**SERMON FOR EASTER 2 at 8am | 24.04.2022**

**Acts 5: 27-32; Revelation 1: 4-8; St John 20: 19-31**

**I have always had a soft spot for St Thomas since it was on his feast day in July that was ordained priest way back in 1984.**

**Or perhaps the date has nothing to do with it.**

**Perhaps it is just that, in today’s world, we need a patron saint for sceptics. How often we hear the parallel of Thomas’ words: *Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.***

**Standing there among his friends before Jesus shows up, we can feel the tension in Thomas. They are full of it: *We have seen the Lord!* They press him relentlessly: *we all went through the agony of Jesus’ arrest, trial and crucifixion; we have all been trying to make sense of what he said about the Third Day and his return. Take our word for it, he is alive!***

**And there would have been a good 40% of Thomas that would have wanted to go along with them: these men wouldn’t be lying, surely?**

**But he can’t do it. He can’t quite put his toes over the edge and jump; there is something nagging in his mind which says: these things never happen. *However much I want to believe, I need real proof.***

**You don’t need me to tell you that this is where many in society find themselves: they would quite like to believe, to have the reassurance that faith provides – but the suspension of rational, concrete evidence means that faith eludes them.**

**So what can the community of faith do to help them to take that decisive leap – I was going to say – into the dark? I think there are two things which have helped me and have been real helps to those I try and teach.**

**The first is to take people back to the great stories like our 1st reading: the testimony of Peter and the apostles in front of the High Priest as recorded in Acts. The disciples had been told quite bluntly that they were to stop preaching or they would have to face the consequences which were likely to be pretty dire.**

**Yet the response from the early Christian leaders is uncowed: *We must obey God rather than any human authority. We are witnesses to these things and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.* It is the defiant voice of the Early Church which rings across the centuries – and of course has been supplemented by believers in every continent ever since.**

**And the key word is ‘experience’; *we have experienced the resurrection* in the case of the apostles or *we have experienced the power of God in our lives* in so many Christian’s testimonies that draws them all to say: we cannot NOT believe.**

**As so many of us stood here in Church yesterday afternoon for the Thanksgiving for the life of Rose Baker, what we were celebrating was her faith and her commitment to the Church because it underpinned everything that she did. And hers was just one more example of the experience of billions of people through history. No one story tells it all but together they have the cumulative effect of reminding us of the way that God acts.**

**Now of course it is perfectly reasonable to say, *well it doesn’t matter how many people speak of God and have faith in him, every single one of them could be deluded!* It is possible; for myself I just don’t happen to think it is very likely.**

**To take this one stage further, I am often impressed with the insights of Martyn Percy, former Dean of Christ Church, Oxford whose book ‘*Anglicanism: Confidence, Commitment and Communion’,* looks in particular at the current scepticism about faith. He writes: *Anglicanism has never considered itself to be a sect or a denomination – it considers itself to be both catholic and reformed, with no special doctrines of its own. (But) within her gentle embrace there is also a general rejoicing in the tension between clarity/ambiguity, decision/deferral, word/sacrament, Catholic/Protestant…***

**What Martyn is feeling for among the religious community is a humility and an openness that allows the human mind to swim in the warm waters of God’s inclusivity.**

**He says that within Anglicanism *there is an acknowledgement that one can belong before one fully believes* (as if anyone fully does) *and that all people, at all stages of their spiritual journey can worship together without having to subscribe to every word of the creeds or agree to a defined checklist of ‘do’s and don’ts’.***

**It is, if you like, the home of those who pray: *Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief,* the cry of the father who asks Jesus to heal his son in St Mark 9. Or in the words of TS Eliot: *With the drawing of this love and the voice of this calling, we shall not cease from exploration. And the end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time…* sensing that God is loving us and waiting for us to go beyond the limitations of what can be humanly, rationally, proven. It is the kind of faith that has its origins in Hope.**

**For some, faith depends entirely on logic and rational fact: for them - as for us - Easter is a vital part of the story. As St Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 15: *if Jesus has not been raised from the dead our preaching is useless and so is your faith. We are also false witnesses about God. For if the dead are not raised then Christ has not been raised either and those who have already fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If we only have Christ in this life, then we are to be pitied more than all the others. But Christ has indeed been raised, the first fruits of all who sleep.***

**That is the Apostolic faith of the Creed. It can stand as fact.**

**But for others, faith is much more intuitive: it is the slow ‘drip, drip’ gift that never stops giving. God reveals himself in big ways and in small and it is much more a presence than a statement. And for many that presence grows as we learn to trust our instincts and begin to listen to the deeper voice beyond rational logic. It is the language of love, the language of abandonment – it is what happens when we know we are cherished and held by some ‘other’.**

**This journey has nothing to do with whether we like Church or not, or even whether we can describe what God is like. It is not the resort of the desperate, the lonely or the gullible. It is about a deep conviction that will be rooted in the Resurrection - but doesn’t stay there. Faith, for Thomas and for us, is the invitation to reach out beyond ourselves in trust. In the words of Psalm 34: *I sought the Lord and he answered me, he delivered me from all my fears. No one will be lost who put their trust in him.* Or in the words of the Gospel: *Blessed are those who have not seen – and yet believe…***