

Bennochy church 8th April 2018

A slightly different approach this morning. I want you to 'listen' but to do that, I want you to use your eyes. This is a picture of Thomas' encounter with Jesus after the resurrection. *What is your eye drawn to in this painting?* (A moment to look). Share with someone round about you. If you can't see the screen I have some printed copies.

The painting is the *The Incredulity of St Thomas (1601-2)*, by Caravaggio. I was wondering, what is the painter trying to communicate? After all, every picture tells a story. It says to me, Thomas needs to investigate Christ's wounds, literally, to see if they are real. Notice, the finger of Thomas is right inside the body of Christ. I'm not sure we would all want to go there! But we have a natural instinct to find out, for ourselves, what is true. This picture says to me, Thomas does not want a second hand faith.

The second picture is very modern. It is by James He Qi, called *The Doubt of St. Thomas*, painted in 2014. Take a moment to look at it. Let me say this, our natural tendency will be to compare the two paintings. Which one, which style do we like the best? I want you to set that aside. Use your eyes, and ask yourself, can this painting help us read, and hear Scripture in new ways. Again, what is your eye drawn to? Share with someone round about.

Every picture is an artist's interpretation. They are trying to understand and then illustrate a truth, and pictures of Thomas, virtually all of them, refer to him as having '*doubt*'. The nick name has stuck - 'doubting Thomas', and visually, they portray the resolve of that doubt, as coming from Thomas touching the side or hands of the risen Jesus. Caravaggio's image, in particular, is a dramatic illustration of possibility, and poses an interesting thought, what if, that is what actually happened? The truth is, we don't know.

Let me suggest that Thomas has had some bad press. There is a bit of fake news going on here. John never states that Thomas actually touched Christ's wounds. Yes, the offer is made by Jesus, and Thomas makes that great declaration of faith, "*My Lord and my God*", but did the touch of Christ wounds actually take place? The story is ambiguous.

I can't believe for a moment that the doubt of Thomas was any greater than the rest of the disciples. Remember, Jesus had already appeared to them. They were a step ahead of Thomas, and they had been so full of faith, that we find them locked away in a room, fearful of the authorities and wondering what to do next. When Jesus first appeared to them. They had no less doubt than Thomas,

They are described as rejoicing *only after* Jesus shows them, his hands and his side. In other words, Thomas is not unique and different from the other disciples, and he benefits from exactly

the same experience, that transformed the other disciples from people fearfully hiding, into those who are rejoicing. And their joyful confidence is reflected in their words to Thomas when he later arrives. They say, "We have *seen* the Lord." Their joy is the direct result of seeing Jesus' hands and side, the very things Thomas says, will be key to his own believing. The ten *did not* believe until they saw; and Thomas *will not* believe until he sees. What they received, he, too, will receive. Maybe the history of art has obscured this important point, and given Thomas a false label.

It is not actually important whether Thomas touched the wounds of Jesus or not. The invitation is made, matching his words, said to the disciples. It that is what it takes, says Jesus, go ahead!

The credit that Thomas gets, is for believing after *seeing* Jesus, same as the other disciples, not after touching him. And that is our encouragement. That fits in with our story. That is where we are. Like Thomas, we were not in the room with the disciples. And we will never be in a position to touch the wounds of Jesus. In that room, we are Thomas. Now able to see the presence of Jesus, and his wounds, through the spirit of Pentecost.

In the manner of Thomas, Jesus *continues* to reveal himself to those who seek their own truth of resurrection. There is no blue print as to how his Easter wounds are revealed. His encounter, with each of us, is unique.

There is one extra dimension to this story that must not be missed. The declaration of Thomas take place within the community of the disciples. The revelation of Jesus happens within community and for the sake of the community. Jesus is in our midst. And as part of this faith community, Jesus asks us to examine his wounds and believe. The faith of Thomas was not because he could get his finger into where a spear or nails had been, but because he saw with his own eyes.

Do you believe that your faith is greater than that of the disciples? Remember these words, Jesus said, "*Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!*" That is greater faith.

We will never stand by the Jordan and see the waters part, yet, each pilgrim step we take, trusting in God, we will walk across on dry land. Do you believe that? We have not seen the man who carried the cross, but in faith are we willing to pick it up? We don't meet Jesus in a locked room, or in the church. We meet Christ out in the world. His wounds are no different. The call to believe is exactly the same. Eyes fixed on Jesus. Trust in God. Trust in him always. Amen.