

Reflection on Sunday 27 April 2025

by Adrian Walter, Lay Leader of Worship

Reading: John 20. 19-31

Doubting Thomas

My academic background is geology. I have always had a great fascination with terrestrial surface processes, earthquakes, volcanos, tectonic plates and the like. But, unfortunately, to fully understand these dramatic processes required me to have a more than rudimentary understanding of the less dramatic processes - geophysics, geochemistry, mineralogy and crystallography – yes, I can sense your eyes glazing over already... so let's move on to today's Gospel reading about...Thomas.

Unlike Peter, who gets a staggering 178 mentions in the Bible, Thomas is mentioned just 11 times, over half of which occur in mundane lists of disciples and only four of which are speaking parts. (Mind you, that's better than Bartholomew, who gets just four mentions and no speaking parts!) So, what do we make of the man who speaks only four times but who is remembered for just one statement which has stigmatized him for two millennia.

Well, I believe Thomas was just like you and me - a multifaceted individual, his character changing depending on the situation - and so to slap a 'Doubting Thomas' label on him does him a huge injustice. After all, we don't refer to someone as a 'Denying Peter', do we?

So, this morning I'd like to introduce you to several other facets of

Thomas' character - all of which are, in my opinion, just as valid as the one for which he is famous - in the hope that this little-known disciple will be a source of some great encouragement as you live out your faith today.

First, let me introduce you to...

Discipled Thomas – We first meet Thomas in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (but not John) at the start of Jesus' ministry, where he is listed amongst the 12 disciples. Now, we know that everything that God does is for a purpose and that He knew Thomas just as well as He knew all of the disciples. He knew all of Thomas' weaknesses, yet He still chose him. You see, God is not looking for perfect disciples, or I certainly wouldn't be standing here today. He is looking for people like you and me, with all our flaws, and that's good news indeed.

We next meet Thomas halfway through Jesus' ministry and this time it's...

Daring Thomas – (John 11. 16) Lazarus has just died in Bethany, which is a stone's throw from Jerusalem. Jesus has previously had to leave the area as the religious leaders were seeking to kill him, but He wants to go to Lazarus' family. The disciples try to talk Him out of it on the grounds that He would probably be killed, but Jesus is adamant that He is going.

The Bible tells us, 'Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."' This is seen by many as a statement of great courage; Thomas expressing his willingness to die for his Master and therefore an indication of his belief in Jesus as the Messiah. How

does that resonate with you? Are there times when your faith is so real that you would stop at nothing to defend it? If so, that's great...

However, there is an alternative interpretation of Thomas' statement, and that is where we meet...

Despairing Thomas – “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” We only have the text, not the intonation, so we can't know exactly what Thomas meant, but I've always held the view that it would be more in keeping with some of Thomas' other character traits if the way he said it was despairing to the point of being sarcastic in an attempt to dissuade Jesus from going. You see, I'm not always the courageous type; I often wonder if I'd be prepared to die for my faith, and if Thomas was being cynical, that's certainly me - I can be very cynical (it's a work in progress that I'm not always being cooperative with God about).

We hear nothing about Thomas again until right at the end of Jesus' ministry, where we meet...

Direct Thomas – (John 14. 6) During the Last Supper, Jesus talks about where He is going, finishing with, “...you know the way to the place I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” This is Thomas bluntly verbalising what I'm sure all the other disciples were thinking but dared not say. And we should never be afraid to question God, to tell Him we don't understand, to ask Him for clarification. And we should be very grateful to Thomas, because it was this blunt interjection that led to probably the best known of all of the sayings of Jesus, “I am the way and the truth and the life...”

Like most of the disciples, Thomas isn't named in Gethsemane, or at the arrest of Jesus, or His trial, His crucifixion and subsequent burial, or in those huddled in the upper room afterwards, so we're suddenly introduced to...

Distant Thomas – (John 20. 24) For whatever reason, Thomas was absent on that first Easter day. We don't know where he was or why, but the Bible tells us, 'Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.' It may be that with his Master gone, presumably for ever, things just weren't the same anymore. And isn't that just like us - a priest, a curate, a key church worker, a prominent member of the congregation leaves and things just aren't the same - so the temptation to walk away comes upon us.

In 2020, Stella and I spent much time talking to God about whether He wanted us to leave Hertford Baptist Church after 40 years and move here. We needed to be absolutely sure that we were moving for the right reasons, that Hertford St Andrew was the place where God wanted us to be at this point in our spiritual journey - and we are sure... but I'm still asking Him why!

So now we come to the Thomas we all know...

Doubting Thomas – (John 20. 25b) 'But he [Thomas] said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."' The statement for which he will always be remembered.

We all want proof, preferably indisputable proof, of everything in life, but that's not faith. Do you, like Thomas, struggle with doubt? Well, if it helps, I do, we all do. We all have doubts, no matter how

long we've been a Christian, but Christianity is not a religion, it is a faith. As J B Phillips, in his paraphrase of Hebrews 11, puts it: 'Now faith means putting our full confidence in the things we hope for, it means being certain of things we cannot see.'

Now, Thomas has heard about faith for the past three years: your faith has saved you; your faith has made you well; your faith has healed you (to three different people). He's seen those miracles, he was in the group of disciples Jesus chastised for their lack of faith, but, somehow, he's still not got it, and it's not that he's struggling to believe, for he says, "I will not believe!".

So, a week later, Thomas has an encounter with the risen Christ. In 1661, Caravaggio attempted to capture this in his painting *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. There is nothing in Scripture to suggest that Thomas even touched Jesus, let alone poked his finger into His side, but what I find interesting is that the other two disciples, possibly Peter and John, seem just as keen to see Thomas touch Jesus – perhaps Caravaggio thought they also secretly harboured doubts, doubts which, again, only Thomas was prepared to express?



Whatever, at this point all his demands leave him and we are introduced to a changed Thomas...

Deep Thomas – (John 11. 28) As I said, there is nothing to suggest that Thomas touched Jesus, and I believe that he did not. I believe the Biblical narrative is complete and Thomas, standing in the presence of Christ, can do nothing more than say, "My Lord and my God!" In those few but profound words, Thomas acknowledges the divinity of Jesus, who is now not only his Lord and Master but also his God. It's an encounter that changes lives; 60 years ago it certainly changed my life, and if you have not had that life-changing encounter with the risen Christ but would like one, then please speak to me or someone later.

And so, finally, we meet...

Deponent Thomas – (Deponent being a posh word for witness!) We hear no more about Thomas after this encounter, but tradition has it that Thomas took the Gospel eastwards, planting churches as he went, and ending up in India where he was cruelly martyred for his faith - hardly the actions that should lead to a man being labelled for all time as a doubter.

So, there you have it – eight different facets of Thomas' character, which raises eight questions for us...

Are we Disciples? Or are we like the crowds who followed Jesus, but more out of curiosity?

Are we Daring? Do we, in the words of William Carey, "Attempt great things for God and expect great things from God" or...

Are we Despairing? Do we think that in a post-Christian world this is all pointless?

Are we Direct? Or do we, like the other disciples, not want to admit we don't understand?

Are we Distant? Do we drop in and out, or are we like the other disciples, staying together through difficult times?

Are we Doubting? It's ok to have doubts, but please talk to God, and others, about them.

Are we Deep? Are we trying to understand this God who loves us so much?

Are we Deponents? Do we make the most of the opportunities God sends our way to witness for Him, in what we say or just what we do... or don't say or do?

Well, I would suggest all of them have been present in each one of us at one stage or other of our spiritual journey, and many still are. That's certainly true in my case!

The alert amongst you will notice that they all begin with D. Well, there is another word which I believe describes Thomas which also begins with D. So, just to prove that my education wasn't totally wasted, in crystallography a three-dimensional crystal form with eight faces is known as an octahedron. That probably means nothing to almost all of you, but to many of the ladies in the congregation it should mean an awful lot because an octahedron is the natural form of a diamond before it is cut and polished into a valuable gemstone.

So, that gives Thomas his final D - he was a diamond, a rough diamond at the start, but one who, despite all his flawed humanity, God (who is the master lapidarist) cut and polished into a shining example of faith and witness which should serve as an encouragement to us all.

Amen.