

Easter 2

John 20:19-end

Father Christopher

Poor old St Thomas! He has had rather a poor press in recent centuries. In Jesus's words to him, *'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'*, we are used to hearing a rebuke. He should have believed without needing to see or even touch Jesus. Faith without seeing or touching is held up as *real* faith, what it's all about.

There may be a hint of that, but Jesus does after all give to Thomas what he asks for in order to believe. And Thomas then acclaims, *'My Lord and my God!'* the only time in the gospel in which someone directly calls Jesus God. So, while Jesus is saying that those who believe without having seen Him are blessed, it's certainly not at all clear that He is somehow putting down Thomas for needing to see Him. Furthermore, while Jesus says to Him, *'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side'*, which has given much inspiration to gory artists, such as Caravaggio, as you can see on our posters for today, we are not actually told that Thomas does so. I think it is in fact likely that He does not at that point need to, despite having earlier said that He would have to in order to believe. This is supported by Jesus simply referring to His having believed because He has seen.

So, the story as it is told is actually as follows:

St. Thomas misses Jesus's first resurrection appearance to the disciples in the upper room, on the evening of the first Easter Day.

He is so astonished [and who wouldn't be] that He says He won't believe unless he sees the mark of the nails and puts His hand in Jesus's side.

A week later, Jesus grants Thomas's request, but in seeing Jesus, he likely does not in fact need to take Him up on His offer.

This was probably written down as the last of the disciples to have known Jesus were dying, and the figure of Thomas is a very useful bridging figure, as one who had not received the breath of the Spirit directly from Jesus, but who saw Him nonetheless. And this would have been read and heard by Christians who had not only not seen Jesus, but as time went on, hadn't even heard testimony from those who had. In other words, they were facing real questions about what it meant to believe in Jesus, and what it was to be the Church, when there was no personal testimony to hear.

And the answer which St John gives us is very interesting. You could take it in a very straightforwardly Protestant way, and say that the answer is simply faith. The key to being saved, and to being part of the Church, is to make the leap of faith in our minds and hearts: it is a very personal decision, and is up to each of us, based on the evidence before us as we read it in the gospels. I do not argue with that view of salvation, but I do think it is lacking something. It is lacking something of the physical and communal nature of faith, which I think we find in this passage. In breathing the Holy Spirit on the disciples who are there that first Easter Day evening, Jesus is re-creating them; He is giving birth to the Church.

The word used for breath is the same one used when God breathed on the waters in creation at the start of Genesis; and He appears to them on the first day of the week, Sunday; and appears again, when Thomas is there, on the eighth day, eight traditionally the number of new creation, when things begin again.

It can be tempting, in our modern, apparently rational, world, to see this as all one great metaphor, and to see the Holy Spirit as what's left of God when you take away the Father and the Son – the bit we can't quite put our finger on. And yet, as described here the Spirit is just as physical and real as the Father and the Son. Similarly, the Spirit's presence with us in the Church is just as physical and real. What was passed on by Jesus to the disciples, and what they in turn passed on through those earliest Christian communities, as described in our first reading from Acts, sharing their possessions, is not limited to the practical or to the simple sharing of individual faith with each other. The Church is far more than that. Our faith is far more than just our own personal belief in the stories and statements of faith that we have heard from others in the church. Our faith

is given to us by the power of Holy Spirit, though we of course have to cooperate with its operation in our lives, and it is sustained by the same Spirit, operating in the Church, through all of us who together are the Body of Christ.

St. John in his first letter, which we heard as our second reading, says, *'We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.'* You may think that that only applied to that first generation, but because the Holy Spirit remains in the Church, which is the body of Christ here on earth, we too hear, see and touch through the sacraments, through the liturgies of the church. That is particularly clear at our Easter vigil, as we follow the paschal candle back into the church together, groping as a group in the darkness. Just as Jesus also gives authority to the disciples to forgive or retain the sins of any when He gives His Spirit. That wouldn't make any sense at all if our faith was simply an individual matter of believing. It only makes sense if we understand the Holy Spirit as being with us in a very real way, guiding us in our ministry as the Church, if we will only be open to Him.

There is another aspect of this that I haven't noticed before. And that is that, while we are told by St John that *'these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in His name'*, and though the story of St Thomas emphasises the difference between seeing, and even touching, Jesus in the flesh, and our own experience, at the same time, we also experience something of what it was like to be in that upper room by hearing the story. We, the successors of the apostles, are with them, our ancestors in the faith and in the Church, in that upper room when we hear this story. We imagine the claustrophobic fear they must have experienced, and that is no accident – for John is seeking to draw parallels and a common sense for his own community, which lived in fear of persecution. And just as the fear, and necessity, of hiding, will have struck a chord for his community, so will Jesus's repeated words, *'Peace be with you.'* He says that when he appears, suddenly, in their midst on that first Easter evening.

He shows them His hands and His side, and then He says it again: *'Peace be with you.'* No accident I think that His words of peace sandwich His showing of His body, just as His repetition of it after they have seen His wounds will have had extra meaning. And then He says it again a week later, when He appears to the full 11, including Thomas. So we too, while not coming to faith, or being sustained in it, through seeing Jesus physically as they did, do come to it, or are sustained in it, through hearing the gospel read to us, and thereby imagining ourselves in the story. And through the very real presence of Holy Spirit, which was breathed onto the disciples, and which remains with us in the Church, our continuing to live Christ's risen life - their risen life, our shared risen life - is not a metaphor, or a way of thinking, but our *full* reality. As Jesus says to them, *'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'*, so that takes on very real meaning for us, still in the strength of the Spirit.

We imagine ourselves into the story, with the apostles, as their companions, their brothers and sisters; but we are also their companions, their brothers and sisters, because they did go out as commanded, and those whom they in turn commissioned in Jesus's name did the same, and so the Holy Spirit continues to dwell in us, the Church of God today, and to send us out. And so, may we know the risen Christ as the truest, most real, presence in our life, as they did.

May we live in the power of the Spirit, knowing His enlivening presence with us. May we too be sent out in His power, as our risen Lord, Jesus Christ, was sent by His and our Father.

Amen