



**Sermon:- 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2016**

## **I may be wrong, but I doubt it!**

### **Doubting Thomas**

Charles Wade Barkley is an American retired professional basketball player and current analyst on the TNT television network. I get the impression that he's America's answer to Jeremy Clarkson.

He recently wrote a book entitled "I may be wrong, but I doubt it!" You can just imagine Clarkson uttering these words ... But it occurred to me that this could be Thomas's motto as we've come to know him through 2000 years of Christian history. "Doubting Thomas" he is called and his fame is assured as his name has become a catchphrase.

Poor Thomas, forever labelled and also libelled, and why? Because he showed doubt. But is that really so unreasonable? He wasn't there when Jesus appeared to the other disciples. When Thomas comes back and they say they've seen Jesus, Thomas is incredulous. Of course he is! Wouldn't you be? He'd seen Jesus crucified! A cruel and violent death. Nailed to a cross for hours in the baking sun and then stabbed in the side with a spear just to make sure. Living at that time in the Roman Empire, Thomas would be familiar with crucifixion as a form of execution. He knows how brutal it is, and how effective. Perhaps he thinks this is some sort of cruel practical joke and so he argues with them. "Dead men don't come back to life! I want proof! I'd need to see the nail marks in his hands and the hole in his side where the spear went in before I'd be able to believe," he says.

### **Doubting Disciples**

But if we compare Thomas with the other disciples, he actually doesn't seem too bad. He wasn't with them when Jesus appeared to them, and we don't know why. But John tells us that the reason the rest of them were there behind locked doors is because they were afraid to go out. So maybe Thomas is actually braver than the rest as he seems to have been out and about rather than cowering in a locked room. And do you remember how the rest of the disciples reacted when the women reported their experience at the empty tomb. Luke tells us that when the women told the other disciples that the angels had told them that Christ had risen, "The disciples thought that what the women said

was nonsense, and they did not believe them.” Even if we only refer to John’s account, Mary Magdalene has already told the disciples that she has met the risen Christ in the garden, but they are still huddled behind closed doors for fear of the Jews. So to single Thomas out as the doubting one begins to seem rather unfair. They all doubted to begin with and he was no worse than the rest. Perhaps because he wasn’t there, he has become an icon for those who doubt. His encounter with the risen Christ is a snapshot of all the encounters in those first few hours and days and so in a sense he stands for all of the disciples. In hearing about him and his reaction we hear from one point of view what all the disciples went through together. And perhaps he is also an icon for us. Because isn’t there a sense in which we have all been Thomas at some point?

### **Doubting us**

If we’re honest, we will admit that we have doubts, don’t we? Or am I alone in not always being sure? Aren’t we all sometimes just like Thomas? Doubting Thomas, maybe, but also doubting disciples.... And may be, doubting you, doubting me!!!!

### **Believing Thomas**

But maybe there is more to Thomas. On the basis of this one incident he has been labelled “Doubting Thomas”. But as we’ve seen, that’s not entirely fair. The problem is that it is so familiar to us that we find it difficult to look at it in any other way. But the others doubted too, and if we think back through his months of following Jesus Thomas is not a doubter. Thomas has faith; he believes in Jesus and is committed to him. It is Thomas who, when Jesus insists on going to Judea, declares, "Let us also go with him that we may die with him."

This loyal disciple who has given us the expression "Doubting Thomas" deserves to be remembered better than this. He did not refuse belief: he wanted to believe, but he was afraid to, and can we blame him. But because of his belief, his loyalty, and his goodwill, Jesus gives him a sign. And isn’t that interesting, because elsewhere Jesus has refused to give people signs. However, a Jew brought up on the Old Testament, as Thomas would have been, takes the physicality of life and death very seriously. And so Jesus invites him to touch and see. And maybe this is the whole point of Thomas and this episode in some closed room in Jerusalem.

To understand what is going on here, to make sense of it, we first need to understand that doubt is not the opposite of faith. We don’t lack faith because we doubt, we lack faith when we don’t care enough to believe. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu has

reminded us, the opposite of faith is indifference. And Thomas was absolutely not indifferent. Thomas cared, Thomas wanted to believe... Thomas had faith that there was something worth believing in. "Show me, prove it, I want to believe, help my unbelief"

### **Jesus' Response**

So perhaps we've got this story back to front. Maybe it's not about doubt, but about faith. If we think about what happens when Jesus appears to Thomas, it's not really what we might expect. We might think that Jesus would reprimand Thomas for his lack of faith, after all, he has criticised the disciples in the past for their lack of faith. But he doesn't. On the contrary, Jesus takes Thomas seriously, and offers him the proof he asked for. And maybe this isn't all that surprising. After all, Jesus was human too! The writer of the letter to the Hebrews (4:15-16) tells us that Christ has been through weakness and testing just like us, so he understands our needs and desires, and our temptations and frailties. And because of this, and because he knows Thomas's heart, he takes note of what Thomas asked for and offers what Thomas says he needs. Rather than criticism, he meets Thomas with acceptance, understanding and compassion.

The good news for us in the story of Thomas is that it shows that there is nothing wrong with struggle, or doubts as we live out our life of faith. Jesus offers Thomas the proof he asks for, which I think indicates that there was nothing wrong with Thomas asking for that proof. But I think it's also worth noting, and important to remember, that this proof offered did not create the faith in Thomas. He had faith, but the offer Jesus made helped him to express that faith in a new way. It's also worth noting that faith may be spiritual, but it is based on a person who really lived and died and rose again. It is not accidental that our two 'gospel sacraments' involve real water, real bread, real wine. In this little incident we see the importance of flesh and blood, concrete reality, positive experience, to support faith.

What we also see illustrated here is that faith can exist in spite of doubt, perhaps even because of doubt. Faith includes doubt. Doubts are an indication that that we're thinking, questioning, and that we care about the truth. And God is big enough to cope with our doubts and questions.

Jesus understands Thomas's doubts, and he understands ours too. Alfred Lord Tennyson, in the poem In Memoriam, writes "*There lives more faith in honest doubt, Believe me, than in half the creeds.*"

Jesus knows this, and he meets us at the point of our doubt, in the midst of our struggles, and says, "*I understand, I know you, I've been there. I don't blame you, here I am.*"

He wants us to take our doubts to him so that he can meet us in the midst of them. So that we might feel him breathe on us as he did on the eleven and be filled with the very spirit and breath of God and know that "He is Risen", and does appear to us even in the midst of things we cannot and will not ever understand.

*So that we too might join with Thomas as he falls to his knees in front of Jesus and proclaims, **"My Lord, and my God!"***

*Rev Jane Denniston*

*Campsie Parish Church*