

## **The feast of St Thomas – 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022**

### **Doubt and Truth**

‘By doubting,’ wrote the Eleventh century Theologian, Peter Abelard, ‘We are led to enquire and by enquiry we perceive the truth.’

One of the things that drew us to Christ Church is our statement of intent – strap-line, if you like – on the church website, ‘Seeking God through beauty in worship, honesty in our faith and doubt and service in our community.’ I like that second clause, ‘Honesty in our faith and doubt.’ Doubt leads to what Abelard calls ‘enquiry’ but we might call ‘discussion, exploration and argument’ and they can point us closer to the truth – or some of the truth; for 800 years after Peter Abelard the French humanist Andre Gide added, ‘Trust those who seek the truth but doubt those who say they have found it.’ Truth, particularly truth about God can never be owned, can never be complete and each time we see some aspect of truth it opens up new possibilities for doubt and so new opportunities to discover more. Doubt is essential to spiritual honesty and the disciple Thomas with his openness to doubt is the patron saint of all who doubt and question.

The Jews of Jesus’ time didn’t have a problem with questioning and challenging authority, even the religious authorities. They wouldn’t have called it ‘doubt’ but it grew from the same underlying intellectual and spiritual rigour. When the twelve-year-old Jesus was left behind in Jerusalem, his frantic parents found him in the temple asking questions and speaking with authority. He continued to question and challenge throughout his ministry and he didn’t mince his words: ‘The Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath,’ he insisted.

He was uncompromising. ‘There is no marrying or giving in marriage in heaven,’ he said to the lawyers. ‘You are quite wrong.’ And he was critical of the pharisees: ‘You tithe mint and rue but pay no attention to judgement and to love for God.’ His challenge to the lawyers, pharisees and temple authorities was in a long tradition of seeking to refine faith through argument. The Old Testament records those arguments and challenges even, sometimes, with God. Abraham argued with God over the destruction of the inhospitable city, Sodom. ‘If there are fifty virtuous people in the city – don’t destroy it! If there are thirty! If there are twenty?’

In a separate story, Moses was commanded by God to lead the Israelites out of exile in Egypt and protested that he couldn’t do it, he was no good at public speaking. God responded and appointed his brother Aaron to speak for him. Even Mary protested mildly, but with who knows how much private vehemence, ‘How can this be? I’m a Virgin!’

Doubt, disagreement, argument, and protest are not signs of irreverence, but of genuine interaction with the living God. They suggest that, like the believers of the Old Testament, we take faith seriously, and our relationship with God is growing and changing us. It is in the nature of God to be in relationship. In the Nicene Creed we proclaim Christ as ‘Eternally begotten of the Father.’ We believe God to be in an eternal process of flow, eternally begetting the Son who is in turn eternally begotten of the Father. Father and Son are eternally in relationship with the Holy Spirit. And the Trinity itself is in an eternal process of incorporating all of us – believers and non-

believers – into God’s self. Thomas and his doubt, and each of us with our wounds and fears and failures are destined to be caught up into the living consciousness of the Trinity.

Thomas’ scepticism at the news of Christ’s resurrection was, ‘I will not believe – not unless I see for myself.’ And because he wasn’t even sure he could trust his eyes not to be misled he added, ‘And feel the wounds for myself.’ This wasn’t obstinate, ‘blind unbelief’ but honest scepticism of the sort that many people today have about the reality of the resurrection. The truth mattered to Thomas, as it matters to us.

Some years ago, Colin and I were in Tibet in a Buddhist monastery and we watched a philosophy class taught as it has been for thousands of years. Pairs of Tibetan Buddhist monks acted out their argument. As each one made a verbal point it was accompanied by a physical movement of attack – and the partner responded with a verbal and physical counter-attack. The result was a cross between wrestling and dancing. It powerfully symbolised the involvement of our whole selves, mind body and spirit in the search for truth.

‘By doubting we are led to enquire and by enquiry we perceive the truth.’ Thomas’ robust statement of doubt led him to a physical encounter with the risen Christ and the truth he discovered – that Christ was indeed risen gave him new insight and a new understanding of the nature of the risen Christ.

Thomas, the doubter, alone among the disciples acclaimed Christ, not just as teacher, or Messiah, or the Son of the Living God - but as God himself: ‘My Lord and my God.’