

23 April 2017

A saint for the 21st century?

John 20.19-31

Acts 2.14a, 22-32

An American writer, who has done a lot of work in the spiritual development of children wrote a fascinating article a number of years ago, suggesting a wholly different model for the way in which we should enable and mark the stages of children's growth in faith.

His name is John Westerhoff, and he was writing I think either from the American Episcopalian or Presbyterian tradition.

The model that he had inherited from his tradition was one in which children are baptised into the faith as infants. Their faith is nurtured through Sunday School or Junior Church, and then many children are then confirmed around the age of 12 or 13, after which they are welcomed into the faith community of the church.

John Westerhoff speculated on the basis of his research into the way in which faith develops through childhood and adolescence, that 12 or 13 is not the age that children should be making a faith commitment for the rest of their lives.

He suggested that children should be baptised into the faith as infants; their faith should be nurtured in the church through an all-age community learning and worshipping programme.

At the age of 12 or 13 we should recognise that children are ready for a new stage in their spiritual development ... but that should not be marked by confirmation. Instead we should institute a new ritual in the church that should be held on the feast of St Thomas, in which young people are encouraged to embark on a new journey of questioning and exploring their faith – in which they are encouraged to look at their doubts face on.

Only in later adolescence should we have a ceremony in which young people 'own their faith' and step out into the path of Christian discipleship ... which is where confirmation would come in ... although he dared to suggest that it might

even be appropriate for people to own their baptism by being baptised by immersion at this point.

I feel somewhat sorry for Thomas.

Of all of the apostles, it is Thomas who has been labelled by his mistake.

He is forever known as 'Doubting Thomas'.

All of the other disciples of Jesus made their mistakes ... but few of them are labelled by those mistakes in the way that is true of Thomas.

Peter denied Jesus three times ... and the story is told, but that's not how Peter is principally remembered. He held onto the nickname given him by Jesus – Peter, the Rock ... although he was far from rock-like ...

James and John argued about who was the greatest ... but they don't carry that label with them.

But Thomas gets stuck with this label, of the one who doubted Jesus.

And even within this story this all seems rather tough on Thomas.

Have you ever asked yourself why Thomas wasn't with the other ten, the first time that Jesus appeared to them.

We are told that they were where they were, because they had locked themselves in because they were fearful of the Jewish leaders.

So, if Thomas wasn't with them, what does that say about Thomas? Was he perhaps less fearful than the rest? Was he, perhaps, willing to take his chances? Had he decided that he wasn't going to be cowed by fear, and despite the risk, he was going to get on with his life?

After all, it was Thomas who said to Jesus before the raising of Lazarus, as Jesus had indicated that he was going to head towards Bethany despite the risk to his life: "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

What if Thomas was actually prepared for this?

So we have these fearful disciples ... and the possibly less fearful Thomas ... but it's Thomas that gets labelled because of his doubt.

The rest don't get labelled as chickens, or as cowards.

It's not 'fearful Philip', or 'Scared Simon' or 'Knock-kneed' Nathanael.

But it is Doubting Thomas.

Thomas is not alone in coming to terms with everything that has happened ... and it's just possible that he has adjusted himself to the new situation more quickly than the others.

He refuses to be shut away behind locked doors. He's going to try and get on with his life, and face his fears, and any possible backlash from having been a follower of Jesus.

But it does mean that he is not present when Jesus comes to the disciples in their locked room.

He doesn't hear the words of 'Peace'.

He doesn't experience that sense of overwhelming joy that comes from the presence of the risen One.

He doesn't hear the words of commission from the living Lord – 'As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.'

He doesn't experience Jesus breathing into them the breath of God's Spirit.

And when he hears the news he just cannot compute it. How would you?

It goes against everything that we know about the world in which we live.

It might be a painful truth ... but it is a necessary truth that we have to learn ... that death is real – it marks the end of life.

But his friends are now telling him that this man who was dead is alive – and is speaking these powerful words of peace and commissioning into their lives ... and none of it makes any sense.

They must be living in a different reality – a world of wishful thinking.

And a week goes by ... and just imagine the difficult conversations that they must have had.

It would have been difficult enough for the ten of them who had shared this experience, to try to make any sense of it all.

But with Thomas there, refusing to believe their stories – how awkward was that?

Did they try to keep off the subject? Did they try to persuade him? Did they try to talk to one another when Thomas wasn't around? Did Thomas' questioning spirit begin to infect their own thinking at all? Did they begin to have second thoughts?

What is clear is that by the time the week was up, not a great deal had changed for any of them.

Thomas was still sticking by his line – “Unless I see with my own eyes and touch with my own hands, I won't believe it!”

But the disciples hadn't really moved on either – they are still in this room behind locked doors.

v26 – “Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them.”

This news of Jesus' resurrection hadn't sunk in deeply enough to shake them out of their fear.

Susanna Wesley, John and Charles Wesley's mother, once said: ‘There are two things to do about the gospel – believe and behave it!’

The disciples may have got somewhere near the point of believing the news of Jesus' resurrection, but they hadn't yet got to the point of behaving it.

The words of Jesus assuring them of his peace, had not sunk in sufficiently to take the disciples out from behind their locked doors.

But, of course, the focus of this story is not on these other disciples ... The rest of the disciples are let off ... despite their continuing fearfulness ... The focus of the story is upon Thomas and his doubting.

And Thomas is addressed directly by Jesus:

“Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

And it seems as if Thomas has no need to reach out and touch. He thought the only way he would believe was by physically touching Jesus ... but he found himself overwhelmed by the presence of Jesus.

We never hear that Thomas actually did reach out and touch Jesus. What we hear is the highest confession of Jesus that is found in the pages of the gospels:

“My Lord and my God!”

Thomas may have been slow in coming to faith in the risen Jesus ... but when the truth eventually sunk in he came to a deep and profound appreciation of the fact that when he was in the presence of Jesus, he was in the presence of God himself.

“My Lord and my God!”

This is the point that the whole of John’s gospel has been moving towards – no higher claim can be made of the person of Jesus than this.

I think that John was keen to present Thomas, not as doubting Thomas, but as ‘confessing Thomas’.

It is not the doubt that the evangelist wants to emphasise, but the confession ... the faith ... the profound insight.

A week earlier the other disciples had been overwhelmed with joy. This week Thomas was overwhelmed with awe and wonder, and went way beyond anything that the other disciples had recognised in response to the presence of the risen One.

While it may be unfair on Thomas to leave him with this label, I suspect that it has been of great comfort to many in their Christian discipleship that one of the apostles of the Christian church carries this label.

In fact all of the evangelists, when they tell of the story of the resurrection, tell us that doubt was part and parcel of the first response.

The first gospel that was written, Mark, tells us that the disciples did not believe the news of Jesus' resurrection when they first of all heard it from Mary Magdalene and the two walking in the country – Mark 16.11, 13.

Matthew tells the story of the risen Jesus meeting the eleven disciples in Galilee:

“When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.” (Matthew 28.17)

In Luke's account of the resurrection, it was the women who first brought news of the resurrection to the disciples and Luke records “they did not believe the women, because the words seemed to them like nonsense.” (24.11)

And even in the presence of the risen Jesus, Luke records that the disciples “still did not believe it because of joy and amazement.” (24.41)

But the story of Thomas has personalised all of this into the story of someone that we can identify with.

And it seems to me that Thomas is an apostle for the 21st century ... because we live in an age of doubt.

We are taught and encouraged to question authority.

Scepticism is thought to be healthy. We don't just believe things anymore just because someone in authority tells us that it is true.

It is partly about living in a scientific age – in which every hypothesis has to be tested.

“Unless I see it with my own eyes, and feel it with my own fingers I will not believe” – that's the mantra of the scientific age.

I need to test this for myself – it's not good enough that you have told me.

The whole progress of science has been based upon a healthy scepticism of received wisdom – pushing the boundaries of human understanding so that our

scientific theories of how things are, actually reflect the evidence that is before our eyes.

But what place does healthy scepticism have in the realm of faith?

Surely faith can never be proved ... not to the satisfaction of the scientist ...

For Thomas, what we need to understand, is that doubt is not part of his journey away from faith, but it is part and parcel of his journey *into* faith, and of his journey *in* faith.

Paul Tillich once said that doubt is not the opposite of faith, it is instead an element of faith.

The very nature of faith is that we exercise faith in the context of doubt – there may be alternative answers – we do not live with certitude – we are not dealing with uncontested facts. Faith is faith, because we place our trust in someone in the context of a sea of doubt.

And a healthy church is a church that affirms the faith of the Thomases in our midst – and which recognises and affirms the faith-journeys of the Thomases – and which allows the Thomases to articulate and talk about their questions ...

A healthy church in the 21st century is one that is not afraid of doubt, and does not label doubt as ‘unfaithfulness’, or ‘falling away’, or being a ‘trouble-maker’, or part of the ‘awkward squad’ ... but which encourages and enables its members to face up honestly to their doubts and questions.

What is remarkable about this story is that Thomas came to his deeper faith, because the other disciples kept him in their circle of friendship so that he was with them when Jesus appeared the next week.

They didn’t banish him because of his questions. They did not exclude him, because he was a negative influence. They didn’t make him feel unwanted, because he didn’t toe the party line.

They embraced him, with all of his doubts and questions, and because of that he was able to have his own encounter with the risen Jesus ... and he ended up articulating what they themselves had not yet articulated – he spoke what they had not yet declared: “My Lord and my God.”

Churches have not always been very good at this. We have often silenced the doubters. We have put down those who ask too many questions. We have wanted to hold fast to the faith in a difficult and challenging world, by preventing people from asking the challenging questions.

But in doing that we have then made it extremely difficult for those who have their questions to find in the church a place where those questions can be asked. Doubt has been seen as an extremely negative thing ... rather than an inevitable part of the journey for all of us.

Because we have not affirmed the presence of doubts and questions in others, we have struggled to know how to deal with them when they arise in our own lives.

And so we become self-critical. Rather than exploring our doubts and our questions, we end up silencing them, suppressing them. Which will only leave them to fester and to come out in hidden and unhelpful ways.

But I think that there is also something highly significant in Thomas' story in what made the difference for him.

In the end he didn't have to physically touch Jesus. That didn't matter for him anymore. He thought that would be the most important thing. What was sufficient for Thomas? It was a sense of the presence of Jesus.

And that, I think, is what faith is always about. It is an overwhelming sense of the presence of God – of the presence of the living Jesus.

It is not about the physical stuff of touching ... nor even necessarily of seeing ... it is that overwhelming sense of presence.

That we are living our life in the presence of God ... and more than that, that we are living our lives in the presence of the God who comes to us in the human face of Jesus. The loving, forgiving, suffering and selfless One is the very presence of God.

And that sense of presence becomes overwhelming for us, and we can only bow down in worship and declare, 'My Lord and my God!'.