

Seeing and Believing

John 20:19-30; Acts 5:27-32

In John Irving's C20th masterpiece of a novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the narrator John has a number of conversations with Owen Meany about the meaning of belief. In one scene in a school playground, Owen illustrates his faith in God by pointing to a grey granite statue of Mary Magdalene as twilight falls. When it has become so dark that the statue is no longer visible, Owen asks John if he knows that the statue is still there. John says that of course he knows, but Owen keeps pushing:

"You have no doubt she's there?" Owen nagged me.

"Of course I have no doubt!" I said.

"But you can't see her – you could be wrong." He said

"No, I'm not wrong – she's there, I know she's there!" I yelled at him.

"You absolutely know she's there – even though you can't see her?" he asked me.

"Yes," I screamed.

"Well, now you know how I feel about God," said Owen Meany. "I can't see Him – but I absolutely know He is there!"

Not being able to see, but still believing. It could have been taken straight from our Bible reading today. Not so much Doubting Thomas, but honest Thomas, questioning Thomas, courageous Thomas, searching Thomas, asking not so much for proof but for reassurance.

If ever there was to be a patron saint for our modern, secular age, it would be Thomas. We know little about him. He may have been a twin, but we don't know who his twin was. He wasn't one of the closest disciples like Peter and Andrew, or James and John, but in John's gospel he does speak. He's with Jesus in Bethany when Lazarus died, and said he was willing to go with Jesus, and face death with Him if it must. He was there in the upper room when Jesus talked about death, and it is to Thomas' question about where Jesus was going that Jesus responded, "I am the way and the truth and the life." And then, in the time after the resurrection, Thomas was not present when Jesus came to His followers, and Thomas spoke his questioning words, and, when Jesus did appear again, Thomas without touching the wounds, confessed in front of everyone, "My Lord, and my God!"

In later years, legend has it that Thomas the Apostle left the Holy Land and travelled through the Middle East, and got as far as India, where he was martyred for his faith.

It is important to note that this honest man, rather than this doubting man, is allowed to share his story in the Bible. In the world we live in today, when so many people seek their certainties and their incontrovertible truths and their evidenced proof, Thomas isn't hushed up or glossed over and air-brushed out. He speaks honestly about what he knows and what he does not know, and Jesus does not scold him.

For most of us hardly a day goes by without doubt creeping in. Doubt, that insidious, unsettling, confidence-sapping coolness that drains hopefulness and faithfulness. Today is often referred to as 'Low Sunday', the Sunday after Easter. Possibly because nothing will quite match the exuberance and excitement of the Easter celebrations that we enjoy in church. Also because after traditionally high attendances on Easter Sunday, the following Sunday is usually marked by lower attendances.

But in our Bible story, it was that Sunday, the Sunday after the resurrection, the resurrection that Thomas missed. That low Sunday when Jesus appeared to him, and to the others.

It is good to realise that Jesus appears not only on the high days and holy days of life, but on the low Sundays too. And Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and so on. The days when the sparkle has gone off life a little. The humdrum days with nothing much to commend them. The drudge days when we simply get through the hours as best we can.

It is good to realise that Jesus appears not only on the feast days when our faith is strong and bright and positive, but also on the darker days when doubts gnaw at us, and disappointment, fear and pain are not far away. I wonder if it is the cast that on those days, those dull or dark days, that His presence is even more important. Days when through the tears or the hurt or the anger or the loss, the presence of Jesus unshakeably, unmistakably shines through the broken places of life.

Days like last Sunday when, though we were bathed in sunlight, the smoke from detonated bombs made the air acrid in churches and hotels in Sri Lanka. Some will spend good time

attempting to work out what enters the hearts and minds of those motivated to act in such ways, in Sri Lanka and in so many other places across the world; Christchurch in New Zealand, holy places in India and Egypt and beyond. I cannot fathom how killing and maiming and wounding people of faith practising their faith can bring anything other than swift condemnation and miserable grief. We pray for all in Sri Lanka who worship, perhaps fearfully, today. But know this, the God of Easter, the Jesus of Thomas' experience, stands with you, weeps with you, grieves with you. Sharing the loss, shouldering the pain. Some have asked why, if God is so strong and invincible, God does not intervene to protect and prevent. God's plan is to work and work and work through God's people to get to that time and place where these actions no longer happen. What do we learn, how do we change, what is transformed if God keeps doing things for us. God gave us free will to decide and determine, and God waits and works with us longing that all God's children will work for peace and justice and fairness, and live in hope and contentment. Sri Lanka, and all the other horrors of our time, is not the fault of God. They are evidence of the brokenness that God come again and again to mend and to heal. And in time, God will, with us. God comes on days like that.

God comes on days like the funeral service on Wednesday for the journalist Lyra Mckee, gunned down in Londonderry by a masked gunman from the New IRA. Days when people feared for a short moment that the bad old days of the Troubles were returning. Until Father Martin Magill, after thanking politicians from all sides for attending, said, "Why in God's name does it take the death of a 29-year-old woman with her whole life in front of her to get to this point?" He barely got the words out before the congregation rose to its feet and applauded. So loudly that nervous politicians shifted uneasily, began to clap, and reluctantly, in my view, got to their feet. In the wake of the wasted, unfulfilled life of a young woman, God came. Through the presence of ordinary people not willing to bow to the mindless violence of a misguided minority, God came. To quell the doubts and uncertainties, and by presence, bring reassurance and hope.

These could be irredeemable low days. But God comes, even our wounded God comes, to stand in our midst and show us what love will do so that resolve may be strengthened, hope might come, and we might gasp, with Thomas, “My Lord and my God!”

I know that today in Church, and in the homes of some of those who worship here; I know that in our community, and in the streets of our cities, there will be people whose world has been turned cruelly upside down. A bereavement here, a diagnosis there, a relationship foundering, a heart breaking, a hope snuffed out, a promise shattered. On days like that, on days like this, God comes, and stands in the midst. With us.

People are still waiting to see the marks. They are not looking for the marks in Jesus’ hands and sides anymore. They wait to see those marks on the church – the wounds in **our** hands and feet – the evidence that we are really connected to the Jesus Who was crucified and raised. For all that we hear about the sophistication of modern people, they are much more willing to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead and stands with them when they see ordinary people like you and me modelling the Jesus-kindness, the Jesus-love, the Jesus-courage in the places where we work, in the good neighbourliness that we show, in the compassion we offer to strangers. The marks that matter today are not the ones in Jesus’ hands and side, but the ones in our communities. Is there anything authentic about this worshipping community that bears witness to Jesus’ death and resurrection; is there anything real in what we profess about our faith in our words and our actions that make a difference to those who need hope and forgiveness and healing and love in our communities and world?

People won’t start looking for Jesus if they can’t see Jesus in us and the kind of faith-full people that we should be. They won’t see Jesus unless they see Jesus’ kindness and compassion and generosity and inclusion and graciousness in us. Seeing is believing, and when they see us, and how we live out our faith, then they are more likely to believe in the Jesus we follow.

The whole Gospel is written for this very reason: so that we will believe in Jesus and, “have life in His name.” Thomas with reality and doubts is transformed by his experience of the risen Jesus, giving his life to follow the carpenter of Nazareth. May we in our lives have that same

experience, and learn with Thomas to say and to keep on saying, “My Lord and my God!” and live it out, daily.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen