

Through hope our lives are blessed

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Second Sunday of Easter, Year A — 16 April 2023

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Acts 2.14a,22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1.1-12; John 20.19-31.

Today, the second Sunday of Easter, we hear the story of doubting Thomas. We do so every year, and every year more or less the same things are said: 'I'm glad Thomas doubts because I can share my doubts too' or 'we hear that doubt is good and is not the opposite of faith.' I don't disagree with these thoughts, but there is always more. Thomas might well be the patron saint of doubters, but this isn't the only time he speaks in John's gospel. By the time we reach chapter 20, we are building a picture of this enigmatic man. Way back in chapter 14 Jesus tells his disciples that he will go and prepare a place for them. He adds, 'and you know where I am going.' Thomas speaks up: 'we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way.' Jesus responds with the stunning claim: 'I am the way the truth and life.' Earlier on, Jesus hears of the death of Lazarus and tells his disciples that he will return to Judea. The disciples speak up: the last time you were there they tried to stone you . . . are you mad! With a sense of resignation almost Thomas says: 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

I'm not too sure what to make of Thomas, but clearly there is more than just doubt happening here. He seems resigned, fatalistic, sceptical even. Twice Thomas is called the twin, but we never meet his brother or sister, is the writer of the gospel being poetic, is Thomas perhaps in two minds—are there two Thomases? This might be drawing a long bow, but I wonder, is Thomas trying resolve the problem of living in two worlds? Is he trying to reconcile the words and actions of this man who he has followed, with the world around him? Is he torn! Perhaps this is even more reason for us to celebrate this man's words and find in him something of the struggle of most Christian folk I know, the problem of being an exile, not being quite at home, feeling like you're the odd one out.

Today is one of those times when we need to hear from a Biblical scholar, such are the nature of the readings from Acts and Peter's first letter. We have heard the opening today of this letter from Peter, a book that has been described as one of the most beautiful and compelling in the New Testament. Peter is writing to folk dispersed across modern Türkiye, people who, though they have never seen Jesus, love him, believe in him, and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy. This is the life of those exiled by time, place, culture, language, worldview; this is us. It is a difficult divide for us to bridge. This is a worry for many within the Church and I would suggest a stumbling block for those outside. The divide between the church at the world seems to be broadening.

During my time as Chaplain at the Army Recruit Training Centre at Kapooka we would speak a lot about the divide between civilian life and service life. There was a sense, too, that the divide was growing. In years past the divide was not that great; discipline in school was often rigidly enforced; there was a clear sense of hierarchy. Basically, you did as you were told, without question. There were times you would fail, there were consequences for mistakes, sometime punishments. In society today we sit a little lighter with these things, for good or ill. But, in service life, you can expect to find all these, and more, are part of your everyday experience as a recruit, and some cannot cope. The question was asked, do we change the training methodology, do we make things more accessible? What allowances do we make, given that the culture around us has changed dramatically? This is the question that we face in the Church, a question that is faced by every generation.

Like Thomas, there might well be times when we are fatalistic, cynical perhaps, doubting certainly. We are not, and shouldn't be, Pollyanna optimists, but we need to live in such a way that demonstrates hope, shows that hope is always a valid way of life. One of the roles of Chaplains at Kapooka was to demonstrate this, live it, show it. We would suffer alongside the recruits at PT in the rain, endure some of the collective punishment that was meted out. But we would keep reminding them of the day when they would parade in front of their families, of the day when they would begin their careers. We embodied hope. Thomas at the end of the day, says 'I need to touch the risen body.' But when Jesus appears to him as a risen body, Thomas doesn't touch. He says: 'now, I see enough.' We are that risen body, we are called to embody hope, so that when people come across us here in church or in our daily lives they will say 'now I see.'

The question for us is: do we need to change, do we make things more accessible, what allowances do we make for the culture around us? These are valid questions but, importantly, we need to remain ever constant in the very heart of our tradition. Hope is one of elements that lie at the very core of our belief, along with faith and love. They transcend time, place, culture, language, or worldview. Rather than worrying about the culture around us, or changing to accommodate it, we need to be steadfast in bringing faith, hope, and love into our culture. They are what our Easter celebrations are all about and they are given voice by Jesus in that wonderful benediction at the close of today's reading: Jesus said to Thomas: 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' Blessed are they, indeed.

Our mission is live in such a way that folk get caught up in this new life, a life which acknowledges that cynicism, fatalism, doubt, are part of the human experience and sometimes are indeed the means by which we grow. Thomas certainly did. But that ultimately it is through hope that we live lives that are indeed blessed. Amen.