**The Master of Awkward Questions**

**A Sermon for Cashmere Presbyterian Church**

**Sunday 7th April 2024**

**Preacher: Very Rev Hamish Galloway**

**Text:** John 20:19-31

**Introduction**

I reckon Thomas gets a bad rap from popular opinion! He has entered popular proverbial language with the saying ‘a doubting Thomas’ as a derogatory term for nay-sayers and pessimists. In my reading for this sermon, one American commentator called him the poster-boy for doubt, another called him the patron saint of doubters! But I think this emphasis on his doubt, and the implication that it is at odds with faith, is to deal with Thomas unkindly. There is much more to this man than first meets the eye. The full story is actually about a person who comes to a strong and tested faith through asking the hard and honest questions of a genuine searcher. Let’s explore further:

1. **Who was Thomas?**

He was pessimistic by nature. For example, when Jesus talked about going into Jerusalem at the time of Lazarus’s death, Thomas saw it as death trap for all of them! (John 11:16). And despite the enthusiastic claims of the disciples that they had seen Jesus risen, Thomas did not believe it.

He was a questioner by nature – when Jesus gives his famous ‘there are many rooms in my Father’s house’ speech in John 14, he concludes by saying ‘you know the way to the place I am going.’ I imagine the disciples nodding their heads, even though the rest of the gospel account shows they didn’t know this. It is Thomas who steps up with the awkward question – ‘Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” (v5)

The Christian poet Malcolm Guite put it this way:

*“We do not know……how can we know the way?”*

*Courageous master of the awkward question,*

*You spoke the words the others dared not say.*

*And cut through their evasion and abstraction.*

He was, nevertheless, loyal and courageous – even though he thought going to Jerusalem was a death trap for all of them he counselled the 12 disciples ‘let us go with Jesus.’ (John 11:16)

And he was chosen – Jesus prayerfully thought long and hard about who would be in his chosen 12 disciples. Could it be that the pessimistic and questioning approach of Thomas was a vital part of the people mix he needed in his leadership team?

1. **The nature of doubt**

There is praiseworthy doubt and flippant doubt! Flippant doubt is driven by things like laziness, closed mindedness and jealousy. For example, the agnostic who uses doubt as an excuse to avoid searching for truth or making a commitment to truth is lazy in their doubt.

And the atheist who has closed their mind to any possibility of the mystery of God is expressing a flippant doubt thrown out from a closed mind.

And the person who, like the pharisees, raises questions and doubts as a calculated way of trapping an opponent is coming to ‘doubt’ from a place of mean-spirited jealousy. It is interesting that Jesus did not respond to the Pharisees’ demand for a ‘sign’. Yet he did respond to Thomas’ desire for a sign – I will believe ‘when I see the nail marks…..’ (John 20:25). Why did he respond to Thomas? It was that his doubts were neither lazy, nor closed-minded, and certainly not mean-spirited.

Thomas’ doubting here came from 2 genuine places –

1. Anguish and grief – one of the most difficult places to maintain faith is in the face of tragedy. William Barclay tells the story of the Baillie family – 3 brothers, John and Donald were renowned Scottish theologians, and Peter called to be a medical missionary in India. Their mum was a faith-filled woman who was widowed twice in early life, but worked, saved and prayed to put all 3 boys through Edinburgh University. Then came a stunning blow – Peter, still at language school, died in a drowning accident even before his missionary career began. His mum, strong Christian woman as she was, found that this tragedy shattered her faith!

Some commentators similarly think that Thomas’ faith in this man Jesus, whom he had loyally followed and supported for 3 years, was shattered by his death on the cross. That the reason he was not with the disciples when Jesus first appeared in the upper room was because, like a wounded animal that creeps away to suffer alone, he was licking his grief-filled wounds in a quiet, lonely place. Leonard Griffith puts it this way – ‘the cross cast him into an abyss of despondency and gloom that even the excited good news of the other disciples couldn’t pull him out of.’

So this was genuine, heart-felt doubt driven by circumstances, hard to take.

1. Hard, honest seeking for truth.

His doubt was not a shallow, flippant doubt that lacks for the energy of exploration. He passionately wanted to see, to understand, to believe. His was honest doubt making an honest attempt to resolve it.

Unlike the refusal to respond to the Pharisees’ demand for a sign, Jesus does respond to Thomas’ doubt in dramatic fashion, giving him the very thing he requested, the chance to touch his wounds, to see and feel for himself. Clearly this is Jesus affirming the genuine quality of Thomas’ doubt and responding to it with faith inducing answers.

1. **Resolving Doubt?!**

William Barclay goes on to tell how God did not leave Peter Baillie’s mum in the misery of her doubt. Her sons John and Donald tenderly nursed her back to faith.

So, too, Jesus does not leave Thomas in his doubt. And it is interesting to see how Jesus nurses Thomas back to faith – it is *not* by leading him to some high academic insight but rather by a personal encounter with himself. This is consistent with other examples in John’s gospel – early on, when two of John the Baptist’s disciples expressed interest in Jesus, his response to their wondering was an invitation to get up-close and personal, ‘come and see’ (John 1:39). Over the centuries since, millions have had their faith come alive, strengthened and renewed through personal encounters with the risen Christ. Just this very Easter I had a text message from a St Andrew’s Old Collegian who was there when I was chaplain. He texted me about a profound personal experience of the presence of God this Easter that had restored his waning faith! I rang him to talk, and in the conversation he spoke of an undeniable encounter with God! I believe these encounters are available to all of us if we have eyes to see, ears to listen, hearts to open.

1. **Doubt that leads to faith!**

If Thomas had not asked the question of Jesus in John 14, ‘We don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?’ we would never have got the classic response: ‘I am the way, the truth and the life.’

And if Thomas had not have been honest about his anguish and doubt after the death of Jesus, we would never have had the dramatic ‘touch my wounds, put your hand in my side’ encounter that lead Thomas to speak out his new-found faith: ‘My Lord and my God.’

There is no record in scripture of any other disciple making such a strong statement of faith! Thomas came to this place through hard, honest doubt, questioning, searching and…. finding! it reminds me of what Jesus said about seeking and finding. Thomas came to a tested faith because he was prepared to test it.

His questioning doubt did not only lead to faith, but also legendary service. In this passage, Jesus sends the disciples out in the power of the Spirit to be bearers of the good news of forgiveness. Legend has it that Thomas went all the way to India on this mission. What a wonderful outworking of a searching soul.

**Conclusion**

The biblical nickname for Thomas is not doubting Thomas but ‘Didymus’, meaning the twin. The name of the other twin is never mentioned. Could it be you or me? One commentator I read provocatively suggests it could well be! That is, that just like Thomas we often have the ‘twin’ experience of being assailed by doubt at times in out lives. It could be borne out of tragedy or genuine crisis of faith that is seeking for answers to complex questions.

To that twin identity I think this sermon would say 4 things:

1. Be open and honest with that doubt, for it is a pathway to strong, tested faith.
2. Do that journey with others who are also searching. Thomas missed out when he withdrew from the group. By contrast, he encountered Jesus in the midst of the company of others. And, interestingly, they allowed him to stay in their early church group despite his doubts and questions! May we here be that kind of community, a place for exploring faith together without the need for certainty.
3. And may this be a church community that seeks, encourages and facilitates the kind of personal encounters with God that lead us to make a twinning proclamation with our brother in faith, Thomas, ‘My Lord and my God!’
4. Finally, the reoccurring phrase in this whole passage is Jesus saying ‘Peace be with you!’ it is interesting that the most common commandment in the bible is ‘fear not’, having been said over 200 times. It picks up on the propensity we have for despair, anxiety and fear. Often times that anxiety comes when doubt assails us. Clearly, when Jesus’ first words to Thomas were ‘Peace be with you,’ he recognises how this personal ‘God encounter’ would ease his restless and doubtful spirit and bring peace to his soul.