

St Ann's, Rainhill – 8.3.18 (Sunday 10.30am Communion)

Easter 1 - John 20.19-31

Thomas & Judas

Well, it's Doubting Thomas Day today, isn't it? Every year we consider the story about Thomas – he missed the initial appearance of the Lord and didn't believe the other Apostles. He doubted until he could see for himself. Which he did, a week later. Do not doubt, but believe, Jesus tells him. It is Jesus who uses the word doubt – *apistos* (ἄπιστος), literally, do not be unbelieving – and so an Apostle is named. Doubting Thomas.

You may have seen this cartoon (*Image 1, below*) – I got it from Facebook, and I think it's quite well observed. We don't call Peter "Denying Peter" or Mark "Ran away naked Mark". Why Doubting Thomas? In Luke's account of this appearance, the other Apostles were just as unbelieving – touch me and see Jesus said to them, feed me some broiled fish.

We only really encounter the Apostles in a series of snapshots, included and described by the Gospel authors to make a point. Here, we are being encouraged to believe without seeing, as that is the requirement of the post-Ascension Church. We must believe without seeing, and so Thomas becomes the patron saint of doubters, the one we must not be like. The Gospel stories are full of characters like that. Lazarus was raised from the dead – but he was not the only one. The son of the widow of Nain, Jairus' daughter, loads of saints following the death of Jesus, Tabitha by Peter, and Eutychus by Paul. But we remember Lazarus, we use Lazarus as the example.

All the disciples abandoned Jesus, but we remember Peter because he is recorded specifically denying Jesus three times.

The whole of Jerusalem turned its back on the Lord after cheering his arrival, but we remember Pilate washing his hands of the affair.

And, of course, looking over my shoulder, what do we see? Beautiful stained glass. Containing a rarity, as I'm

sure most of you know. The black halo around the head of Judas. That name is a common phrase to describe a traitor, one who has betrayed their own people. Medieval artists frequently portrayed Judas as red haired, and red hair was cited in Shakespeare's 'As You Like It' as 'the Judas colour'. Of all the characters in the Bible, it is hard to imagine any who have been so thoroughly vilified as Judas. He sold his friend, his master, his Saviour for 30 pieces of silver. Judas is not without his defenders – my wife included. We were discussing this window earlier in the week, and we talked about the possible motivations. Thirty pieces of silver – well, it wasn't a great deal of money in fact. I mean, yes it would buy food for a month, but in the grand scheme of things, hardly a fortune. And, actually, Judas was not disclosing the secret identity of Jesus – he was pretty well known, after all – at most he would have ensured that, in the confusion in the Garden of Gethsemane, that the right man was swiftly identified. It could also be that Judas was a zealot, passionate about the restoration of Israel and the expulsion of the hated Romans, and that he wanted the Messiah to do this. That

could take two forms – maybe he was disappointed in Jesus and wanted him taken out of the picture. Or perhaps he wished to goad Jesus into action. What certainly appears to be the case is that Judas performed a necessary part of the narrative – maybe he had no choice, or at least there was an inevitability about what he did. It is even possible that he had no idea that his actions would lead to Jesus' death – certainly there is no indication that the disciples as a group ever realised that Jesus had come to Jerusalem to die, however much he told them.

We have no need to call him 'Betraying Judas' of course. His name alone carries all that weight.

Doubting Thomas, Abandoning Disciples, Denying Peter, Betraying Judas. All but one rehabilitated, sainted even. And yet is there not something of all of them in each of us? Which of us here has not failed to believe, like Thomas? Which has not in some way abandoned following Jesus, even if only for a while in certain areas of our lives? And who has not denied, failed to stand up for Jesus at home or in work or in our community, for fear of being labelled or

ridiculed by others? While I don't suggest that many run away naked, that sense of panic when we are cornered on an issue of faith, something we find hard to square with something in our lives or something in the world, that can make us feel like legging it, if only metaphorically.

We are all Thomas, Peter, Mark and the rest. And, I would suggest, we are all a bit Judas too. Oh, not selling a friend to those who would murder, but which of us hasn't disapproved of the way the Church is going? We may have said unkind things, perhaps even withdrawn giving in protest – that happens more than you may think. We can write letters of complaint, naming the object of our scorn and listing why we think they are doing a bad job. We often act without thinking through the consequences, and then say we didn't realise that it would turn out that way.

Doubt is not such a big thing if belief can be kindled as a result.

Denial fades into insignificance once one is convinced.

Running away naked? Well it's unlikely to crop up too often, I think.

But betrayal? We seem to be resistant to letting that pass. Betrayal has many faces. Adultery. Lying. Fraud. Gossip. Many others too, all betrayals in one form or another. Betrayals of trust, of responsibility. How can it be forgiven? If we are betrayed, we may never trust again.

And yet the message of Easter is that Jesus died that all may be find a way back to the God we, as a species, have denied. A way across that chasm of sin which our failure to accept our Creator has made. There is no sin, other than blaspheming the Holy Spirit, which the Bible says is unforgivable. And that is a rather specific set of circumstances, unlikely to crop up in the twenty first century. So betrayal, even that of Judas, is forgiveable. And I for one am extremely glad of that!

The Judas in the Gosple accounts is a caricature, as is Peter and Thomas, and the rest. Moments in time, stripped of their depth and context, written to teach us and help us better follow Jesus. They work in this because we

all, consciously or not, recognised a bit of them in us. Or say, there but for the grace of God....

And that is exactly right. The Good News is all about the grace of God. That God offers us forgiveness whatever we have done, and does not want us to endure the torment of regret shown in the failures of the disciples.

Easter is about a fresh start for all humanity, a way back, a chance to reconnect and start again.

For Peter

For Thomas

For Judas

For me

For you

For them...

All of them...

Amen.

Image 1

