

FAITH ... AND 'DOUBTING' THOMAS

By John Gagliardi



Apart from Judas – the infamous betrayer of Jesus - the disciple who always gets the worst “rap” is poor old “doubting” Thomas – the man who may well have given birth to that all-too-common modern saying, “**seeing is believing**”.

Well, of course, we understand that for we Blood-bought, Spirit-filled and faith-proclaiming sons and daughters of the Living God, the opposite should be true – not “seeing is believing,” but “**believing is seeing**”. We walk by faith, the Bible says, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5: 7).

Which is all very well when things are going right, and faith and believing are easy. But then something comes along that rocks our confidence, that severely tests our belief system. A good person with cancer we have been praying for dies. That great business idea crashes and burns and bankruptcy looms. That beautiful beloved child turns to drugs and crime and breaks our heart.

Hey, I'm sorry, but this is real life – bad stuff happens. And when the hard tests come, we get to see how real our faith is, how solid our belief system is when it all turns to dust before our very eyes.

And this is exactly what happened to Thomas – called by Jesus Himself to be a disciple and an apostle, he put his faith and hope in Jesus as the Saviour and Redeemer of the world, only to see him betrayed by His own people, and arrested, tortured and crucified by the Romans.

Even earlier, Thomas had shown a somewhat pessimistic and fatalistic – even ironic – streak. When Jesus invited His disciples to accompany Him to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead, Thomas responded: “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11: 14-16).

The Scripture doesn't explain exactly why Thomas reacted the way he did, but it is clear the disciples weren't too keen to go back to the place where the Jews had tried to stone Jesus a short time earlier. They seemed purposely obtuse when Jesus said metaphorically, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up”.

Almost petulantly, they made the obvious point – if he's only asleep, he'll wake up again all by himself – he won't need us to wake him up! But Jesus had to bluntly tell them that Lazarus was dead – He was talking about a resurrection, not an awakening.

Thomas – still with his “glass half empty” attitude – reappears a few chapters later in the Book of John after Jesus tells His disciples they are to trust in Him and not to let their hearts be troubled: “In My Father's house are many rooms ... 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” (John 14: 2-4).

Instead of responding with faith and gratitude, Thomas instead argues with Jesus: “Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Classic Thomas – doubting and carping and questioning the very Words of Jesus!

Thomas is very modern in the way he argues and debates and questions – he could be called the “patron saint” of the secular rationalists. Many today will identify only too readily with Thomas' skepticism as we struggle to hold our faith firm in the face of a society that makes science and human reason the standards by which all truth is judged.

So it is no surprise that after Jesus rises from the dead, a decidedly supernatural event, Thomas doubts the word of his friends: “Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord’.

“But he 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!’”

Thomas was hurt and confused, he had seen his dreams vanish and his faith destroyed. Nothing was going to convince him that someone has risen from the dead unless he could see it with his own eyes.

Ever compassionate and gracious, Jesus injects Himself right into the middle of Thomas' despair and bewilderment. A week later, Jesus appears again to the disciples – this time including Thomas – and says to Thomas: “Put your finger here; see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it into My side. STOP DOUBTING AND BELIEVE!” (John 20: 27).

Let me quote from an article *Learning Faith from Doubting*, by Dr Ralph F. Wilson: “Thomas would speak to doubters today, to those of us who have seen our dreams and hopes destroyed. Doubting Thomas would tell his story of how Jesus' life intercepted his own. He would tell us of his fears and doubts.

“And then, with a radiant and joyful face, St Thomas – Apostle to India – would recount his joy at seeing and knowing the risen Christ Himself. Thomas was the first disciple to put into words that Jesus is both Lord and God – Doubting Thomas utters the greatest confession of faith recorded anywhere in the Bible: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20: 28).

Thomas' next appearance is as one of a group of disciples fishing unsuccessfully at the Sea of Tiberias. Jesus appears and miraculously guides them to a huge catch of fish, so great that they could not haul the net in. He invites them to breakfast, feeding them bread and

fish – the third time Jesus had appeared to them after having risen from the dead (John 21: 1-14).

For Thomas, there is no more issue of doubt or unbelief – his once and for all declaration of Jesus as his Lord and his God set forever his future course, becoming arguably the most travelled of the apostles.

According to long-standing Church tradition, Thomas preached in present-day Iraq and Iran, spent time in China, and then went on to bring Christianity to the Indian Subcontinent. In 52 AD, he is reported to have landed on the Malabar Coast of India, in the company of a Jewish merchant by the name of Abbanes (by comparison, Peter and Paul remained primarily in the Middle East and went only as far as to Greece and Italy, Mark went to Egypt, John to Syria and Asia Minor, and Andrew to present-day Turkey and Ukraine).

When Marco Polo travelled to India in 1292, he is reported to have met Christians there who traced their existence back to Thomas, and when the Portuguese first landed in India in the early 1600's, they found a group of Christians there who called themselves the Mar Thoma Church ("Mar Thoma Sleeha" is translated as "Lord/Saint Thomas Apostle").

Thomas is said to have travelled to Kodungallur in Kerala, and after founding a church there, went on to Mylapore where he was ultimately martyred in 72 AD as he knelt praying on a hill on the site of the present-day Santhome Church.

Jesus said to Thomas – and says to us in the 21st century just as powerfully: ***"Stop doubting, and believe!"***

In a moment of time that changed "Doubting" Thomas for ever – and who knows how many others with him down the annals of time in nations that remain key spiritual battlegrounds to this very day – his response stands as an everlasting monument to doubts overcome and faith triumphant: **MY LORD ... AND MY GOD!**