

*Acts 4:32-35    1 John 1:1 - 2:2    John 20: 19 - 31*

When I was at school, unlike most of my fellow pupils, I never learned to swim. My own fault, as I was too scared to go into the water. Only when I got to college in the mid 60s, did I respond to the explanations and promptings of the Sportsmistress by finally testing the water. Even then, I needed the help of my friends to summon up the courage to let go of the side of the pool.

I was reminded of my early dread of getting in to the swimming pool when, on Friday, I heard Nick Baines, Bishop of Leeds, talk about stepping out in faith being like learning how to swim. We may know all the facts and have every encouragement but its all to no avail unless we have the courage to step into the water. Only then do we realise that the water supports us, while we put our learning to the test.

In today's Gospel reading, the disciple Thomas must be up there among the most misunderstood people of the Bible. He's so often called 'doubting Thomas', with the implication that this is some sort of fault. But is this 'tag' really deserved?

The story of Thomas's behaviour after the resurrection makes more sense in the light of other incidents that John has recorded. The first mention is when Jesus learns of the death of Lazarus. Jesus delays his journey back to Bethany, and some of the disciples think going back would be dangerous, as the Jewish leaders were at that moment looking for an opportunity to put Jesus to death.

Its Thomas who realises that Jesus is determined to go to his friend, and who says to the others, 'Let's go to die with him'. As Thomas is content to stand by Jesus, even if means his own death, doesn't that sound more like a loving and loyal disciple rather than a doubting one ?

A few chapters later, John records Jesus's prayer at the Last Supper. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his passing over, through suffering, to glory. But as he's using figurative language, they're missing the coded message he's giving them. Here again we find Thomas speaking for the group, as he says 'We don't know where you're going, how can we possibly know the way?'

The others must have also been puzzled but perhaps didn't want to show their ignorance or draw attention to themselves. However, Thomas is not going to stay silent. He simply doesn't understand what Jesus has said and he really does want to be clear. He can't follow Jesus unless he knows where and how to do so. So, never mind the doubting Thomas tag; surely this is a refreshingly direct and realistic disciple !

In remembering these other stories about Thomas, we perhaps see a different context for that appearance of the risen Christ among his disciples. He arrives while the disciples are gathered in fear behind locked doors, and while Thomas is out.

Jesus appears, gives them a mission, and empowers them with his own Spirit to continue his work of salvation.

When told his friends had seen the Lord in that locked room, Thomas felt that something didn't ring true. If they had seen him, why were they still hiding away? If they're filled with such joy, having been empowered, by the Spirit of God, to complete Christ's work on earth, what were they waiting for ?

So Thomas effectively says, 'I don't believe you'. He's a loyal and straightforward man, who longed to follow Jesus but needed to know the way. But he couldn't read the presence of the risen Christ in the faces of his friends.

As Christians, we are called to be Christ to others and to see Christ in others, but this is only possible if we are filled with the same Spirit he breathed on his disciples. Its this Spirit that equips us for the work we have to do. Faith can be handed down but it must become first-hand for us. We each need our own relationship with our risen Lord.

When told of the re-appearance of Jesus, Thomas wanted to experience this wonderful event for himself and, to do so, he stayed in the fellowship of the faithful. Jesus returns, offers the disciples his peace, and invites Thomas to touch him. Thomas does so, feels the marks of the crucifixion, and believes.

The disciples had said they would never abandon Jesus and when at the cross, they did so, they know that their lack of courage had led to the breakdown of their fellowship. Now they know that any new fellowship has to be different; based not on their own strength but on the vision of the loving, gentle God who had called them through Jesus. It would have to be an example to others of what genuine fellowship, the life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit , might be like.

Many people still say that they would believe in Jesus if they could see as evidence a definite sign or a miracle. However, we have all the proof we need, recorded in the books of the Bible, evidenced in the fellowship and testimony of believers and borne out by our own experience of his help in times of trouble. If we are to carry on Christ's work, what are we waiting for?

While Thomas believed only when he saw and touched the risen Christ, the response of Jesus was to say " You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe !"

Amen