

The Disciple Thomas

Thomas is perhaps after Peter and John one of the most remembered of the disciples for one statement which he makes following Jesus resurrection. In John 20: 25 following Jesus reappearance to the other disciples when Thomas was not with them we read this:

" So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he [Thomas] said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

This statement down the years has earned him the title "Doubting Thomas" but does he really deserve it?

He was not the only disciple to have doubts but the only one to express them openly but as we shall see shortly that was who Thomas was; if he didn't know something he would ask the question, often the question that the other disciples were thinking but didn't want to ask, in case they looked silly or perhaps were afraid to.

I said Thomas wasn't the only disciple who doubted. Where do we read about these other "doubting disciples?"

In Matthew 28:16-17 just before the Great Commission was given we read this,

"Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw Him they worshipped Him; but SOME DOUBTED." Note it doesn't say one or even one or two but "some" implying I believe a number greater than two. Because of what Thomas said when Jesus appeared to him later in John 20 I do not believe that Thomas would have been amongst these "doubters".

In Mark 16: 9-11 concerning Jesus resurrection we read :

"When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week , He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with Him [the disciples] and those who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen Him, they did not believe it."

and in Luke 24: 37-43:

" While they [the disciples] were still talking about this ["this" was the appearance of Jesus to two on the road to Emmaus] Jesus Himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you". They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He [Jesus] said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

When He had said this He showed them His hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, He asked them, " Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave Him a piece of broiled fish, and He took it and ate it in their presence."

Exactly the same reaction in each of these, especially the account in Luke where Jesus invites the disciples to touch Him to see He isn't a ghost and shows them His hands and feet, as Thomas in John 20. But it is Thomas who gets the name "Doubting" Thomas. Why was Thomas initial questioning so important to earn him the title? I believe the answer comes a little later in John 20 but we'll look at that shortly.

Who was Thomas?

As with the other disciples we have only rudimentary information in Scriptures but other sources tell us this :

Thomas it is believed was born in Galilee and was martyred, probably in Madras in India by being run through with spears. He was in India as a missionary for the gospel following the disciples splitting and leaving Jerusalem.

He had another name, Didymus. Both names mean twin, Thomas in Aramaic and Didymus in Greek. John and Nik have shown us in previous weeks that there was a cultural cross over in many of the disciples names and nicknames and it is unclear whether Thomas actually had a twin or whether "Didymus" was a nickname given to him because of his similarity to one of the other disciples or some suggest even Jesus himself. It is again unclear as to what his profession was before becoming a disciple but some have suggested that because of his enquiring mind and logical questioning with a desire for answers rather than supposition, he may have had some sort of scientific background.

He is mentioned in all of the gospels and Acts as one of the twelve, Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:15 and Acts 1:13 but only as part of a list of the disciples of Jesus. It is only in John's gospel that Thomas plays a not insignificant role in the Scriptural events:

As I said before Thomas is shown to have an enquiring mind and if he didn't know something he asked until he got a satisfactory answer. Jesus ministry was amazing and you have to feel for the disciples as Jesus speaks to them in a very radical way about His ministry and what is to come. I'm not so sure that we would not have had doubts ourselves as we heard and saw some of the things that Jesus did and said to the disciples, if we didn't have the benefit of hindsight.

Thomas is first mention is in John 11. Jesus had had a report that his friend, " the one you love" as Mary and Martha put it, Lazarus was gravely ill and He was asked to go to him.

What was the disciples reaction?

In verse 8 & 9 we read:

"Then He [Jesus] said to His disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." [This is where Lazarus and Mary and Martha lived]

A short while previously Jesus had been in Judea and the Jews there had tried to stone Him for blasphemy but He had escaped from them and crossed the Jordon to the area where John the Baptist had preached.

What was the disciples response. Very much what ours would have been I suggest:

"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone You, and yet You are going back there?" [walking into danger and taking us with You, may perhaps be implied.]

Thomas then speaks his first words in Scripture:

v16:

"Then Thomas, called Didymus, said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we might die with Him[Jesus]."

Are these the words of a man who is "doubting" his belief in Jesus as the Messiah? Are these the words of a man who is afraid to die for those beliefs? No they are the words of a man who is totally committed to Jesus, to His ministry and to the message of Good News that he is proclaiming. They are the words of a man who can see his fellow disciples faltering and speaks to encourage them in their faith and their trust in Jesus.

Far from the words of a man who is "doubting" Jesus or His Oministry.

In John 14 we hear from Thomas again as Jesus talks to the disciples about what is to come and is preparing them as best He can for the unprecedented events which are going to unfold.

We read this which follows on from in Chapter 13 Jesus washing the disciples feet, predicting His betrayal and sending Judas off to betray Him and telling Peter that he would deny Him three times before the cock crowed. I suspect they were pretty shell shocked by now and Jesus brings them these words of comfort:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in Me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."

A very familiar passage to us and because we know the rest of Scripture we know what Jesus is saying here and how we can obtain eternal life, but try and put yourself in the disciples shoes as they are hearing this for the first time on top of everything else Jesus has said in the last few days and hours about His death, His betrayal.... remember what we read in Matthew 28 when the disciples had witnessed Jesus death and resurrection and were about to witness the Ascension of Jesus into heaven, having witnessed all this and Jesus having reassured them we still read in verse

17:

" When they saw Him they worshipped Him, but SOME DOUBTED"

Still they couldn't quite believe what was happening, and what Jesus had said to them. It was all too much to take in and it was only on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came that their eyes were opened to the whole truth and we see a group of frightened men who have probably obeyed Jesus command to stay in Jerusalem because they didn't know what else to do, transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit into bold ambassadors of the Good News of Jesus such that when Peter preached over 3,000 were added to their number that day.

Would we have been any different?

But back to John 14, who is it that speaks out what I'm pretty sure all of the disciples were thinking and wondering?

v5:

"Thomas said to Him, "Lord we don't know where You are going, so how can we know the way?"

No frills just a direct seeking of the answer to a question Thomas doesn't know the answer to.

What does Jesus do in response. Sigh deeply because they still haven't got it? Go over what He's said previously to try and clarify? No He says these words which mean so much to us as Christians and is the basis of our trust and faith in Jesus.

"Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Note Jesus says, "I am the way" not I am one of the ways, or I am the way and there are others who will come after me to be the way as well. No He says, " I am the way" and to reinforce it He continues, "No one comes to the Father except through me." In other words if you want eternal life then you must accept me as your Lord and Saviour, the Son of God who came to die for your sins and repent of your old ways and put your complete faith and trust in me. There is no other way.

Many try to water the statement down to make it more acceptable and attractive to a wider audience but just as Thomas' question was direct and to the point, then Jesus answer was also direct and to the point so there could be no mistaking what He was saying.

Thomas along with the other disciples had many unanswered questions about why Jesus death had come about, and the resurrection, could it really be true that Jesus had been raised from the dead and as we've seen it is not until Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that they get revelation of the truth of what has happened. So is it any wonder that Thomas with his enquiring mind and thirst for answers makes his statement in John 20: 25 and doesn't actually deserve the title some have given him of "doubting" because the rest of the disciples as we've seen were just as confused and doubting about what was happening as he was. He was just the one who put his thoughts into words.

What happened next?

In John 20:26 we read this,

"A week later His [Jesus] disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, " Peace be with you!" Then He said to Thomas, Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

What was Thomas' response?

v28

"Thomas said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"

All doubt was removed from Thomas and he willingly acknowledges who Jesus is. From the other Scriptures that we've read it seems that not all of the disciples were willing to totally accept who Jesus was at this point, although they had not spoken out their doubts, and Pentecost was to be their enlightenment day. For this reason I think Jesus next statement although directed at Thomas was also for the other disciples to hear as well because Jesus would have known their doubts even though they hadn't expressed them.

v29

"Then Jesus told him, " Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Thomas was also with the disciples whom Jesus appeared to by the Sea of Tiberias and shared a meal with.

Perhaps Thomas has been dubbed "Doubting" over the years because it reflects the feelings of those who have given him the title, it certainly isn't because he doubted at the time any more than the rest of the disciples as we have seen. Indeed it was Thomas's direct questions which allowed Jesus to make important statements about our faith, our belief and the way to eternal life.

Thomas certainly did not lack trust in Jesus ministry or His teachings as we saw when he unhesitatingly encouraged the disciples to return to Judea with Jesus even though he knew that he might be returning to an horrendous death by stoning and the other disciples were not so keen!

What can we learn from Thomas? Firstly, that it's okay to have questions. Jesus spent a long time in the last days of His ministry trying to pre-empt and answer questions that He knew the disciples would have about this unique event in history that was about to happen and change the world forever. Thomas, through his enquiring mind asked the questions the other disciples probably had but didn't ask. There have been a number of noted scientists who have set out to write books to disprove the existence of Christ as the Son of God and have ended up having to accept that all the "evidence" they have gathered proves exactly the opposite that Jesus Christ was indeed the Son of God and have written their books accepting this. Perhaps one of the best known is Josh McDowell who wrote "More than a Carpenter" a book which Lynne and I have given countless copies to various people over the years along with millions of others and there are many, many testimonies of how it has helped to bring people into a relationship with Christ.

There are also many intellectuals and scientists who have been atheists and after studying Scripture have reached the conclusion that Christianity and faith are the only reasonable answers to their questions. Probably one of the best known of these is C.S. Lewis who when, as he saw it, God didn't heal his mum of cancer set off on a path of rationalism and atheism.

In CBN's "C.S. Lewis' Journey to Faith" we are told,

"The road back to faith was cluttered with obstacles Lewis once thought impossible to overcome. his conversion to robust Christianity required years of intellectual struggle and came only after being convinced that faith was reasonable."

Lewis himself wrote,

"I knelt in prayer to become the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England"

But the intellectual arguments were too compelling for him to do any other.

If you want to read more then CBN's article makes very good reading.

But you don't need to be a scientist or an intellectual to have questions for God either before you make a Christian commitment or afterwards. God gave us all a brain and He expects us to use it and not just follow blindly. There would have been no need to give us freewill if that were the case! God is bigger than any of our questions and if we seek the answers in an open and honest way He will provide them, either directly or through Scripture or trusted and experienced Christian friends.

So was Thomas "Doubting"? I hope you agree with me on the above evidence that he wasn't. His actions certainly didn't indicate any doubt in his faith and trust in Jesus. He was a man with an enquiring mind, looking for answers, as many of us do, who focalised those questions perhaps more than some, but when he had an answer that satisfied him was the first to declare his trust and faith in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour.

I have several Christian friends who have followed similar routes to faith. God calls us all differently because we are all unique but it is in accepting in faith that statement as truth in our lives that Jesus makes in John 14:6

"Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

followed by repentance and a changed life living for Christ that we can all have that sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life when we are called home as Jesus promised Martha in John 11:25.