

Disciples, Doubt and Belief

How well do you know the disciples? Not simply anyone that followed or follows Jesus, but the original group – the twelve that we read of in the gospels?

It can be a bit of a challenge to name them, because the scriptures present us with lists of the twelve, and they're not quite the same, with Matthew and Mark having a disciple named 'Thaddaeus' and Luke having one named 'Judas son of James' instead.

But even if you don't know them all, which ones do you think are the most famous? And why?

I think the most famous one is the one who went bad: Judas Iscariot. He's famous because he ultimately betrayed Jesus. In recent times there's been quite a lot of myth develop around the figure of Judas – sort of speculative fiction. Sometimes he becomes more a tragic figure than an evil one – with claims that he supported Jesus, but was concerned that Jesus was not doing things fast enough, or that he was concerned that Jesus wasn't directly supporting the poor enough. But that sort of speculation is beyond the biblical evidence.

Clearly, though, Judas is the most well-known disciple. But who's the second most famous?

It might be John, the disciple that Jesus 'loved the most'. And if you read John's letters in the New Testament, you find the word 'love' mentioned awfully frequently.

Or it might be Peter. After all, Peter was one of the first disciples called. He was the first one to recognise Jesus as the Messiah (Mark 8), he was one of three who were present at the transfiguration, he walked on water – for a short time at least – to Jesus, he was identified by Jesus as the rock on whom he would build his church, and he was one of the three who went with Jesus all the way into the Garden of Gethsemane and were present at his arrest.

And of course Peter was singled out as the disciple who would deny Jesus three times, and then asked by the risen Jesus to specifically care for his sheep.

So Peter has a reasonable claim to be the second most famous disciple.

If we ponder what Judas claim to fame is, it's that he betrayed Jesus.

And John's claim is that he was the disciple Jesus loved the most.

But what is Peter's corresponding claim? Some people will say his great faith. Some people that it his impetuosity. Others that he is the rock... and so on. He's not a single issue guy.

But I think there's a third contender for the 'second most famous disciple'. And if I ask you what his claim to fame is, I am sure that one thing will spring to your mind. The third contender is Thomas. And Thomas doubted. Even when confronted by the risen Jesus, Thomas doubted.

The phrase 'doubting Thomas' is cemented in our language, and it's used in contexts far removed from scripture.

And just like Judas' reputation is subject to some popular revision, so is Thomas'. Parts of the modern church say they welcome doubt, welcome questioning. And while I think that's a good thing at one level, I think we need to, both as individuals and as a church, to do our best to address doubts and answer questions. To move on, from doubt to faith.

And that doesn't mean that all doubts are dismissed or all questions will be answered. But the essence of our shared faith is just that: it is faith. Faith in Christ. Belief in Christ. Trust in Christ.

It is possible to believe various facts about Jesus: that he was a good teacher, that he was crucified, even that he is the son of God – without actually believing in him. But Thomas' reaction when confronted with the risen Jesus was one of belief in him.

[Jesus] said to [doubting] Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." (20:27)

Thomas didn't say in response. "Yes! I see now that you have risen from the dead".

Instead his reaction was one of faith: Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" (20:28)

And interestingly, that is the most profound declaration of Jesus' identity in any of the gospels – Thomas identifies Jesus as God. Not the Son of God. Not with God. But rather, Jesus is God.

Thomas had gone from doubt to that declaration of faith in Jesus.

And yet, it's for the doubt that we remember Thomas - not for his faith.

But that thought, if we look at the exchange in context, is not really fair to Thomas.

We know that when the risen Jesus first appeared to the disciples, Thomas wasn't with them, and when they told him the good news, he didn't believe it. [Thomas said to the other disciples] "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." (20:25)

And while that statement has gone on to become famous, Thomas was certainly not the only one to need solid evidence of the resurrection.

Just go back to the beginning of this morning's reading:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. (20:19-20).

Just like he would later do with Thomas, Jesus showed the other disciples his pierced hands and his wounded side – and it wasn't until he'd done that that John tells us the disciples were overjoyed.

And yet Thomas – who required no more proof than the others – is the one who's remembered for doubting!

Jesus presented himself to Thomas and the other disciples, and went on to appear to many others – Paul speaks of Jesus appearing to Peter "and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also..." (1 Corinthians 15:5-8).

So those appearances of Jesus were important in establishing both the fact of the resurrection, and also in making it clear who Jesus is – that he is the Messiah, that he is the Son of God, that he is someone worth putting your faith in.

We know those appearances didn't continue, and Jesus was only present for forty days until he ascended.

But we know that people didn't stop turning to Jesus when he ascended, and the history of the church, from the book of Acts through to the present day shows the staggering growth in the numbers of believers – people who have turned to Jesus without seeing him physically.

And really, that is just as Jesus foreshadowed: in verse 29, Jesus tells Thomas, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

So what is it that convinces those later believers – those who have not seen and yet have believed – that Thomas – and indeed the other disciples – didn’t have?

Why doesn’t someone today need the same evidence that Thomas and the others needed?

It’s sometimes suggested that the number of witnesses has grown – that a thousand people making a claim is more convincing than a dozen, and that a hundred thousand more convincing still.

But the difference, I think, is that the subsequent generations of Christians have had the Holy Spirit working in their hearts. The idea of God becoming incarnate, of dying and rising again is beyond each one of us, without the help of the Holy Spirit.

And we see that in this reading: Jesus appears to the disciples and convinces them of his resurrection based on his physical presence – showing them his hands and his side.

And then he commissions them – in verse 21 “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

Earlier this year, we heard that at the beginning of Jesus ministry, when he was baptised by John in the Jordan River, that the Holy Spirit descended on him:

Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.” (John 1:32)

And John the Baptist also spoke about Jesus bestowing the Holy Spirit on others: “The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.” (John 1:33).

And that was way back at the beginning of John’s gospel – and here, near the end of John’s gospel, it happens:

Verse 22 “And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

I’ve heard this passage called “John’s Pentecost”, and it does seem that Jesus breathes on the disciples and, in that act, they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And as you might know in the original Greek, the word for “breath” is the same as the word for “spirit”.

It is a bit hard to put together with the events that the book of Acts tells us occurred at the day of Pentecost, but it does seem to fit with other events in Acts where the good news of the kingdom and the gift of the spirit don’t progress at the same rate (Acts 10:44, 19:1-7).

It does seem to be though, that it is the action of the Holy Spirit within us that enables us to take the leap from hearing the message, knowing things about Jesus, to believing in him. It’s not by force of character, or the finely honed argument or the eloquence of a speaker, which brings people to faith, it is the work of the Spirit in their hearts.

And that can take many forms. It can be slowly growing in faith over many, many years. It can be a blinding flash of light. A moment of inspiration. Or a gradual realisation.

Famously, John Wesley came to faith, after years of failed ministry and disillusionment, when he heard a reading of Martin Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans, and realised what God’s grace in Christ truly meant. It was his conversion experience – he later said “I felt my heart strangely warmed”.

It was the Holy Spirit acting in him. He'd known and believed all the facts about Jesus already, but it wasn't until that encounter that he moved on from believing facts about Jesus to putting his trust in him. Soon after he began taking the gospel of Christ to the people, in churches when he was invited, and preaching in the fields, in halls, houses and chapels, when the churches would not allow him to preach.

We so often think that life-changing encounters with God should feature bright flashing lights, trumpets and clashes of cymbals. But sometimes they are simply our hearts being strangely warmed. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But with that gift comes a corresponding service. Having breathed the gift of the Spirit on the disciples, Jesus tells them in verse 23, "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

That's pretty daunting, isn't it? If you forgive sins, they are forgiven. If not, they aren't.

It's a huge responsibility. As someone who leads church services often, I'm confronted by giving the assurance of forgiveness. To stand up in front of a group of people – and tell them that their sins are forgiven is a leap of faith. I don't know what they've done, or how bad they feel about it ... but I get to say "hear Christ's word of grace to us: "Your sins are forgiven"" or "As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us" or something similar.

But forgiving sins is not just something for people who lead services to worry about, because forgiving sins is what all Christians are called to do. Think about the Lord's prayer which we'll say together later: Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Forgiving sins is part of being a Christian, because Christ forgave sins – remember Jesus, praying from the cross "forgive them Father, for they don't know what they're doing".

Even when we're confronted by evil, injustice, unfairness, exploitation we need to be open to forgiving the perpetrators. It's a tough thing to do – but again, think of Jesus praying for the forgiveness of those who were killing him on that cross.

Our reading this morning ends at the end of John chapter 20, and was likely the original end of John's gospel – with the last chapter being added some time later.

Having described the journey from doubt to belief, first of the other disciples, and then of Thomas, and then the blessings that will flow to subsequent generations of Christians through the Holy Spirit – "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (20:29), John goes on to mention how what is recorded in his gospel is only a fraction of what he knows of Jesus.

He says "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book."

We have the other gospels – and indeed the rest of the bible – from which we can learn more of Jesus. But John's comment points out the inadequacy of human writings in capturing the full nature of Jesus – the nature of God.

John says that even though not everything is recorded, what is recorded is enough. That with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, what is written is sufficient to come to know, and put our trust in Jesus.

John writes: "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (20:31)

Which of course echoes the words of Jesus himself from chapter 3 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him will not die, but have eternal life".

Thomas' – and the other disciples' – doubts are put to rest by the physical presence of the risen Jesus.

Today, our doubts are put to rest by the presence of the Holy Spirit, if we will only open our hearts to the Spirit's presence.

Even today though, there are those that seek physical evidence of the events of the scriptures, evidence of the existence of God. Some are convinced that if we can just show people some sort of evidence of a seven day creation, or the remains of Noah's ark, or the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah, or the site of Jesus birth, or some other thing, then people will be convinced. They think if they can just confront people with hard evidence, then they will become believers.

But that is not the case. We don't need to rely on or seek such evidence. We come to know Jesus today through the scriptures, through the witness of faithful Christians of all the ages, and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

And blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. Blessed is each one of us.

Amen.