

St Thomas the Apostle

On Wednesday the Church celebrated the feast of St Thomas the Apostle. He is often referred to as doubting Thomas, and indeed the term “a doubting Thomas” has come into common parlance as a criticism in a negative sense. I would suggest, though, that that is unfair, not least to Thomas himself.

As we heard in our Bible reading just now (John 20.19, 24-31), the Gospel for St Thomas' day, he doubted the claim by the other disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead. Only when he encountered the risen Jesus himself did he believe. Rather than being a failing on Thomas' part his doubt can, I suggest, be seen in a more positive light, as wise caution. And when he does encounter Jesus himself his response of faith is quite definite: “My Lord and my God”.

We can surely learn much from Thomas. He was not willing to accept such a bold claim as his Lord's resurrection second hand. He could not be accused of being gullible. Rather he wanted to be totally certain of the truth of that claim. He needed concrete proof first hand. And when he received that proof his belief was assured and his commitment unequivocal.

In our modern world we are bombarded with claims: claims from politicians about what they will do if we vote for them, claims about products if we buy them, to give just two examples. Propaganda, advertising, soundbites, spin – these are all powerful and often persuasive pressures on people. Some of these claims may indeed be true but many are often more suspect. Yet sadly people can be taken in by false claims and promises.

The more cautious and measured approach adopted by Thomas surely has so much to be recommended. We need to take time to think, time to assess claims and not accept them until we are sure in our own minds that they are indeed true.

Many conflicts, many disagreements, much prejudice in our world come about as a result of kneejerk reactions and not knowing the whole story. One has to admit that applies equally to the Church. And so Christians above all should seek to follow the example of Thomas.

Instead of doubting Thomas, a better description should perhaps be thoughtful Thomas, or indeed believing Thomas. For in the end he does come to belief, and his faith is all the stronger for his initial caution and hesitation.

I always find it helpful to think of the opposite of faith being not doubt but certainty. Doubt presupposes an open mind, whereas certainty can reflect a closed mind. The great need for peace and reconciliation in our world today requires open minds, minds that will question, minds that will weigh the evidence on both sides. Only then can there be real and meaningful dialogue and a realistic hope for peace.

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