

Sermon

Sunday 11 April 2021

Lesson

St John 20: 19 – 29

In the night, under the cover of darkness, on the first day of the week and behind locked doors, Jesus, the Risen Christ, came and stood among the disciples. He said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Jesus showed them His torn hands and pierced side. On that first evening of the Resurrection, Thomas was not with the disciples; he was not in the room when Jesus appeared. Later, when the disciples told him of their experience, Thomas said, ‘Unless I see....I will not believe.’ One week later, again the disciples gathered under the cover of darkness in a house behind locked doors. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus appeared in their midst with the same greeting, ‘Peace be with you.’ Jesus spoke directly to Thomas: ‘Put your finger here and see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it in My side.’ Thomas said, ‘My Lord and my God!’

When first we think of the disciple Thomas we think of the doubter, but the Gospels suggest that there is more to the man than this. A

few days before the triumphal entry, Jesus and His disciples had narrowly escaped being stoned by a crowd in Jerusalem. Then came the appeal from Mary and Martha to Jesus to go to Bethany because their brother Lazarus was dying. The village of Bethany was not far from the walls of the Holy City. When the appeal came, the disciples protested that it was too dangerous; they would risk being captured and that would mean certain death. Realising that Jesus was determined to go to Lazarus, Thomas alone said, 'Let us go also, that we may die with Him.'

On the night before He died, seated with His disciples in the Upper Room, Jesus said, 'In My Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.....You know the place where I am going.' Many of the disciples may have wondered what Jesus meant, but it was Thomas who asked Him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Unjustly discarded as a doubter, Thomas is a man of courage and inquiry. It seems to me that he cared deeply about Jesus. It is possible that the sole reason that Thomas was not

with the disciples on that first night was because, in grief, he could not face being with them. Overwhelmed by the brutality of the crucifixion, by the traumatic loss of a such a friend, teacher and confidant, Thomas simply could not be with anyone. Perhaps he was comforting Mary, the mother of Jesus. Courage, spiritual searching and bereavement make Thomas a disciple with whom we can readily identify.

At evening, under the cover of darkness, Jesus 'appeared' to the disciples. In his conversion experience on the road to Damascus, Paul 'saw' Jesus, the Risen Christ, but what he saw was not seen by those who were with him. Paul described what he saw as being similar to that experienced by the apostles. The 'appearances' were an inner experience, an intimate encounter with the Holy. In Paul's letters, the verb used for 'appear' is quite specific: it means an apparition, an inner vision. It is something that is experienced and 'seen' within the consciousness, in the mind and heart. The 'appearance' of Jesus that night in that room in Jerusalem could not have been recorded on an iPhone. There was nothing physical to see.

‘Seeing’ Jesus, ‘seeing’ the Risen Christ, was and is an inner vision, a mystical experience. Christ is ‘seen’ with the ‘eye’ of the heart. It was utterly, utterly real and life-changing; it was life-changing because Christ was seen and felt in the soul.

In the Gospel story, when Jesus appeared a second time to the disciples Thomas was present. The experience Thomas had was, I believe, a personal one. Following His word of peace, *Shalom*, Jesus said to Thomas: ‘Put your finger here and see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it in My side. Thomas answered, ‘My Lord and my God.’ It is not clear if Thomas does touch Jesus but, if we enter the story for ourselves, the physicality and closeness of Jesus make His presence overpowering. Thomas said, ‘My Lord and my God.’

The declaration which is made by Thomas is an interesting one. Written towards the end of the first century, the Gospel of John has Thomas say, ‘My Lord and my God.’ Around that time, the Roman Emperor was Domitian, whose title was ‘Our Lord and God.’ It is possible that the evangelist is provocatively bringing into focus the

competing value system of Jesus with that of Rome. To say that 'Jesus is Lord and God' meant that Domitian was not. In the twenty-first century, in a world at times torn by conflict between peoples, violence within societies, selfishness, triviality, greed and a hint of nihilism, to say 'Jesus is Lord and God' is to make a stand for an altogether different kind of world.

In Jerusalem, under cover of darkness, in that room, the physicality of the Risen Christ, the bloody and broken body of Jesus, is no less potent in mediating the presence of the Sacred. The ethereal vision is packed with physicality. In and through Jesus, Thomas 'sees' God present in this world, the Spirit in the material. If we modernise the story, re-write it in the twentieth century, we could replace the Roman Empire with Hitler's Reich and the open wound of Jesus with a 'number indelibly printed on his arm, the number given to Him in the concentration camp before being led to the gas chamber.'<sup>1</sup> What now does this story mean?

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 15

Standing before Thomas, Jesus pointed to the number. Thomas declared, 'My Lord and my God.' In his apparition, his inner vision, Thomas saw God in the darkest, cruellest place on Earth, in the intolerable suffering and violence of humanity. He 'saw' the Transcendent God, the Mystery of heaven, there in the grim and grit of human suffering. More than that, Thomas felt God to be with him, utterly present to him.

If we close our eyes and enter the darkness of the scene, if we too can stand in that room and, through the eye of the heart, gaze upon Jesus, then we too will 'see' Him. Scripture is a doorway through which *we* glimpse God.

Amen.