

19th April 2020

Today's Reading: John 20:19 - end

- from Revd. David Hildred



The disciples met together behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. Who'd have thought that this year we would empathise so easily with their version of lockdown: having lost their leader, Jesus, to the schemes of the Jewish religious leaders, they feared that any one of them could be the next to be picked off.

And yet, of course, the difference is that they were able to meet together and be in close contact for support and encouragement, whilst we must be diligent to be socially isolated.

They were living through the moments when, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the world was never going to be the same again, spiritually speaking. We, too, have yet to see what our 'new normal' might be in the light of the ongoing presence of Covid-19. Let's see what their focus was in those unsettling times, as we seek the Lord's word for our times too.

I think it's unfair that the nickname that we associate with Thomas is "Doubting Thomas". I know that the challenge of Jesus to Thomas is to "stop doubting", indicating that that was what he had been doing - but how many of us would want to be called by something we had been doing, but then stopped doing? For that is exactly what Thomas did: he stopped doubting.

*In v25 he indicated that he was prepared to believe, if he were presented with evidence, and that's not unreasonable, is it? The Christian faith is based upon evidence, not upon "cleverly devised stories" as Peter puts it in 2 Pet 1:16. We are not those, who like the White Queen, try to believe six impossible things before breakfast. No, we believe based upon evidence.*

*And that's what this record about Thomas has as its focus. Thomas does see Jesus and he does believe. He declares about Jesus in v28 "My Lord and my God". Jesus then declares in v29 that Thomas really does believe, and that there will be those who don't see Jesus, but who will believe and are therefore blessed. This record is about "Believing Thomas" more than about "Doubting Thomas".*

*That is confirmed to us by John's last words in this chapter as he says, v31, "These things about Jesus are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name". The focus of this chapter, this gospel is about believing. The focus of the disciples in lockdown is about believing. What will our focus be?*

*In these few verses we have the What, Why and How connected with believing in Jesus. John tells us that What we need to believe about Jesus is that he is the Christ, or in Hebrew, the Messiah, which means he is the Son of God. He is not simply a son of God, such as any religious leader or hero might be called, but he is The Son of God, the one and only, the unique. The rest of the Bible helps us to see that the implication of this is that Jesus is the One, the only One, who can bridge the gap between God and Man: he is both Son of God and Son of Man. He is the only One who can bring the two sides together. Can you believe that?*

*Well, the point of the resurrection, the point of Thomas seeking evidence for his belief, is that it is reasonable to believe Jesus is that One. Anyone could claim that their death will result in Man being made friends with God once again, but the One who says that and then rises from the dead is the One worth listening to. Did he rise from the dead? Thomas is intended to help us here: he is our eyes searching for evidence, he is our voice asking for clarification.*

*Thomas is not the only one who provides evidence for us to consider. Those women who arrived first at the tomb were taking spices to anoint a dead body: they weren't expecting Jesus to be alive, but yet that is who they met. There were various other appearances, with one of them involving 500 people all at once - they can't all have been hallucinating, can they?*

*John tells us that the What of our belief is that Jesus is the Son of God. He then tells us Why we should believe that: "and that by believing you may have life in his name". The result of us believing that Jesus is the Son of God is that we have life. Other parts of the Bible call that "eternal life", which is all about knowing God and being with him for eternity in the place that Jesus described to the thief on the cross as "paradise" - "Today you will be with me in paradise".*

The Bible gives us only glimpses of this paradise, but we see enough to know that it is good, it is perfect, it is the place of life and love. Revelation 21 describes it thus: "Now the dwelling of God is with Man ... he will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away".



Eternal life is not just a matter of this life going on for ever, it's about a new order of life where all wrong is put right. That's a pretty good "Why" for believing, isn't it? And we can believe it because there is One who has risen from the dead to prove that what he says is true.

So that's the What and the Why. Where's the How of believing? How we get to that eternal life is described by John earlier in this incident, when Jesus breathes on his disciples and gives them a special commission, v23, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven". It's not that they are to go around choosing themselves whether someone is worthy of forgiveness, but as carriers of the Holy Spirit they are to breathe the very words of God over people, since it is only God who forgives. The disciples are to be the visible and audible expression of the spiritual reality that people need: How we get to eternal life is by being forgiven. It's not about promising to be good, but acknowledging we are bad and are in need of that forgiveness.

We can dare to believe that we are forgiven every time we own up to God, because there is One who has paid the price for the wrong in our life through his death on the cross, and proved that the job was done once and for all by rising from the dead. Thomas has given us the evidence we needed to be sure that this belief is reasonable. What, Why and How.

The disciples were in a sort of lockdown, yet their focus was on believing in Jesus. May that be our focus too. Alleluia, Christ is risen!