

JOHN 20:24-31
FAITH IN TWO MINDS

Nicknames – here are some famous people with famous nicknames: what are they? Usain “Lightning” Bolt; Phil “The Power” Taylor; Jack Nicklaus – “Golden Bear”; Frank Sinatra “Old Blue Eyes”. Some people are better known by their nicknames than their real names: Sting! Did you have a nickname at school? Or at work? Or in the family? When I was at Primary School we had a headmaster who gave everyone a nickname; usually it was based on something about us or a connection with a surname, or something that rhymed. It was all very polite, and he used them all the time in class; he rather used the nickname than our real names, perhaps because it helped him remember or keep us distinct in his mind. My nickname: well, there were several; one was related to whisky – well, there is a well-known whisky label. Another was “jukebox”: we’re talking mid 60’s here and a highlight of early Saturday evening television viewing on the BBC was that well-known programme “Juke Box Jury”; do you see the connection? That is one of the nicknames I had at school that I’m happy to repeat; there were others that are best forgotten! These nicknames come from a bit of a good connection, a sense of affection almost.

Thomas had 2 nicknames, one is given in the Bible; the second is given to him as a result of his story in the Bible. The first nickname was “Didymus”: twice when John refers to Thomas he calls him Didymus; it means “twin”. His name, Thomas, comes from the Hebrew word meaning twin and Didymus is the Greek version of that word. So Didymus is simply Thomas, the twin; we have no idea who was his twin. The other nickname might alarm Thomas more if he knew: “Doubting”. Almost every time we talk about Thomas, we call him ‘doubting’, as if we want either to make clear what we think about him or separate him from the other Thomases in the New Testament; but there are no other Thomases in the New Testament, he is the only one; so it must be that we want to make clear what we think about him. The distinguishing mark about Thomas is that he doubted! When we read his story we understand why, but when really see Thomas in full, it hardly seems fair!

We’ve been looking at discipleship through the eyes of the disciples and we come to the last in that series today. We’ve seen faith as a journey of discovery, and that discipleship sometimes challenges us to take risks, both through the eyes of Peter; we’ve seen the background dependability of a man like Andrew as he helps others make connections with Jesus; we’ve seen the fiery Sons of Thunder, James and John, who look for the great seats in the kingdom, being told that Jesus’ way is the way of humble service; we’ve seen the cautionary tale that is the story of Judas; and on Palm Sunday we saw the anonymous disciples doing what Jesus wanted and being the ones who made it possible for Palm Sunday to happen, they went for the donkey, obeying Jesus. Being a disciple is all of these things for the twelve who followed Jesus the first time around; being disciples is the challenge facing us as Christians in 2015, to be more than members of a religious club, but people whose whole lives reflect Jesus and are lived for Jesus.

What do we know about Thomas? Very little, in the New Testament. Other than appearing in the lists of the names of the twelve, he appears three times in John’s gospel. His first appearance is in chapter 11 and the story of Lazarus, when he demonstrates his loyalty to Jesus, but almost with a resigned air about him; “*Then Thomas...*” (*John 11:16*) The second time we see him is in the upper room and Jesus is talking about Himself and what happens next after His death, and the place He will prepare for His disciples, all in John 14. Jesus says “*you know...*” to which “*Thomas said...*” (*John 14:5*) It’s almost as if he needs to be sure about what Jesus is saying before He will accept and believe; and he asks the question which probably

everyone else wants to ask, but is afraid to. From this little evidence, Thomas seems to be a loyal follower of Jesus, but he needs to be sure of things before he will act on them. Maybe he was that kind of person; maybe he was not very good at taking risks, but needing to have all the information to hand before committing himself. Before we think of him as achieving nothing because of that, Christian tradition has it that Thomas took the gospel East in the days of early Christian mission and went as far as India; the church in India will trace its roots back to the mission carried out by Thomas.

By far, the most famous part Thomas plays in the gospel story is in the aftermath of Easter. On the evening of Easter Sunday, the disciples *"were together..."* (John 20:19) and then Jesus appears in the room. He spoke to them: *"Peace..."* (John 20:19f) Now we ask a question: *"Now Thomas..."* (John 20:24) Where was Thomas? Why was he not there with the others? We don't know the answers to these questions, but Bruce Milne speculates based on what he describes of Thomas' character. Milne suggests that Thomas has gone out alone, to go for a walk on Easter Sunday evening to try to come to terms with what has gone on. He needs to come to terms with Jesus' death first of all, and then to try to understand these strange stories of resurrection. He will act only on something that he is sure of and so he tries to find time alone to work out in his own mind what has gone on so that he knows what to believe. There are people who find that they need time alone, by the very nature of their personality and maybe that's Thomas.

Of course when he comes back, the others are full of what they have seen. *"The other..."* (John 20:25) He had no reason to think they were lying and we get no sense of that from him; but *"Unless I..."* (John 20:25) He feels the need to see for himself; he feels the need to have the evidence of his own eyes before he will believe. So he is called 'doubting' Thomas. The best definition I've come across of doubt is "faith in 2 minds"; the opposite of faith is not doubt, the opposite of faith is unbelief and yes, Thomas does doubt; he needs confirmation before any uncertainty in his mind is settled. So on the next Sunday evening: *"A week..."* (John 20:26f) It is as if Jesus has been listening; he gives Thomas the opportunity to do exactly as he wanted; "put your hands..." and Thomas comes face to face with the very evidence that he has wanted in order to confirm his faith. Jesus lets him see; Jesus deals with him in a way that is full of grace. Thomas discovers that Jesus is truly raised; he discovers that the other disciples told him the truth; he discovers that Jesus loves and cares for him. *"Stop doubting..."* it is a mild rebuke; there are grounds for faith all around if Thomas only has the eyes to see them! He has begun to see.

I think that to leave Thomas as 'doubting' does him such a great disservice. See the way in which his story finishes: *"Thomas..."* (John 20:28) This is such a sublime confession of faith; it is the best and highest confession of faith in the whole of the gospels; no-one else quite describes Jesus in these terms, yet the man who forever is described as 'doubting' falls on his knees and utters this sublime confession: "Jesus is Lord; Jesus is God!" His doubts were answered and he came to the point when his faith was clear and assured; the evidence is before him and he is persuaded; the doubter's faith became firm and assured and he spent his life living out that faith in Jesus and he even spent his life serving Jesus. He came through his doubts to the place of confident, assured faith; he got there because he asked questions; he got there through the times when he was uncertain; he got there and expressed his faith: Jesus is Lord; Jesus is God.

We have a picture in our mind of the Christian as someone who comes to faith in the most dramatic fashion as result of some blinding experience of Jesus and from that moment of conversion the Christian is sure of everything, understands everything,

and believes it all without doubt and without question. That person is most rare and I'm not even sure that this person ever existed or exists now! Much more common is the person whose faith is at times sure and confident and at other times is riven with doubt; or there is the person whose faith is forged through times when they're not sure of things and have lots of questions to ask and they ask these questions openly and freely of a friend or in a group they trust and they find answers and their faith grows stronger as a result. Faith forged in that kind of place is the much more common experience for many of us. Os Guinness wrote a book called *Doubt* some 40 years ago, the best book I've found on this subject; his definition is 'faith in 2 minds' and he describes the Chinese picture of doubt as having 'a foot in 2 boats' and you can picture what happens there! Doubt is not unbelief; doubt is faith that has questions and is not sure; doubt comes from all kinds of places; doubt is not wrong!

Thomas's story shows us that faith is not always a straightforward affair; there can be an agony to faith, to the person who believes, but at same time doesn't! There might be all kinds of reasons: something in Thomas' personality maybe gave rise to his agonies, as the person who finds it hard to take things at face value, or who sees faith as 'too good to be true' and that the things they are asked to believe are not credible. At times when we find faith hard, we tend to cut ourselves off from others, we struggle on our own and maybe that is what we need for a time, but faith together can also be a good thing, finding the space to resolve these questions with the help of others. Guinness' remedy for doubt is to feed faith: "faith grows and flourishes when it is well nourished and exercised, so the best way to resist doubt is to build up faith." (p24) "*Put your...*" (*John 20:27*) Thomas's faith was nurtured by what he saw of Jesus. We can't see Jesus in that same way, but listen to what Jesus says about us: "*Because you...*" (*John 20:29*) We have these eye-witness accounts; we have centuries of Christian witness; we have the risen Jesus; we have one another to nurture our faith.

The gospel is *the* most precious treasure; it is something more than money can buy. Where does God keep this treasure? In clay pots. We are these clay pots and God keeps the treasure of the gospel in us and in people like us. Go back to read 2 Corinthians 4 when you go home: see the ways in which Paul describes himself and his fellow Christians, as people who are hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. Are these perfect people? Hardly. But in people like this God keeps the treasure that is the gospel. This is the Christian Church; this is the Christian faith. What can we learn from Thomas? We learn that faith is not perfect, that faith can be agonising at times, that faith is often forged in questions, doubts, and uncertainties and that out of that forge comes the most sublime confession of faith: "Jesus is Lord; Jesus is God!" We are a work in progress, God's building site, messy and untidy, yet out of that building site God is building for Himself a Church, a people who will love and worship Him forever. The hymn with which we will close the service in a few moments, knows that we are a work in progress; Charles Wesley has it: "Finish then thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be... changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise." Thomas had a foretaste of that, 'lost in wonder, love and praise' moment – "Jesus is Lord, Jesus is God!" How ironic that Thomas, with the nickname "doubting" forever, has this highest confession! Marvel at the grace of God!