

In touch in the flesh

7 4 13

Almighty Father,
you have given your only Son to die for our sins
and to rise again for our justification:
grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness
that we may also serve you
in pureness of living and truth.

Our text today is from John's gospel, chapter 20 and verse 25:

'Unless I 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, I will not believe.'

Well, I think last week's service on Easter Day was as good as it gets. The church was packed. People streaming in well after 11 o'clock. Standing room only. The baptism of a boy whose parents I'd married here in church. It felt like family; it felt like community; it felt we are a proper church. And, of course, St Bart's is all these things.

But today, the first Sunday after Easter, which used to be called Low Sunday because it was an anti-climax after the great day itself, we have an example of doubt and challenge to the faith that so excited at least ten of the disciples. That challenge is neatly expressed by one disciple who wasn't there with them when Jesus appeared that first Easter Sunday evening – doubting Thomas.

Let me say I believe it is reasonable to doubt. We should be careful what we take on trust. There are folk out there who would like to trick us and none of us should be gullible. It is sensible and advisable and sometimes necessary to test the truth of anything we are told is true. That said, there is a difference between honest doubt and a scepticism or cynicism that refuses – no matter what – to be convinced. That faith in disbelief, exemplified by Professor Richard Dawkins, is truly as narrow-minded and blinkered as the worst type of religious bigotry. Not so Thomas whose doubt is rooted in a real desire to believe but he wants to believe on the basis of his own personal experience of Jesus and not simply by believing in the joyful witness of his friends.

So Thomas sets out the reasonable test of faith which is our text today:

‘Unless I 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, I will not believe.’

If the manifestation that the disciples are full of is truly Jesus, then it should bear the marks of the crucifixion – the imprint of the nails, the gash where the spear pierced his side. And not only is Thomas demanding visual proof, he also requires tactile proof – to see and to touch the man he knew and whom he knows to be dead. If he can, then the ten disciples are right and Jesus is truly risen from the dead.

And, of course, we all know that Thomas was fortunate enough to be granted what he asked for when a week later, Jesus appeared to them and Thomas had the chance to prove beyond any doubt that Jesus had in fact risen from the dead.

But what I would like to know now is whether Thomas actually touched Jesus. I used to think not. I also used to think that Mary Magdalene did not touch Jesus when he appeared to her first outside the empty tomb. My faith was cerebral, intellectual, of the mind and given my Englishness, touching someone is not something one does in polite company. But now I feel that our faith is not just of the mind but is also of the body too. What is extraordinary about Christianity is the belief that God who is spirit has taken upon himself our flesh in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. Christianity is a religion of the incarnation where God became a man, the word became flesh.

So did Thomas touch Jesus ? You must answer the question for yourself. This much is certain. Thomas asks to see and to touch Jesus. When Jesus appears, he invites Thomas to touch what he can see. We're not told whether he does or he doesn't - there seems to be a gap in what is reported in the text by John. Simply what follows is that great statement of faith by Thomas who no longer has any doubts: 'My Lord and my God' which echoes what Bartholomew had said to Jesus 'You are the Son of God !' 'You are the King of Israel !' (John 1 v 49), some 19 chapters earlier when Jesus calls Philip then Bartholomew to follow him.

I believe Thomas like Mary would want to touch the man they loved. To be in the flesh means we can touch and be touched. That's what it means to be connected to be in communion. Each time we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are touched by God. Thomas was - are we ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

7th April, 2013

G: Sermon 27 : In touch

