

Daily Reflections for Easter Week 2021

Monday 5th April – John 20:19-31 ‘Thomas’

Poor old Thomas. Imagine being the one character of history who gets the nickname ‘doubting’. Other famous people get tagged with ‘The Brave’ or ‘The Wise’ or ‘The Just’. And Thomas was at least two of those things: by reputation he later founded the church in India, which is quite a brave and wise thing to do. But no, for all that he did before and after, he’s forever known as the Doubter.

In recent years a new term has come into our language – FOMO. It’s an acronym, it stands for Fear Of Missing Out, and modern psychologists have concluded that this is one of the great drivers of our current Western society. Largely driven by the way technology has crept into every part of our lives, we hate to miss out on things more than ever before. It’s why so many people are always checking their social media, or the news, or their phones every few minutes – as a society many of us have developed FOMO: a deep fear of missing out.

And when we look at Thomas we can see why – if anyone should get a case of FOMO it would be Thomas. He didn’t just miss the latest celebrity news, or the latest video of dogs which look uncannily like Winston Churchill, he missed the resurrection of the Son of God! He missed seeing his friend and leader do something which had never been done in the whole of human history – come back from the dead.

So maybe we can feel some sympathy. Thomas reacted as most of us do when we miss something really great, our sadness tends to turn into petulance. It’s a natural response fuelled by hurt: it’s a way of saying: ‘Jesus needs to make it up to me, because it’s not fair that I’ve missed out.’ And maybe that’s something we all feel at points in our lives, when things don’t work out as we think they should.

We hold these two great things in tension – *God is sovereign, he’s in charge; and yet he also gives us free will*, so most of the time we can get on with things. The problem I’ve observed with most of the answers to difficult events is that they tend to focus on one of these extremes or the other: it’s either *all us*, or *all God*. And so we shout at God, or we shout at our leaders or some other scapegoat.

The story of Thomas tells me that God’s answer is different. Jesus doesn’t reason with us, or argue it out: *he comes to meet us where we are. Jesus’ answer to Thomas’ hurt is simply his presence. ‘Put your hands here, and here...’* Just like Job in the Old Testament, God’s answer to the difficult questions is the gift of his presence. Here I am: ‘your Lord and your God’.

And the great truth of our faith is that *he still comes to meet us*. He breathes the breath of His Spirit on us just as he breathed on his disciples, and utters those glorious words: ‘Peace be with you.’

My prayer is that the warmth of Jesus’ presence will come to each one of us today, and this week, and throughout this season. And I encourage us to invite that presence every day, to offer a simple prayer: ‘Jesus I need you, come close to me, come dwell with me today’ – that we might too receive the blessing of Jesus that he gave to his disciples: ‘blessed are you who have not seen and yet have believed... Peace be with you.’

Tuesday 6th April – Luke 24:13-35 ‘Emmaus’

I wonder if any of you have ever had the experience of talking with someone you didn't recognise, and then later discovering that they were famous? In 2015 Cristiano Ronaldo, the world's most famous footballer, disguised himself and went out to play football in one of Madrid's central plazas for an hour. Almost no-one gave him the time of day. Most walked by quickly, embarrassed at the thought they might be asked for money by someone who looked more or less like a tramp. Eventually one little boy joined in properly, and passed the ball around with this stranger and tried to tackle him. After a while, the stranger picked up his ball, asked the boy's name, signed the ball... and then took off the disguise bit by bit.

As you can imagine, at that point pandemonium broke out. The last scene on the secretly-filmed video was of Ronaldo walking out of the square surrounded by a great entourage of dozens of fans. Unlike Jesus, not even Ronaldo could disappear from their sight!

The image that stayed with me, though, was the face of the little lad just after he realised what he'd done, that he'd actually not just met one of the world's most famous people, but played 1-on-1 and even tackled him. He was overcome with emotion and buried his face in his mum's coat.

That sense of overwhelming emotion was probably just a fraction of what would have been experienced by Cleopas and his friend. Can you imagine suddenly realising that you'd just spent the day with God himself, their Lord and friend Jesus? And they hadn't even realised!

The road to Emmaus is such a wonderful story, and there's so much we could say about it. *How Jesus opened their hearts to the Scriptures* and showed them how his coming was written throughout the ages of the Old Testament. *How Jesus met them in the breaking of bread* and everything that tells us about both hospitality and sharing communion. *How we can rejoice in further evidence of the resurrection* as Jesus widens the circle of people he appears to, people who will witness to the glorious truth of our faith in the years to come.

All of those are great to reflect on – but I just want to pick up on one simple point that the story tells me today. And it's this – *when we know and love Jesus, when we follow him, we are never alone.* Jesus walks with us every step of the way. We never walk alone.

Like the disciples, we might not always recognise him. There are times in our lives, tough times, when it seems like there is just one set of footprints in the sand, as the famous story goes. *But the point is not that God has left us, rather that we haven't recognised his presence at that point.* He is still there, still whispering truth into our ears, still breaking bread with us.

That is a message which encourages me in this challenging season. Many of you may have asked yourselves the question this year: where is Jesus? Or maybe others have voiced it to you. Perhaps it's something that has affected you in the past, or that you fear in the future.

The story of Emmaus tells me that Jesus is right there with us. He has never left us. He walks with us, he guides us, he shares with us. It was an extraordinary coincidence – or God-incidence – that last year on the day the church told this story, the song at the top of the charts has this as its chorus – and could there be a better word from God to us today: Walk on, walk on, with hope in your hearts. And you'll never walk alone. You will never walk alone. Amen.

Wednesday 7th April – John 10:7-18 ‘The Good Shepherd’

Four years ago, on the second Sunday of 2017, we were about to start the 9.30am service at St Mary's, when one of our welcomers came and found me urgently. 'Come outside, you'll want to see this,' they said. So I hustled out and watched one of the more unusual sights I've seen in my 7 years here. Running along the road, and just passing the churchyard gate, were about 50 sheep.

We had no idea where they had come from or where they were going. I don't think they had any idea where they were going either! There was great excitement – some wag commented that our flock had swelled considerably that day. But anyway we delayed the start of our service to work out what on earth we were going to do with them. It took quite some time... but eventually, by lunchtime, the sheep were safely back in a nearby field.

What's the moral of this story? 'Never leave your gate open' would be one of them. But more simply, *sheep need a shepherd*. Look what happens when a large flock is left to its own devices.

Jesus tells us today: 'I am the good shepherd.' Or to make it more personal: 'I am *your* good shepherd. I know you and you know me. You know my voice, you know that life is better with me, because my life is dedicated to you.'

In this season we need the reassurance of that voice perhaps now more than ever. To know that we have a good shepherd leading us through the chaos and uncertainty of this time, one who is totally dedicated to us, who walks with us and will never leave us, who comes to meet us where we are.

And *our shepherd ultimately means to give us life – life in all its fullness*. The Greeks had two different words for 'life' – *bios* and *zoe*. 'Bios' means physical existence – simply being alive, breathing. 'Zoe' is real life – spiritual life, wellbeing, wholeness. This is the word Jesus uses here when he says that his purpose for us is abundant life – abundant *zoe*.

We are wired for zoe life. It's built into our DNA, because we are made in God's image, so therefore we long for the same things God already has within himself. Even those who would not profess our faith long for deep relationship, strong community, fruitful lives and to rejoice in the beauty of our world.

But to really know this kind of wholeness, this abundant *zoe* life, *we need to receive it from the one who made it – the Good Shepherd himself, Jesus Christ*. By God's grace we can all experience it in part: but the fullness is only found in Christ. He is the gate, he's the way to know this true life, he's the one who can plant it deep in our hearts. Without him, we get the temporary 'hired hands' version, not the real thing.

So today, let's give thanks for our Good Shepherd. Let's acknowledge our need for him, let's invite him to lead us again. And let's do that confident of this great truth: that his plan for us is true life, *zoe* life, life in all its fullness. Amen.

Thursday 8th April – John 14:1-6,27 ‘Jesus Our Way and Peace’

Receiving peace is one of the foundational themes of the New Testament. St Paul introduced all of his letters with the greeting: ‘Grace and Peace’. Grace is what enables us to know salvation and the *zoe* life of God within us; *peace is the first and greatest outcome of this new life.*

Peace is designed to be the hallmark of every dimension of our relationships. Peace with God, peace with others, peace with ourselves. We are called to peace. In Colossians 3:15, Paul writes: ‘Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body *you were called to peace.*’ Peace is not merely the absence of strife; it is the presence of harmony.

And peace is not merely a concept, such as not harming someone. Notice what Paul wrote: ‘Let the peace of Christ rule...’ The *idea* of peace is not what solves conflict; it is the *peace of Jesus* that provides the power to live and work in harmony.

So what is the peace of Jesus? It is “the peace that belongs to his kingdom by virtue of his sovereignty.” Jesus rules and reigns over everything: all creation, all humanity and all history. When we step into his reign (in other words, when we step into the kingdom of God), we step into his peace. We can now live in constant interaction with Jesus, and because of his protection, guidance and provision, we have nothing to fear; we can live with real confidence. In the kingdom of God we are safe, secure, valued and assured that God is with us.

And this assurance enables us to receive the peace of Christ, a peace that, as Jesus says the world cannot give; or as St Paul puts it elsewhere, a peace that surpasses all understanding.

It’s why Jesus is so emphatic when it comes to issues of worry, fear or anxiety. Have you noticed that Jesus never talks about these things in terms of advice or encouragement, but instead as a command? He doesn’t say: *try not to worry, try not to fear, try not to be troubled...* He commands it: ‘*Do not worry, do not fear, do not be troubled.*’

Of course we all face temptations to worry and fear, to un-peace as you might say. And Jesus knows that. But he also knows that the solution is not human effort or technique. The key to peace is found in him, and through him. He is the Way. Our peace is found in a person, one who has all the power and resources of the universe at his disposal. His perfect love casts out our fear.

And so he says to his disciples: Do not be troubled, because I am the way. All other worldviews, all other religious teachers, say: *this* is the way. *Only Jesus says: ‘I am the way.’* The key to life is not a set of moral values or guidelines or principles, it’s a relationship. It’s a deep union of love with Jesus.

‘...and when you know that, you’ll know the right way to live, because I am the Truth. And you’ll have abundant life, because I am the Life.’

And so we can affirm these great words again today, and claim the peace that Jesus promises his followers. In this extraordinary season, we are surrounded by the shadow of death. And yet, we can also affirm, with hope and even joy, that peace is possible, a real peace, a peace that only Jesus can give, because he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Amen.

Friday 9th April – Acts 17:16-28 ‘God in our hearts’

I wonder what is the greatest city you’ve visited? In our modern world, there are many such cities. I myself have lived most of my life in London, and I’ve been fortunate to visit some of the other great cities of the world.

In today’s passage, we find St. Paul in Athens: at the time the second greatest city on earth behind Rome, and unquestionably its greatest in terms of learning and culture. But I’m fascinated by Paul’s response to this experience: what he saw, what he did and what he felt. What Paul *saw* was not a city full of extraordinary buildings and unparalleled learning, but a city full of idols. What he *felt* was not awe at its grandeur, but distress at its spiritual ignorance. What he *did* was dedicate himself to sharing the good news of Jesus.

Paul saw through Athens’ impressive facade to its real heart: idolatrous and looking for wisdom in the wrong places. We human beings tend to create god or gods in *our* image, not the other way round – and St Paul is having none of it. His God, our God, the one true God, is not like this. He’s not small or only concerned with a part of our lives. Notice how he begins the key section of his sermon: ‘The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth.’ *Our God is a great big God* – he made the whole world, the whole universe is suffused with his presence.

And notice the three radical implications of this statement which immediately follow: first, ‘*God does not live in temples built by human hands.*’ How could he? How could any building be big enough to house this God? We humans have certainly tried, and who can fail to be awe-inspired by some of those buildings? But God is bigger than all of them, he’s not limited to certain places on earth or in our lives. There is no place on earth where Jesus can’t say: ‘This is mine.’

Second, *God doesn’t need anything.* Or as Paul says: ‘He is not served by human hands.’ He doesn’t need our libations or rituals to appease him or impress him. He is complete and whole within himself. We do all that stuff to try and make *ourselves* feel better, not God. And third, *it is this God whose breath fills our lives:* ‘He gives everyone life and breath and everything else.’

The true God is not limited to certain places or rituals or buildings, to certain boxes and compartments in our lives. He fills the whole universe, and all of our lives matter to him – every breath, every thought, everything that matters to us matters to Him as well. Or as Paul summarises beautifully later in his speech: ‘*In him we live and move and have our being.*’

Imagine a life where every moment is filled with God’s presence. We can bring every worry to him, we can cry every tear with him, we can share every joy with him, we can celebrate every blessing knowing that he is smiling with us. This is not fiction or pie in the sky: it is the reality of what Jesus came to bring us. God’s Spirit – in other words his very breath, his presence – comes to dwell in us. It is what you might call *the with-God life.*

In this challenging season, amidst the pain and loss, there is also one extraordinary prophetic vision renewing the church: and that is to reawaken our sense of what it means to walk with God all the week, to cultivate a faith which lives *everywhere:* at home, in our families, in our thought life, in our private prayer. I long to celebrate and sing with you all once again. But most of all, I want to see the church in this nation rise up again in our generation with this truth etched into every moment of every day of our lives, wherever we are: ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’ Amen.

Saturday 10th April – John 17,1-7,20-23 ‘That they may be one...’

Let's ask ourselves a cheeky question for a few moments: if Jesus was to visit earth for a while this year, which church would he join? Would he be a charismatic or a Catholic, an evangelical or a liberal? Is he secretly an Anglican or a Baptist or a Pentecostal? Would his requirements be very specific? Where we used to live in Clapham Junction, we regularly walked past a church called, and I kid you not: 'The Ransom African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church'. Now there's a church whose name is its doctrinal statement!

I'm sure most of us will be thinking two answers to my question. The one we'll say aloud with a beatific smile on our face is: 'Jesus would be happy to join lots of churches.' The one we'll be thinking is: 'but I'm sure he'd prefer my church to the other lot round here.' And from one perspective, that's fine: to be honest, if we don't think Jesus would want to join our church we're in the wrong church.

But although we joke about it, there's a real issue here. On one level, a huge movement like the church is going to have lots of faces, and we should celebrate that. On the other hand, the fragmentation and divisions should make us weep. It's not what Jesus planned – look at what he prays in our passage for today – 'That they may be one, as we are one.' Jesus loves *diversity*, but not division. His desire is for us to be *one*.

As most of you know – but some may not – we are an ecumenical church. What that means is that several types of church – Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Reformed and Catholic – have partnered together to be one church. It's our little way of saying that what divides us is *way* less than what unites us. We will all disagree over some stuff, but being together as *one community of Jesus* is much more important.

And today's passage reminds me why I want to be a minister leading that kind of church. *It's what Jesus wants for us.* We might not always do it very well, and I'm sure there's loads I could do better, but, as best we can, we're trying to be faithful to what Jesus prayed for us.

Since our buildings closed for a time, and we moved church online, a rather amazing thing has happened. Not only have we got lots more of us joining for online services, we are now spread all over the country, and even the world. On Sundays, people join us from Australia, Canada, France, as well as all over the UK – Wales, Devon, Hartlepool, East Anglia, Poole, Kent and no doubt lots of other places besides. And I'm thrilled about that! And that's not just because it's nice having lots of us – it's because of what Jesus prays. I want to say to all of you: Jesus loves having *you* as part of his community. He wanted all of us to be one, *a community of love which in turn reflects his love to the world.*

But this is not some wishy-washy 'love is all you need' type of message. It is based supremely in one act. 'Glorify your Son,' Jesus prays, and what he means is: glorify him as he gives his life on a cross. This is how we know what love is, St John reflects elsewhere – Jesus laid down his life for us. *True love is selfless service:* and as Jesus loved us, so we offer that to each other and to the world.

So, today, let's celebrate that we are one; but let's also remember that this one-ness calls us to offer ourselves for the good of others, wherever we are. Then the world will know that God sent Jesus and has loved us, even as God loved him. Amen.