

Homily for St Thomas the Apostle
St James, Cambridge 3.7.16 – The Revd. Debbie Ford

Readings: Habakkuk 2:1-4
John 20:24-29

- I often think Thomas gets a pretty hard time of it: there's even now a dictionary entry for 'Doubting Thomas': 'a person who is sceptical and refuses to believe something without proof.'
- I wonder is it a good thing to be able to question and doubt? Or is it unhelpful? A sign of lack of faith?
- It's what both our OT and gospel readings have in common: although virtually nothing is known about Habakkuk, what's distinctive about him is that he's the only prophet who actively questions God (just a few verses earlier):

*"O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?
Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save? Why do you make me
see wrongdoing and look at trouble?" (1:2-3)*

- I remember being rather taken aback a few months ago when I started talking to various church members about whether they might be willing to share their faith stories/journeys during Lent – and quite a few people seemed worried that they might not be 'orthodox' enough (whatever that might be!)- or that their questions and/or doubts might reflect some failure or lack of faith....
- Not what I think at all! And not what I think the story of Thomas is about....
- Although there's doubting and doubting, isn't there?
- Questioning can be a really important part of growing into a mature faith, where you begin to engage and ask the questions for yourself... It can be a long journey – and having wise people to help you in your seeking and discerning can really matter.
- And the main thing is what's *behind* our/your questioning. Are you really open and interested in God? Do you trust and allow

him to respond? Do keep waiting and trusting even if it takes a painfully long time? Or do you give up and shut down, thinking you must have made a mistake and put your faith in someone/something else.

- It makes me wonder what was behind Thomas' 'doubting'?
- Do you think he was being cynical & suspicious and skeptical? Or something more/other than that?
- I wonder...
- Jesus was someone Thomas loved and had risked everything for! Maybe hearing the others made him just really, really long to see Jesus for *himself!*
- And *going* for it! It mattered so much! Like Paul, some years later: 'I want to *know* Christ and the power of his resurrection!'
- Thomas has to be honest and true to himself... whatever his questions are...as we all do: how can we any different? However much he might have wanted to, Thomas couldn't pretend he was satisfied with hearing from the other disciples.
- And Jesus wasn't put off, was he? He says 'OK! Put your hand here... touch me, if that's what you need!'
- When David and I first visited Louisiana State Penitentiary (a prison in the South of the US, with 5,000 inmates – many with life sentences – which there means till they die), a small group of us gathered to read, talk and pray about this story of Thomas together.
- At the end, one of the inmates, Kerry, told us how crucial it had been. "I've begun to realise that it's OK to be me. I'm someone who has lots of questions – that's just the way I am. Everyone around me seems to be able to settle for black and white answers and I've always felt that I didn't have enough faith because I can't. I can't tell you how relieved I am."

- Jesus accepts and meets us where we're at – it's different for each one of us – because it's unique to who we are in him. It's called integrity.
- So *be* someone who keeps asking questions!
- We have so many questions, don't we?
- Some of the ones I've heard just this week are: "Am I going to have done well enough in my exams?" "Am I right to give up an unfulfilling job? Will I find another one?" "Are we going to have enough money to live on?" "Am I ever going to meet the right partner?" "Am I ever going to be able to afford a house?"
- "What's Brexit going to mean? Who's going to lead our country?" "Is anybody going to look after me when I get old?" "Is my dying going to be peaceful?" "Is there such a thing as heaven?"
- And of course behind most of our questions are deeper ones: "Am I really loveable?" "Is there a God?" And, if there is: "Do you really care, God?" "Do you really know what you're doing?" "When are you going to answer me?" "Can I really trust you?"
- But just *look* how Thomas was rewarded: he's the first person who explicitly recognises the risen Jesus as God. *That's* what his persistence and faith have opened him up to.
- The poet Denise Levertov captures it beautifully in her poem 'Thomas Didymus'. It's written in the voice of Thomas, who, in the first part, identifies strongly with the father of an epileptic son and how the agony of watching his suffering and asking 'Why?' again and again ties him up in knots.... Long after the father and son are healed.
- As he struggles to trust, his heavy prayer continues to be: 'Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief..' and then his amazing experience of Jesus' response... where his question is not answered, but met and enlightened, finding its part in a much bigger design.

- Just as God promises Habakkuk and us all: 'I'm here: I *do* care. I *do* know what I'm doing; my vision is wonderful... *trust me*'.

"For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay." (2:3)

- So let me close by reading Levertov's poem (of which you should have a copy).

St. Thomas Didymus -By Denise Levertov

In the hot street at noon I saw him
 a small man
 gray but vivid, standing forth
 beyond the crowd's buzzing
 holding in desperate grip his shaking
 teethgnashing son,
 and thought him my brother.

I heard him cry out, weeping, and speak
 those words,
 Lord, I believe, help thou
 mine unbelief,
 and knew him
 my twin:
 a man whose entire being
 had knotted itself
 into the one tight drawn question,
 Why,
 why has this child lost his childhood in suffering,
 why is this child who will soon be a man
 tormented, torn twisted?
 Why is he cruelly punished
 who has done nothing except be born?

The twin of my birth
 was not so close
 as that man I heard
 say what my heart
 sighed with each beat, my breath silently
 cried in and out,
 in and out.
 After the healing,
 he, with his wondering
 newly peaceful boy, receded;
 no one
 dwells on the gratitude, the astonished joy,
 the swift

acceptance and forgetting.
I did not follow
to see their changed lives.
What I retained
was the flash of kinship.

Despite
all that I witnessed,
his question remained
my question, throbbed like a stealthy cancer,
known
only to doctor and patient. To others
I seemed well enough.

So it was
that after Golgotha
my spirit in secret
lurched in the same convulsed writhings
that tore that child
before he was healed.
And after the empty tomb
when they told me He lived, had spoken to Magdalen,
told me
that though He had passed through the door like a ghost
He had breathed on them
the breath of a living man-
even then
when hope tried with a flutter of wings
to lift me-
still, alone with myself,
my heavy cry was the same: *Lord,*
I believe,
help thou mine unbelief.
I needed
blood to tell me the truth,
the touch
of blood. Even
my sight of the dark crust of it
round the nailholes
didn't thrust its meaning all the way through
to that manifold knot in me
that willed to possess all knowledge,
refusing to loosen
unless that insistence won
the battle I fought with life.

But when my hand
led by His hand's firm clasp
entered the unhealed wound,

my fingers encountering
rib-bone and pulsing heat,
what I felt was not
scalding pain, shame for my obstinate need,
but light, light streaming
into me, over me, filling the room
as if I had lived till then
in a cold cave, and now
coming forth for the first time,
the knot that bound me unravelling,
I witnessed
all things quicken to color, to form,
my question
not answered but given
its part
in a vast unfolding design lit
by a risen sun.
Amen.