SAINT THOMAS SUNDAY St John 20:19-31

*Christ is risen!*

Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Apostle who is also known as ‘the Twin’ though it is not exactly clear whose twin he was. He is also immortalised in history and language through the adjective applied to him in the phrase ‘a doubting Thomas’ which is familiar in many cultures. But in some ways we do him a disservice by recalling his doubt to the exclusion of other aspects of his character. If we look at the other occasions when he is mentioned in the gospels, which are relatively few, we are faced with an unquestionable paradox about him. On the one hand he firmly asserts that he will not believe unless he can ‘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’. This inflexibility echoes the account at the end of Matthew’s gospel where we are told that the eleven went to Galilee to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him but some doubted. “How could they doubt?” we might ask, since they knew he had died on the cross and that his body had been taken down and placed in a tomb and had subsequently disappeared. And even Thomas confesses Christ when he appears to him. But another side of Thomas’ personality is revealed at the tomb of Lazarus when Jesus announces that his great friend is dead, Thomas boldly exclaims “Let us also go that we may die with him”. Presumably this means at the hands of the Jews.

Then later we know that Thomas travels all the way to southern India and around 52 A.D. founds the church there which thrives today, the Nasrani or Mar Thoma Church, and he fulfils his statement of faith in a brutal martyrdom. Historically, Thomas is interpreted as one of weak faith who needs scientific and physical proof before he can believe but this fails to take into account his determination and loyalty to his master whom he salutes as “my Lord and my God” when Jesus appears to him eight days later. And we must look carefully at Jesus’s reply to Thomas since he does not criticise him for demanding proof but simply points out that there is a higher level of faith namely “Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe”. And this deeper faith is exemplified in the lives of the martyrs which we hear about in church in the Epistle of the Hebrews. “Faith is the assurance of things hope for; the conviction of things not seen.” Or as the writer of Hebrews says of them that they gave their lives for the promise of God but unlike us did not receive what was promised, though they were commended for their faith.

So Thomas is far from lacking in faith in Christ or of being disloyal, which is another translation of the Greek word ‘apistos’. On the contrary he seems to be an excellent balance of the practical and scientific mind and the spiritual quality of very deep faith. And in a sense he is the perfect example of humanity for our generation. Since man entered the ‘age of reason’ in the eighteenth century, the industrial society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the computer and communication world of the twenty-first he has become highly dependent on science, media and technology to the exclusion of God. The advances which have been made in so many fields are truly staggering and dwarf perhaps every previous age. We should not look down on this progress since it is a fundamental vocation imposed on humanity as far back as the

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Book of Genesis, namely ‘till the earth and subdue it’. This goes much further than creating an agricultural society of farmers but of asking questions about the world, challenging accepted views which do not seem to stand up to rigorous investigation, exploring the visible and invisible creation in a spirit of honesty and integrity. But there is no doubt, I am sure most of you would agree, that at the same time mankind has lost his personal knowledge of God and his spiritual life. This means amongst other things the ability to examine himself closely both individually and collectively, to look within and discover himself, to ask fundamentally important questions about himself: what is life for, how should I treat other people, what happens to me when I die. It could be argued that man is more lost now than ever before when we look at terrorism, acts of barbarity in our streets, the break-up of the family and this despite all our scientific advances.

History has shown that there is a fine balance between the spiritual and scientific worlds. In periods of history where the Church has held great power in society there have been highs and lows. The lows being the denial of scientific progress, for example that the earth is not the centre of the universe but rather the sun and the highs perhaps the good which has been done to others less fortunate than themselves by people of faith who could not bear to see their fellow man suffer. Perhaps in the future we can look forward to a closer union of science and spirituality where each sheds light on the other.

Last week on Radio 4 I heard the pitiful story of a scam which had deprived an elderly lady of 80 plus of her life savings of £130k by people who pretended to be the police warning her of hackers who had accessed her bank account. If she had been as circumspect and as insistent as St Thomas when the disciples told him about Jesus’ appearance no doubt she would not be in tears today. So Thomas has something very practical to say to us in the church. He has a practical vision of going into all the world and preaching the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven which is exemplified in his own missionary efforts through Syria, Iraq and down to Southern India. At the same time his personal experience of Christ inspires him to give all and follow in his footsteps. He gives away freely the gift which he has received from Christ, namely of eternal life. That same gift of Christ’s victory over death through the resurrection is what we have to bring to those around us consciously or unconsciously, voluntarily and involuntarily but with God’s help and in his strength. May God grant us all to be faithful witnesses to his resurrection like St Thomas whose memory we keep today.

*Christ is risen!*

*Oxford 9th May 2021.*