

Sermon Archive 290

Sunday 19 April, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: John 20: 24-31

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



We're told that he wasn't there. I wonder where Thomas **was**, when he wasn't with the others. We know that **they** were locked away behind closed doors, isolated in their fear. Thomas wasn't with them.

Maybe he was on a long walk by himself - finding any kind of company just too demanding, not being able to cope with the grieving of his friends - isolating himself from the isolated - doubly isolated. Or maybe he'd said "no" to the isolation, and had thrown himself back out there into the world, to find as normal a kind of life as he could - back in the shops and markets, the bustling of the crowds of Jerusalem.

Or maybe, neither of those things. Maybe he'd been designated by his bubble as the one to go out shopping - just for a while before coming straight back. You know, in times of lockdown, you've still got to have your bread and toilet paper.

Whatever the reason, Thomas wasn't there when Jesus came; and so he became the only member of his tight-knit community not to have heard the greeting of peace, nor to have seen the familiar face, nor to have entered the mystery of the risen presence. In terms of who his friends have become through all that, in terms of what his community now believes, Thomas had become an outsider.

If Easter is about God smashing the isolation, then there's one isolated man, the out-sider, for whom the work of Easter has yet to be done. This is the **next chapter** in the story of God smashing the isolation.

-ooOoo-

We're told that a week passed after Thomas became the only one not to believe. A week can be **long time** when you're not fitting in. It's actually quite lonely living among people who've gone off somewhere else - being the different one. And for Thomas this experience isn't a two hour state, or even a three day state until rising; it's a week - a full cycle of days - you know some could create a whole world within a week! In the meantime (while that week slowly passes), what do you do? When others are reciting the creed, you leave out certain lines. When others are saying "amen", you just mumble into your prayer book. When others are going forward for communion, you let others go past, and stay in your seat. And as some of them go past you, you wonder whether they're wondering what's wrong. So you wriggle and fidget. As a quite new Christian, many years ago, people would tell me about their experience of prayer, of the closeness and clarity of God. What they described was nothing like what I had experienced. So I shut up, and got on with fearing that maybe there was something wrong with me - why would God not speak to me the way God spoke to them? And I'd hear the miracle stories, and not believe they were true - despite what everyone else in the community was claiming. Again, I was sure there was something wrong with me. I couldn't talk about it. It wasn't that kind of community. So, I kept an extended moment of quiet, and felt a great gap between myself and the people around me. Isolation. And in the story of Thomas, that isolated state persists a while. God doesn't come to an immediate rescue. In the narrative, Thomas just waits - and maybe offers to do the shopping - to get away for a while.

One option for Thomas, during that time of credal dissonance with his community, would be to leave. People do sometimes leave. When one national denomination came to various beliefs about the wrongness of rainbow relationships, some members of a church not too far from here left. They thought "well, if that's what this church believes, then I don't belong here". Principle, push coming to shove, finding a position of integrity. You've got to admire it. And in a way, Thomas is almost doing that. He's got a problem with his community's belief; so he's declared his position, lodged his protest, set out his conditions. He's not going accept his community's faith claim - unless he can see certain things. He's not staying silent - he's declaring his dissent.

By some kind of grace, he doesn't walk away. He stays there, among his community's odd beliefs for a good long week. How long is a week? How **long** is a week!

Meanwhile, in whatever place we locate the wisdom and drive of God, that holy desire to grow the vine, and to bridge the distance, persists. The God who rolled away the stone, so that Jesus and people could reach one another again, who spoke to Mary and sent her to rejoin the brothers, who came on that first night to penetrate the doors of fear, brings a second greeting of peace. Though the doors still are locked (so isolation is still a reality even for those who already believe), he appears among them again. But this time there's a special, extra word for the most isolated one - for Thomas. The risen One says to Thomas "reach out your hand, and touch these wounds".

It's interesting, isn't it, what Jesus allows Thomas to do? If it were a simple case of needing to establish identity, Jesus could always have stood at a distance, and said "Hi Thomas, it's me". Or he could have said "do you remember when you said to me "Lord, how shall we know the way?" You know, recall the things they'd done together, or said to each another. But in this story, Jesus invites Thomas to touch his wounds, and by that, to know him, to reestablish relationship. Maybe he does this simply because Thomas had set that out as a condition. Or maybe it's because there is something about touching one another's wounds that breaks the isolation. I see what hurts you; I see the scars you bear. I **understand** the damage done to you, and I touch it. So long as you're just living, being miraculous, penetrating doors, I remain isolated from you. But if we touch one another's wounds, the isolation goes.

It is said of CS Lewis, who was teaching theology at Oxford University, that he used to encourage his students to think of God's love as a perfect rose, suspended in a perfect piece of glass, displayed in a far off place - all perfection. By the end of his life, he spoke about God's love as a woman with bone cancer - because that's how real love had come into his life. No perfection there - but something about touching the wounds,

finding one another in dying and vulnerability. Nothing far off and perfect, but close and broken.

As the last scattered one is brought back in from isolation, so he can say "My Lord and my God", it's because he's been allowed to touch the wounds. I may be perfect and distant. You may be perfect and distant - but our isolation ends when we touch the wounds.

Well, I think that may be a fitting end for the telling of the tale of Thomas, and how God's second wave came to break the isolation. But John's account doesn't quite finish there. In a little epilogue to the story, John says this: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so 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."

The story continues as it is told to us, and as its effects are manifest in who we are becoming. Are we isolated? Are we left out of God's story? No - the story's given to us, so that, in the words of John, we too may come into the life that came to the disciples. He's coming again. He's touching the wounds. He's gathering the scattered. He's growing the vine.

On Palm Sunday, I said that the dying palms will indeed die. That's the fruit and harvest of isolation. But the vine which God grows will live. "It **will** live", I said. And since Good Friday, we've heard stories about people being brought back in, from their isolation, into the vine that God is growing - brought in as the risen One continues to meet us in the mystery of Easter.

No fear not, people of the risen One! Rather, in gratitude, let us keep together a moment of quiet.