

“THE FIRST DISCIPLES - THOMAS”

John 20:24-31

As many of you will be aware by now (I hope), this year we are looking at what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. We've considered some of the basics. We've looked at the examples of some of Jesus' first disciples. We've started to reflect of some of the attributes of disciples in the home group studies – and there's still time to join a group if you would like to. I hope we all feel that we are actually disciples of Jesus as we try to follow him each day. And we probably all have in our minds an idea of what a disciples should be.

But it's not easy, is it? Discipleship is a pretty fluid state to be in. We'd like to think that we are developing each day into victorious spiritual giants, living lives of unalloyed joy and peace, lives to which our friends and colleagues are inexorably drawn as we witness minute by minute to the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. The longer we follow Jesus, the better people we become and the graph of our growth as disciples is a smooth and sharp upward curve. I wonder how many of us here his morning are actually living that kind of life. I suspect that most of us are struggling with all that.

We may make our pledges of loyalty and commitment to Jesus Christ. Probably that's what brought us into the company of Jesus' disciples in the first place – some kind of “commitment”, a “decision for Jesus”. And we have no doubt renewed that commitment at various times – as we've sung moving hymns, as we've prayed with others, as we've joined in the words at an annual covenant service, as we've prayed in private with our Bibles open at a challenging passage. Deep down we really do want to serve Jesus and to develop as one of his disciples. If anyone ever challenges us we are adamant that we want to follow the way he has set out.

But unfortunately, life gets in the way. We find ourselves living in a world throbbing with temptation. We live and work amongst other people who seem to get on quite well without Jesus. We find ourselves bombarded by television programmes and newspaper articles by people who are much cleverer than we are and who manage to poke some pretty big holes in what we believe. Our daily experience of pain and struggle and anxiety seems to be at odds with the stuff we hear from the big, brash evangelists who promise a life free of such concerns if only we will put our faith wholly in Jesus.

There are things we don't understand about the teaching of Jesus and the wider message of the New Testament. We don't seem to be able to assimilate all that Jesus said. Some of it seems very obscure and there are all kinds of very different interpretations of it. It's almost as if Jesus is being deliberately obtuse and were not quite sure exactly what we're supposed to be doing in response to what he says.

And then we start to have doubts and misgivings. Is it all really true? Are we being naïve in our acceptance of all this Jesus stuff? Does it really work? Often, when we're feeling really low physically or emotionally we find that our spiritual state goes down as well. We get a sense of despair, even, and wonder just why we bother. That is heightened when we find ourselves surrounded by others who seem to be enjoying all the benefits of faith in Jesus and appear to be floating along on Cloud Nine, buoyed up with blessings beyond our imagining. I can remember during all the fuss surrounding the so-called “Toronto Blessing” wondering why I was the only one left standing at the end of the meeting while everyone else was on the floor!

And yet, in amongst all that there are glorious moments of lucidity and faith. We have those moments when Jesus seems so close, when it's obvious that what God is doing to us is showering us with blessings, when the Holy Spirit seems to be almost literally flowing through our veins. Suddenly it's all worth it. And then we begin to wonder why it's not like that all the time. We start to feel guilty that we're not buzzing with that sense of excitement every moment of the day. We wonder if our periods of doubt are being counted against us in some heavenly ready reckoner. We begin to feel that maybe we don't have such a strong faith after all. We compare ourselves and our experience with other Christians we know

and decide that we're somehow inferior. And it all starts to go downhill again. Why is being a disciple such a roller coaster experience?

That's why Thomas is such a good example for us. There's not a huge amount written about him in the New Testament. He has a mention in the book of *Acts*, in a list of disciples, and a few references in the gospels. But what little we do read of his experience as a disciple gives me encouragement, because I can see something of myself in him – and I can see something of the way in which Jesus treats him that gives me hope in my own faltering attempts to be a disciple.

Apart from the inclusion of his name in the list of the twelve disciples as Jesus initially calls them together to follow him, the first time we meet him is in John's gospel, in *11:16*. It's the episode in which Jesus goes over to Bethany and calls Lazarus back from the dead. Jesus and the disciples are in Jerusalem and word reaches them from Bethany that Lazarus, a great friend of his and brother to Mary and Martha, is very ill. There is talk of going over to visit him, but the disciples are suddenly aware of the danger of going over to Bethany, as Jesus will be exposing himself to the possibility of attack by his enemies. They are clearly very reluctant to leave the cover of their accommodation in Jerusalem, but it is Thomas who, in *v16*, declares "*Let us also go, that we may die with him.*" That pledge of loyalty to Jesus is the first we read of Thomas. He is eager to identify with Jesus, clearly prepared for the possibility that he may lose his own life in the process and ready here to encourage the others to join him. Thomas has nailed his colours of commitment firmly to the mast. It's just how you would expect a true disciple to act.

We next encounter Thomas in the upstairs room where Jesus is sharing his last meal with his followers. As the conversation moves on, Jesus begins in *John 14:1* to try and break it to the disciples that he is leaving them. We know, with the benefit of hindsight, that he is talking about his death. He is trying to indicate exactly what will happen over the next few hours. This time Thomas speaks up not to pledge his loyalty, but to express his confusion. He doesn't understand at all what Jesus is trying to say. He cannot grasp what is going on. Now he is struggling, unable to see just what Jesus is driving at. Jesus is not making any sense to him. Indeed, Jesus's response isn't a lot of help – just another rather unclear saying and a suggestion that Thomas needs to believe a bit harder. There is a sense of bewilderment and a clear weakness in his understanding. The assurance and bravado of his earlier commitment is gone. The graph is on the way down, if you like.

And then, of course, we come to the passage we read a few moments ago from *John 20*. This is what we know Thomas for. This is his moment of notoriety. This is why he is – very unfairly, if you ask me – always known as "Doubting Thomas". It's a shame that only he should be singled out, as all the other disciples clearly doubted a week earlier. But the truth remains – Thomas had his doubts about what had happened to Jesus. A week before, all the others had seen Jesus, they had had the experience and he hadn't. We don't know why Thomas wasn't with the others on the earlier occasion. Maybe he was dealing with his grief and despair in his own way, while the rest of them sought solace in each other's company.

After all, it had been an amazing few days. Thomas had seen Jesus arrested and taken away. He knew that he had been executed and buried – along with all Thomas's hopes and dreams for the future. Then there was talk that he had been brought back to life – and all the others had seen him, apparently. But Thomas couldn't get his head round it. He wanted to see for himself, to experience it all physically, tangibly. He wanted the proof, the real assurance that Jesus was alive so that he didn't end up being disappointed again. His emotions were in tatters. His confusion was profound. He was struggling with what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus, because now it didn't seem to have done him much good.

And then, just as he seems to be at rock bottom – desperate to believe, but unable to do so – Jesus arrives and addresses him directly. He even knows what Thomas's main problem is: the need to see, hear, touch him, to have his deepest fears allayed and the stuttering flame of his faith reignited. Thomas is invited by the Risen Lord Jesus to reach out and put his fingers into the wounds in his hands and side. But Thomas doesn't need to do that now. He can see all that he needs to and there is that powerful moment of lucidity

as Thomas cries out “*My Lord and my God.*” The story which John began with “*The Word was God*” in 1:1 now reaches its climax with Thomas’s confession of the deity of Jesus Christ. Jesus is real and alive. His doubts have gone and he is ready to take on the world again. We know that Thomas went off fishing with the others in 21:2 and there’s a very strong tradition that he went off east to plant churches in India, but as far as the biblical accounts go, this is the high point.

So here we have a disciple, a member of Jesus’s core group of followers and later a powerful evangelist and church planter, whose experience matches the erratic path of faith that so many of us go through. He was committed and brave, eager to follow Jesus whatever. But then he had his moments of confusion and struggle. Along with the other disciples he abandoned Jesus when the going got too tough. And then he found himself in a position where he just doubted the whole enterprise – and expressed those doubts to the surprise of his colleagues. In many ways it is an encouragement to know that we are not the only ones who struggle with the demands of discipleship and with the teaching of Jesus. It’s good to know that Jesus was still able to use Thomas in a powerful way as an agent of the gospel, even after his difficulties: it means that Jesus ever completely gives up on us.

But the thing that really makes the difference here for Thomas is an encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus Christ. That is what allays his fears and chases away his doubts. The key factor is not Thomas’s list of conditions for believing in Jesus. After all, in the end it appears that he doesn’t need to tick off the things on that list – there is no mention that he does actually touch Jesus’s wounds. What makes the difference is Jesus. He meets Jesus. And that encounter with the Living Christ turns Thomas’s life around again. We’d be very foolish to say that Thomas never had any more problems or struggles in his life. But at this point he needs to meet Jesus if he is to move on.

And that’s the case with us. We know that we falter as disciples of Jesus. We have times of crisis, times of doubts, times of difficulty. At those times we really do need to pray that we will encounter Jesus again. Through his Holy Spirit Jesus can make himself known to us, deep within our hearts and minds. He can touch us with his love and help us to move on. It won’t always be with the reasoned, provable conditions that we would like, that our rational scientific education might demand. After all, his answer to Thomas’s question in *John 14* was not an explanation but another enigmatic saying and his response to Thomas’s doubt was simply to be there rather than to explain how he got there. But Jesus will meet with us and renew us as he has promised. Please do not be alarmed if your path of discipleship is not a smooth upward path. Don’t feel guilty if you end up struggling – even if that struggle seems to go on and on. Keep praying that you will encounter Jesus and that he will help you move on into a deeper love for and commitment to him. After all, it is in Christ alone that we can find any hope.