

When first we think of the disciple Thomas we think of the doubter, but the Gospels suggest that there is more to the man than this. A few days before the triumphal entry, Jesus and His disciples had narrowly escaped being stoned by a crowd in Jerusalem. Then came the appeal from Mary and Martha to Jesus to go to Bethany because their brother Lazarus was dying. The village of Bethany was not far from the walls of the Holy City. When the appeal came, the disciples protested that it was too dangerous; they would risk being captured and that would mean certain death. Realising that Jesus was determined to go to Lazarus, Thomas alone said, 'Let us go also, that we may die with Him.'

On the night before He died, seated with His disciples in the Upper Room, Jesus said, 'In My Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.....You know the place where I am going.' Many of the disciples may have wondered what Jesus meant, but it was Thomas who asked Him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Unjustly discarded as a doubter, Thomas is a man of courage and inquiry. It seems to me that he cared deeply about Jesus. It is possible that the sole reason that Thomas was not with the disciples on that first night was because, in grief, he could not face being with them. Overwhelmed by the brutality of the crucifixion, by the traumatic loss of a such a friend,

teacher and confidant, Thomas simply could not face anyone. Courage, spiritual searching and bereavement make Thomas a disciple with whom we can readily identify.

At evening, under the cover of darkness, Jesus ‘appeared’ to the disciples. The verb used for ‘appear’ is quite specific: it means an apparition, an inner vision. It is something that is experienced and ‘seen’ within the consciousness, in the mind and heart. The ‘appearance’ of Jesus that night in that room in Jerusalem could not have been recorded on an iPhone. There was nothing physical to see and the verb chosen by the writer tells us that. In his conversion experience on the road to Damascus, Paul ‘saw’ Jesus, the Risen Christ, but what he saw was not seen by those who were with him. Paul described what he saw as similar to that experienced by the apostles. The ‘appearances’ are an inner experience, an intimate encounter with the Holy.

When Jesus appeared a second time to the disciples Thomas was present. Following His word of peace, *Shalom*, Jesus said to Thomas: ‘Put your finger here and see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it in My side. Thomas answered, ‘My Lord and my God.’ It is not clear if Thomas does touch Jesus but, if we enter the story for ourselves, the

physicality and closeness of Jesus make His presence overpowering.

Thomas said, 'My Lord and my God.'

The declaration which is made by Thomas is an interesting one. Written towards the end of the first century, the Gospel of John has Thomas say, 'My Lord and my God.' Around that time, the Roman Emperor was Domitian, whose title was 'Our Lord and God.' It is possible that the evangelist is provocatively bringing into focus the competing value system of Jesus with that of Rome. To say that 'Jesus is Lord' meant that Domitian is not. In the twenty-first century, in a world torn by conflict between peoples, violence within societies, selfishness, triviality, greed and a hint of nihilism, to say 'Jesus is Lord' is to make a stand for an altogether different kind of world.

The acclamation of Thomas also has a deep Hebrew resonance. Chapter 21 of John's Gospel is a later addition. The words of Thomas are the climax of the Fourth Gospel; this is the point to which the evangelist has been working. 'My Lord and my God'. These words, 'Lord' and 'God' first appear together in the Book of Genesis in the story of the Garden of Eden. Behind the word 'Lord' is the divine name, YHWH, which the Jews do not pronounce: God's name cannot be spoken. The word 'God' refers to the God 'El', as in Israel. The two names are first brought

together in the story of the Garden of Eden. Let's listen to part of the story:

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking about in the garden in the evening breeze, and the human and his woman hid from the Lord God in the midst of the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called to the human and said to him, 'Where are you?' And he said, 'I heard your sound in the garden and I was afraid, for I was naked, and I hid.

This ancient myth is a story about the loss of intimacy with God: the 'easy, natural, fear-less relationship with a God who walks in his garden in the evening breeze, and whose sound is mysteriously audible to human ears' is lost.¹ The cry of Thomas returns us to this spiritual union: we become one with the Sacred. We are held by our Eternal Lover. Not for a moment did the writers of Genesis believe that Adam and Eve walked in a garden with God but the sheer physicality of the ancient myth makes God real for us, immediate, tangible. If we close our eyes, enter the garden, feel the evening breeze upon our face and hear for ourselves the silent vibration of God walking by, then the Divine is born in us.

In Jerusalem, under cover of darkness, in that room, the physicality of the Risen Christ, the bloody and broken body of Jesus, is no less potent in mediating the Presence of the Sacred. The ethereal vision is packed with

¹ Trevor Dennis *The Easter Stories* 13

physicality. In and through Jesus, Thomas ‘sees’ God, the Word or Wisdom of God, present in this world, the Spirit in the material. If we modernise the story, re-write it in the twentieth century, we could replace the Roman Empire with Hitler’s Reich and the open wound of Jesus with a ‘number indelibly printed on his arm, the number given to Him in the concentration camp before being led to the gas chamber.’² What now does this story mean?

Standing before Thomas, Jesus pointed to the number. Thomas declared, ‘My Lord and my God.’ In his apparition, his inner vision, Thomas saw God in the darkest, cruellest place on Earth, in the intolerable suffering and violence of humanity. He ‘saw’ the Transcendent God of heaven there, the Wisdom of God, the Word made flesh: he ‘saw’ Him there. More than that, he felt God with him, utterly present to him. In that Upper Room, Thomas returned to the Garden of Eden, to the existential intimacy we crave at the very core of our being.

Pope Francis said that ‘We cannot live Easter without entering the mystery. It is not something intellectual, something we only know or read about. It is more, much more!’ He said, “To enter into the mystery means the ability to wonder, to contemplate, the ability to listen to the

² Ibid., 15

silence and hear the tiny whisper amid great silence by which God speaks to us.'

Like many people around the country, I was very moved by the Archbishop of Canterbury's story about the death of his seven month old daughter, Johanna. Johanna was badly injured in a car crash in France; she died in intensive care five days after the accident. He says, 'It's a very rare day that I don't think of Johanna.' Over those five days, Justin and his wife, Caroline, prayed deeply. He said:

That was prayer at its rawest because it's just prayer of,
Oh God help. Oh God, where are you? What's going on?
Are you going to do something or aren't you?

He said:

I suppose the deepest moment was when we were in a café actually outside the hospital on the day Johanna died. And we were talking and we were praying and we had a sense in ourselves of needing to say to God, Your will be done. Praying that, a sense of handing over - absolutely agonising - and going back to the hospital, and the professor of intensive care saying to us, 'She suddenly seems to be going.'

Welby adds:

The presence of Jesus in that room was simply overwhelming. And there was a sense of handing her over. And that was prayer, at its most profound and getting exactly the answer we didn't want.

In searching for a metaphor to describe his experience of the Presence of Jesus, the Archbishop says:

You know the experience on a really windy day, standing on the top of a high cliff? The wind howls around you to the degree where it's almost difficult to balance. You feel almost dazed by it, yet with that there was this extraordinary presence of God and the power of God touching us very, very deeply, and love.

Is there a better example of what happened in the room with the first disciples, who were utterly broken by the brutal death of someone they knew and loved, than the experience of the Welbys? Like the Welbys, the disciples felt the overwhelming Presence of Jesus. With the eyes of faith, they *saw* Him and felt deeply, deeply touched by Him. Welby says there have been moments of immense pain and an absence of God but in that room 'We were carried. It's grace. It's not virtue....It's a gift.'

In prayerful, meditative reading of Scripture, in stillness, we can enter that room, stand with the disciples, and *see* Jesus for ourselves. So often when Jesus appeared people did not recognise Him. These stories are not about physical Resurrection, physical appearances; the Gospel writers want us to go deeper. Seeing with the physical eyes is not enough. In the language of mythology, it was not enough for Thomas to see with the eyes. Spiritually, he needed to touch and take hold of Christ. In touching Christ, he was touched by Christ, and he was changed. Our sight can deceive us. This physical world is a shadow; Thomas wants a deeper encounter. Thomas touched the wounds of Christ and by His

wounds was healed, was made whole. Encounter with the Risen Christ, with Jesus, is real; it is there waiting for us in the pages of Scripture.

Amen.