

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable unto You, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

My friend the Rev Dr Thomas Brauer, Vicar of Sumner-Redcliffs, takes umbrage at the idea of “doubting Thomas” ... instead, he focusses on the fact that Thomas was called *the twin*! Today’s gospel from John chapter 20 is one of those that we read every year in our lectionary cycle, rather than once every three years. What is it about this passage that’s worth such frequent attention?

This story comes at the end of a tumultuous first day. Mary and Peter and ‘the other disciple’ were at the tomb this morning and discovered it empty and since then the boys, all the while fearful of the Jews, have been trying to decide whether to believe Mary or not. Peter has also had a personal encounter and later in the day two of them (possibly in the wider group of disciples) talk with Jesus on the road to Emmaus and come to recognise Him in the breaking of bread. In the midst of all this, Jesus appears among them ... “*Peace be with you.*”

Two things happen in this first part of the encounter that aren’t explicitly included in the second: first of all, Jesus breathes on them “*Receive the Holy Spirit*” and second, He sends them “*If you forgive sins they are forgiven ... if you retain the sins of any they are retained.*” First of all, I don’t think Thomas is meant to be excluded from either Jesus’ blessing or from His commissioning. I think there is ample evidence in the wider context that this blessing and commissioning process includes both Thomas (and us in this age). Secondly, I’m not sure that the distinction between John’s version and that of Luke as to when the Holy Spirit is sent and received is critical to the story here. More likely, Jesus breathing on them at this juncture (rather than at Pentecost where Luke says that it happened) reflects John’s idea that the Holy Spirit is more about *life and fellowship* than *power*.

I do wonder though, about the unfamiliar (to us) word *retained*. Perhaps this word aims to remind both the disciples then, and us in our context, that before a sinner can be forgiven, they must first surrender and repent ... lay it down ... turn away from sin. If a person refuses to lay down his sin, it is not forgiven.

In any case, I’m more interested in Thomas. It seems to me that he *regrets* being away on that first occasion, maybe even *resents* not being there; “*unless I see/put my hands ... I will not believe.*” Which of you sees the real world encroaching in on this spiritually supercharged moment? Thomas responds emotionally, not rationally. But, like the Vicar of Sumner, I’m not sure *doubt* is the right word to describe what Thomas is feeling. It seems more likely to me that Thomas is *angry* rather than *doubting*; angry at Himself ... angry at having missed out ... angry at being left out. But note that Thomas is not demanding something extra *of Jesus* in making his statement. Thomas is talking to his brothers; he reserves the right to not believe. Perhaps Thomas represents each of us in our humanity ... our emotion, our scepticism ... our guilt.

When, eight days later, Jesus again appears inside a locked room, He offers Thomas satisfaction ... inclusion. The text doesn’t say whether actually puts his fingers in the wounds ... just that Jesus offered Him the chance to do so ... *and that* Thomas recognised Jesus for who He is. Thomas immediately makes the strongest declaration of anyone so far ... *my Lord and my God!* No room for doubt in that statement! Jesus accepts him at his word ... and sends a very special message to all us who have not/cannot see Him ... “*blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*”

In these weeks between the resurrection and Jesus' ascension we look closely at Jesus' post-resurrection experiences: Mary at the tomb; the disciples in a locked room; the trio on the road to Emmaus, and the barbecue on the beach. In each case we are given more than just a collection of details or a single cohesive truth ... we are given an opportunity to accept as real ... accept *on faith*, a truly special series of narratives that nobody today can either prove or disprove.

On one hand we know that the authenticity of the text is rated very highly compared with other works, but on the other that doesn't change our desire for proof. We are left to decide for ourselves; accept this account of these events on Jesus' terms ... or not ... just like Thomas.

Accepting this Truth creates an abiding sense of hope! If this story and the others that support it are true, then our inheritance is real and eternal. Jesus didn't die and rise again for nothing ... we died with Him and we now live in Him ... forever!

As the song says ... *Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' love and righteousness.*

We are offered new life in Him ... enabled, empowered, enlivened by the Holy Spirit for the work that is laid out before us ... not on our own, but in fellowship with Jesus and all our other brothers and sisters who, like Thomas, accept Him simply on faith ... *my Lord and my God!*

Amen.