

## THE EYES OF FAITH

Acts 5. 27-32

Revelation 1. 4-8

John 20. 19-31

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

It is ironic, and I would say unfortunate, that St Thomas is commonly known as ‘Doubting Thomas’. It is as if his most important attribute was his doubting; it is as if the other disciples did not doubt also; and it is as if the resurrection were not an understandable object of doubt. It wasn’t our Lord whom Thomas doubted, after all; not directly, and not more than any of the others. It was the truthfulness of the resurrection witnesses that he wasn’t so sure about. And who knows? Perhaps he had good reason to do so, for he knew them better than we do.

Thomas’s popular nickname could just as well be ‘Thomas the Confessor’, since his confession of *faith* is a much more significant fact for us to remember about him. Having seen Jesus in his resurrected, bodily form, it is Thomas whom St John’s gospel records as making that final, crucial step of faith. He says, ‘My Lord and my God’.

Some people have suggested (and I find the proposition to be interesting) that this confession of Thomas is the climax of the gospel of John. ‘Lord’ is a term that is relevant to human relationships. To say that Christ is *Lord* is to acknowledge his authority over one’s affairs.

But to say that Jesus of Nazareth is *God* is another thing altogether. For the Jews in general, and for our Lord’s Jewish disciples in particular, the name ‘God’ was reserved for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was a term that was never to be applied to any human being; that is, until Christ. It is this recognition that marks

Thomas's confession, as he identifies these two things together in our Lord: the divine and the human, the place (or I should say the person) where Creator and creation meet.

It was the Italian painter Caravaggio who gave us the graphic image of a bent-over, incredulous Thomas, his finger inserted into the gaping wound on Jesus's side. Perhaps. In other artistic depictions of that moment, Thomas is on his knees, looking up into the face of Christ, whom he now sees and knows, as if for the first time.

We can only speculate about Thomas's bodily posture, of course, including what he was doing with his hands, but kneeling seems like a reasonable guess. 'At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow'. Not only at our Lord's human name, but at his Divine Name. The name that God reveals to Moses as the Divine Name is the unspeakable name given to Christ as well. To recognise that this person Jesus of Nazareth, whom Thomas has known for some time now, also bears the name of the Creator; well, falling to one's knees seems a reasonable response to *that*.

Of course, how the divine and human are present in our Lord was not Thomas's first concern; the finer points of Trinitarian doctrine were not an issue for him, there in the locked Upper Room. But in an unrefined form, we hear them as they appear on Thomas's lips: he knew, and understood, that this resurrected Jesus was in some mysterious way the incarnation of God himself, the one who shares the name that is above every name, the one who is of one substance with the Father.

It is a remarkable confession, and it is not the only remarkable aspect of this section of the twentieth chapter of John's gospel. We should take note of the fact that the confession of Thomas is given in response to the instructions of Christ himself. When our Lord sees Thomas, he greets him in peace and then says, 'Put your finger

here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.’ He invites Thomas to touch him, to feel the nail marks on his hands, to reach into the gaping flesh that had been torn by the spear. Reach out and touch me, Jesus says. *Touch me* here, and here.

For a some of us readers, this instruction of Christ given to Thomas may cause puzzlement. After all, it was only eight days earlier that our Lord had been resurrected; eight days earlier that the tomb had been found empty; eight days earlier that Jesus had appeared to Mary Magdalene; and eight days earlier that she herself had received a sharp command *to the contrary* from Christ: ‘Do not hold onto me’, he had said to her. At this moment of tension and high drama, at this moment of cosmic significance, when something new is breaking into the world, our Lord says to her, ‘Do not hold onto me’. She was told that she could not touch him because he had not yet ascended to the Father; but of course after the ascension she no longer would have been able to see Jesus of Nazareth, much less touch him. Not in this life, at least.

‘Do not hold on to me’, he says to Mary Magdalene. ‘Put your finger here...reach out your hand and put it in my side’, he says to Thomas.

This discrepancy is not explained within the text, but surely it is purposeful and relevant. There is something important happening here in John’s gospel, between Mary Magdalene and Thomas, between the relationship of sight and touch, and that of knowledge and faith. Mary Magdalene could not touch Christ, but Thomas was invited to do so. Mary was present in the garden when other people were absent; Thomas was absent in the house when other people were present. Mary had seen our Lord and had not recognised him; Thomas saw him and recognised him. Mary calls Jesus ‘Rabbouni, which means ‘Teacher’; and Thomas refers to Christ as ‘Lord and God’.

There is something happening with these two characters as they circle round each other in this chapter, point and counterpoint, similar and different. They are different people with different roles, and have different relationships with the risen Lord.

We might even say that Mary Magdalene is like Thomas' narrative sister here. Thomas, after all, is referred to as Thomas 'the twin' on three occasions in the scriptures;<sup>1</sup> but his other half is never precisely named. The twin's identity is left to the imaginations of extra-canonical writers. Perhaps this absent twin who cannot be found in biological form, is somehow represented by this woman Mary Magdalene, who is Thomas's mirror image. Both of them are members of the human family that has been drawn together by Jesus; they are a brother and a sister who have, as it were, been 'reborn into the fellowship of Christ's body'.

The two of them, together, as narrative twins, similar and different, illustrate for us something of the dynamics of relationship with our Lord. What Mary and Thomas had in common was *seeing Jesus* and, by whatever means it took them, they were thus able to *believe in his name*. They each met the resurrected Christ face-to-face; met the one through whom they were reconciled one to another; met the one through whom they were reconciled to the triune God.

The kind of face-to-face vision they had may not be an option for us, at least not yet. Our vision is limited, as we see now only as through a glass darkly, as St Paul says.<sup>2</sup> But one day, like Mary Magdalene and Thomas, we will see our resurrected Saviour face to face as well. We will see him and we will know him.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas, also known as 'Didymus', the Twin, cf. Jn 11. 16, 20, 24, 21. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 13. 12.

‘Look! He is coming with the clouds’ our reading from Revelation tells us, and ‘every eye shall see him’. Every one of us, every brother and sister in Christ, will finally see the one who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

One day we will see, and know, in full; just as we ourselves are seen and known *today*, in full, by the one who loves us: Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God.

Amen.