer who, on hearing we'd seen a golden eagle, replied that it was probably a buzzard!)

But no, Thomas doesn't do that, he doesn't doubt his friends' sincerity and faith.

He could have responded,

'That's great- you can believe that if you want, but I'm not going to risk it after all we've been through'

It's quite possible Thomas wasn't with them the previous evening because he was traumatised by Jesus' death and just needed to be on his own, it was all too much...

But Thomas is too committed to Jesus to dismiss the claim out of hand.

No, what he says, in essence, is this:

'I really hope this is true but I need to see for myself to be sure'

Thomas needs evidence. This is too big to take anyone else's word for it. He speaks honestly and with faith, not disbelief.

He wants to see for himself, and believe.

'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.'

Down through the ages that comment has earned Thomas the unenviable title which has become a byword for being dubious about anything: a *Doubting Thomas!*

It is even in the Oxford English Dictionary! But the OED also sheds light on the word 'doubt' and its Latin root *dubitare*, which means to be uncertain or hesitate

Because Thomas wasn't there when Jesus appeared, he hesitates...

Downcast and feeling left out, on the edge of the group, he hesitates. And he is honest.

We castigate him for that, as if doubt is an awful thing.

The theologian Paul Tillich says that doubt is not the opposite of faith, but it is a part of faith.

I agree with him, with the rider that, in the honesty of our doubts, we need to remain open to hear God and be guided by his Spirit, lest we close down and turn away from him.

However, because of the negative connotations we now give to the word 'doubt', especially in relation to faith, I'd rather we thought of this courageous apostle as **Honest Thomas**.

After all, to be honest, to weigh things up and want to know for ourselves, is healthy and life-giving. And I can think of many reasons why, to quote my parents, **Honesty is the best policy**.

Here are just two:

Firstly, questioning honestly helps us to learn and grow

Our grandsons are just growing out of the *Why* stage, now they are four, but for the past year they have asked more questions before breakfast than we adults do in a month! That natural inquisitiveness of children, making sense of the world and wanting to find things out, is also part of the child-likeness which Jesus told us is necessary to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. We need to ask, seek, knock, as Jesus also said, to work out our faith just as a child works out the landscape of their world, who they can trust, what is good ...

Thomas asks questions, and gets some amazing answers.

For example in John 14 when Jesus tells his friends he is going on ahead to prepare a place for them in his Father's house, and that they know the way, it is Thomas who voices their confusion: 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, how can we know the way...?'

And Jesus replies in some of the most memorable words in the gospels, 'I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life.'

Thomas's words are not brushed aside but rather lead to deeper understanding and faith, as in today's passage too.

Questioning honestly helps us to grow in our faith.

When we have doubts, let us bring them to God, wrestle with them, dig deep into the Bible, pray honestly, trusting that we are loved and heard as we do so. Because, secondly,

Jesus takes Thomas' honesty seriously.

The next week, we read, Jesus came to them again and showed Thomas his hands and side...

He did this out of love. He knew and understood exactly where Thomas was.

Imagine how Thomas must have felt!

And what he said and did- he fell down on his knees and declared 'My Lord and my God'.

Thomas is the first person recorded in the gospel account to say this directly to Jesus, to acknowledge his divinity and worship him. He becomes a model for us, that from doubt, fresh faith springs.

Thomas's whole life changed at that moment.

He went out to preach the gospel and spread the good news of Jesus. In India, Thomas is revered as the founder of the Church...

Yes, Jesus takes our honesty seriously.

We all come to him differently, to that point of recognising and acknowledging who Jesus is. For some people this happens when they are very young and they have never known a time when they did not believe, for others it is later in life, a longer or more complex journey.

I wonder how it has been, and is, for you?

I wonder if, like Thomas, you have sometimes felt on the outside of faith and worship, as if you have missed out?

I wonder if you feel the frustration of being expected to believe what other people tell you, or because of what they have experienced, and you are longing for Jesus to become real in your own life, to know and believe.

I hope that Honest Thomas will encourage you, that questioning and seeking helps us to learn and grow, and that Jesus takes our honesty seriously, not dismissing us but dealing personally with us to reassure, convince, inspire and guide us.

As we reflect on these things, let us keep silence for a few moments and then I will lead us in a short prayer:

Lord we thank you for Honest Thomas
and for all we can learn from him.

Thank you that you have made us to ask questions,
to want to find out for ourselves.

Thank you that you take our honesty seriously,
and care deeply about our doubts and struggles.

Thank you that when we are honest with you,
you show us new things, and enable us to see more clearly who you are and what you want for our lives.

Give us the courage to be honest in our walk with you,
to grow in our faith and in our love for you and for other people.

Amen