

Sermon for 1 May 2011

+In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

"Unless I see the mark 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." So says Blessed Thomas, and for it the popular imagination has turned him into a cliché: "Doubting Thomas". He has come to epitomize incredulity, and I, at least, have heard sermons which attempt to cast the Apostle as a saint for our own day; the patron saint of modernity and scientism and skepticism.

But is this a fair reading of Thomas? I don't think so. Such a reading seems to imply one of two equally unfortunate and diametrically opposed conclusions. Either it demonizes the doubter or it unequivocally affirms the doubt. We end up responding to ourselves or to others when doubt arises by saying either "O Doubting Thomas, how couldst thou betray thy Lord" or "God accepts your

doubt, so don't feel obliged to do anything about it." Jesus didn't say either of these.

So, let us put ourselves in Blessed Thomas' shoes for a moment. Why would he not have believed his fellows and gone off rejoicing with them? Perhaps he feared they had fallen victim to magical thinking, to creating an unhealthy fantasy by which they intended to cope with the death of the one whom they loved and called Rabbi and Lord. Maybe he felt that he needed to be the realist of the group, the one to stay above fantasizing so that he could help his brethren come to terms with reality and get on with the lives they had put on hold for three years.

Or, perhaps, he was not prepared to hope. We know that the Beloved Disciple was at the foot of the cross, and it is reasonable to believe that the other Apostles would have seen their Lord's gruesome death. In the face of such evil and desolation one loses hope. The loss of hope,

however, is not entirely passive. We may *choose* not to hope. We may choose not to hope because experience has shown us that our hopes don't always get fulfilled. "Don't get your hopes up!" we tell ourselves and others, because we are so afraid of having our hopes dashed.

T.S. Eliot, after his conversion, wrote an extended poem called "Ash Wednesday", and its opening lines (which I think I've included in a sermon or newsletter article or something before) capture the deadening effect of choosing to lose hope:

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
Desiring this man's gift and that man's
scope
I no longer strive towards such things

(Why should an aged eagle stretch its wings?)

Why should I mourn

The vanished power of the usual reign?

When we are bereft of hope, we cease to *mourn* and to *strive*. We cease to *mourn* because acknowledging our grief presupposes that things could have been different and can become better. We keep ourselves from imagining a scenario in which God has put the world to rights because we'd rather not be disappointed again. Thus, stoicism is a very subtle form of hopelessness. We cease to *strive*, also, because we don't want to get our hopes up. We cease to ask ourselves how it is we are to live as children of the Light, as sons and daughters of the Most High. We become complacent, but at least we're not in danger of being disappointed.

If my hunch is right, and this is Thomas' situation, it adds some depth to his response to

the other disciples. "I will not believe" discloses not simple skepticism, but an inability to hope for fear of disappointment. He might as well have said, "Don't bother me with such optimism! I'm already in a pit of despair, but you may well dig it deeper!"

This brings us to that evening one week after the Resurrection. The disciples, this time Thomas among their number, are once again in the house. Jesus appears and, as I already mentioned, His response to Thomas was not what the popular imagination would assume. Jesus says neither "shame on you for not believing" nor "well done, good and faithful scientist, for demanding empirical verification." No, Jesus' words to Thomas were quite different. "Put your finger here," He said, "and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." To this, Thomas responds with the fullest confession of Jesus' identity and mission in John's Gospel, and arguably in any Gospel: "My Lord, and My God", he

says. It is nothing less than a fulsome experience of the Risen Lord which makes Thomas finally "get it". But when he figures it out, his response is spot on.

This is good news for all of us, because we all go through periods in which faith and hope are lacking. What we learn from Thomas' experience of the Risen Christ is that Jesus may come to us when we least expect Him. God may make Himself known to us even in the pit of despair, pulling us out into a new life, renewed to do His Will in the world. There is good evidence to suggest that Thomas himself went on to evangelize India. In fact, when Western explorers found their way back to the subcontinent after the Middle Ages, they found a vibrant church there, claiming Thomas as their own. We know from today's reading from Acts that Peter—who himself had been frightened and hopeless and huddled in a locked room—went on to preach to a great multitude in Jerusalem about *his* experience

of the Risen Lord. What we didn't hear in this morning's reading, because the lectionary ended a few verses too early, is that about three-thousand people were so moved by Peter's account that they were baptized that day. Thomas and Peter both show us that when we have experienced Christ dispelling our doubts and fears, we have a task before us, to go out and "proclaim in word and example the Good News of God in Christ." Jesus tells those men, just pulled out of their own doubt and fear, "As the Father has sent me so I send you."

But, we may protest, we have not had the benefit of seeing Jesus' nail-scarred hands ourselves. Jesus said, "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," but how are we to do great things for the sake of the Kingdom when even Jesus' closest friends, the disciples, needed *proof* of His resurrection? This is a fair question, and the most sufficient response I know of is that of John Henry Newman. Newman said that

he believed in the existence of God more than even his own existence, but if he were asked to point to a specific experience or piece of evidence he could not.

My guess is that some of us here have had really rather grand religious experiences. These are to be treasured and acknowledged as God-given. I suspect, however, that most of us fit more in Newman's category. We may not have put our fingers in Jesus' hand or our hands in His side, but we still have confidence in the Resurrection of our Lord and a robust sense of hope for our own Resurrection. This confidence is something built up gradually by the practice of holy habits. Through daily prayer and bible study, regular church attendance, acts of charity and loving-kindness that we show to others or that others show to us, and a number of other seemingly small acts; we gain more and more experience of God. He reveals Himself imperceptibly to us, but a lifetime of accumulated

devotion adds up. For we who are struggling with faith and hope (as most of us do to some degree or another at some point in our lives) this is very good news. It gives us something to do, a way to pattern our lives so that slowly we too may come to believe and say along with Blessed Thomas, "My Lord, and My God".

+In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Amen.