

In a name

23 4 17

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

Our text this morning may be found in John's gospel, chapter 20 and verse 24:

'Thomas . . . was not with them . . .'

It's good to welcome Bishop James back again. Sunday 23rd April, Low Sunday, the Second Sunday of Easter but with a church lunch after the service surely a high point here at St Bartholomew's.

Today's gospel focuses on that wonderful passage about Thomas challenging what the other disciples tell him about the risen Lord Jesus having appeared to them when Thomas wasn't there; Thomas's test of faith: to touch Jesus for himself and to be touched by him – his fingers in the wounds of the nails a soldier hammered through Jesus' hands; the wound of the spear a soldier thrust into Jesus' side.

Thomas was my father's name. When I was looking up Bishop James's telephone number in Crockford's – the directory of all the clergy on the Church of England – I discovered that his name in full is James Nathaniel Johnson and I smiled at the wonderful trinity of names his mum and dad had given him. His dad's surname Johnson, son of John, coupled with James as a first Christian name: James and John were brothers, fishermen, two of the twelve. But best of all, given we are St Bartholomew, Bartholomew's first name, his given name at his circumcision was Nathaniel.

But do you know what your name actually means ? My mum was Welsh and she persuaded my dad to give me a Welsh Christian name – Gareth – no saint's name sadly but the name a knight of King Arthur's Round Table, the younger brother of Gawain and Galahad, Gareth was killed by Sir Lancelot as he rescued Queen Guinevere. And Gareth means, believe it or not, gentle which given my temper makes me smile !

Whatever, my name honestly means gentle but does Thomas really deserve the name doubting Thomas ? I think not. For today's passage is not about doubt but about certainty. Thomas challenge is not because he doesn't believe but because he wants to believe whole-heartedly, personally, without doubt. He knows first-hand who and what Jesus was. First-hand he was upset when Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified. First-hand he knew the grief and pain of loss. But having missed seeing Jesus when he appeared to the other disciples, his challenge is clear and plain. To see for himself, to feel in the flesh the reality of what they were so enthusiastically going on about.

Now the gospel never actually says whether Thomas does what he has asks to do, is asked by Jesus to do. He is there. Jesus does appear to him, to them, and Jesus clearly invites him to touch him. Does Thomas like Mary Magdalene on that first Easter morning want to throw his arms around him and embrace the man he loved ?

Well, we English don't go in for touching or hugging but if we were Italian or Greek it's what we well might well do. But whatever the facts, Thomas believed the fact that Jesus had risen from the grave and so Thomas went on to die for his faith in him.

So I don't think we should accept the name 'doubting Thomas' but rather regard Thomas as someone who genuinely sought to prove his faith was real, a faith well founded on a rock.

And whatever our name might mean may we do the same.

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

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

23rd April 2017

