

The apostle Thomas. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 11 March 2015.

As you know, we are now well on the way through our series of talks about Bible characters who feature in the gospels of the New Testament. Last week, Len spoke to us about the conversion and service of the apostle Matthew. This week we look at what the New Testament reveals of the life and words of another apostle, the apostle Thomas, who may well have been a close companion of Matthew.¹ I say this, because I note that when Matthew lists out in his gospel our Lord's twelve apostles in pairs (as he does), he associates Thomas with himself; 'Thomas and Matthew the tax collector' are his words.²³

The New Testament does not tell us very much about Thomas. We do know that his name is an Aramaic word which means 'Twin', as does its Greek equivalent 'Didymus' – a word used three times by John in his gospel to identify Thomas.⁴ In all likelihood therefore Thomas had been born one of twins.

I guess that, to the majority of those who have heard of Thomas at all, he is best known as 'doubting Thomas' on account of his emphatic refusal to believe, without some direct physical proof, the report of the other disciples that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead.⁵

But, thanks to the Gospel of John, we know a little more about Thomas than that. And, indeed, when I consider what that Gospel does say of him, I cannot help feeling that Thomas has suffered most unfairly from the bad press he has received over the years.

In John's Gospel we meet Thomas on three separate occasions, the first of which took place immediately prior to the last miraculous sign performed by Jesus before His death – the raising of Lazarus of Bethany. Not long before, Jesus had left Jerusalem on account of the growing hostility of the Jewish religious leaders, who had attempted, we read, 'to seize Him' and 'to stone Him'.⁶ Understandably, when His friend Lazarus was taken seriously ill, and Jesus announced that He was returning to Bethany, which lay just a few miles from Jerusalem, His disciples objected strongly. 'Rabbi', they protested, 'just a short time ago the Jews were seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?'⁷

The disciples knew full well that there was very real danger both to Jesus and to them in returning so close to Jerusalem. But when, following Lazarus's death, Jesus declared, 'Let us go to him', it was Thomas who unhesitatingly sounded, as it were, the bugle call to his fellow apostles; 'Let us also go, that we may die with Him'.⁸ Thomas felt sure that Jerusalem spelt certain death for Jesus, and that, in accompanying Him there, they would face the same.

Yes, we may accuse Thomas of being a pessimist in that he saw the outcome of our Lord's return to Judea, not in terms of Lazarus being raised up from the dead, but of Jesus ending up as dead as Lazarus.⁹ Yes, beyond question, the faith of Thomas was weak, which was why he saw himself and the others as dying alongside Jesus, rather than, as the Lord assured them at the time, witnessing Lazarus being raised up by His power and thereby having their faith increased.¹⁰

But there is no getting away from it; Thomas's loyalty and devotion to Jesus was more than equal to any lack of faith on his part, and he was therefore ready to do just what he said – to leap into the jaws of death with Jesus rather than to desert Him.¹¹ Clearly, the Lord Jesus meant more to Thomas than life itself! So before I dare censure Thomas for any perceived lack of faith, I need to ask myself if I can get anywhere near him in terms of his ardent love for the Saviour.¹²

The second incident featuring Thomas took place in the Upper Room on the eve of our Lord's passion – when the so-called Last Passover had been celebrated and the Lord's Supper instituted. Here we discover, not *loyalty declared* but *ignorance confessed*.

Jesus was explaining to His disciples why, contrary to all appearances, it really was to their advantage for Him to leave them. In the familiar words of John chapter 14, He promised them, 'In my Father's house are many dwelling places ... I go' ... 'go', that is, by way of death, resurrection and ascension ... 'I go to prepare a place for you'.¹³ And then, having spoken in this way of the Father's house and of His leaving the world by way of His death and glorification, He concluded, 'And where I am going you know, and the way you know'.¹⁴ But at the time the disciples failed to grasp what He meant. And it was left to Thomas, as their spokesman, to interject, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'¹⁵

And these words of Thomas opened the door for the Saviour to answer him with one of the most significant and important of His sayings recorded in the New Testament, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' – 'I am', that is, 'the way to God. I am the truth from God. I am the very life of God' – 'No one comes to the Father except through me'.¹⁶

For the third occasion where Thomas figures prominently, we must re-join the disciples in the Upper Room,¹⁷ but this time following the death and resurrection of Jesus. And here we discover, not *loyalty declared*, or *ignorance confessed*, but *evidence required*.

Let me read to you John's account of what happened:

On the evening of the first day of the week ... , Jesus came and stood among the disciples ... and showed them His hands and His side'. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord ... but Thomas ... was not with them The other disciples therefore later told him, 'We have seen the Lord'. But he said to them, 'Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will not believe'.

Eight days after, the disciples were inside again, Thomas now with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you'.¹⁸ Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands;¹⁹ and put out your hand, and place it in my side, and be not unbelieving, but believing'.

Thomas answered Him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'.

And so it was that, in one bound, Thomas leapt from his doubt and scepticism to the very highest confession of faith recorded in the gospels ... giving us by far the clearest statement of our Lord's deity – of His Godhood – to be made by any of His disciples²⁰ ... reaching way beyond the earlier acknowledgements recorded in John's gospel that Jesus was 'the Son of God',²¹ 'the King of Israel',²² 'the Saviour of the world',²³ or 'the Holy One of God'.²⁴

We can hardly miss the fact that John, who opened his gospel with the staggering claim that the Word (one of many titles given to our Lord Jesus) – that the Word was not only 'in the beginning' and 'with God', but that the Word 'was God' ... that John now brings his gospel to its high point – to its climax – with the apostle Thomas's declaration, 'My Lord and my God'.²⁵

'Doubting Thomas', men say ... really? I recall that when, at the first, Mary Magdalene and the other women from Galilee announced our Lord's resurrection to the apostles collectively, the scripture says, and I quote, 'their words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them'.²⁶ Was Thomas any more unbelieving than the others?

The only conclusion I can reach is that the apostles were far from being credulous men, deluded into accepting the resurrection of Jesus by wishful thinking and hallucinations. The evidence is that, as was certainly true of Thomas, they believed because – and only because – that which at first seemed *too good to be true* soon became *too well-founded for them to reject*.

Footnotes

¹ Unlike in the case of Matthew, we have no record of how Thomas first became a disciple.

² Matt. 10. 3. This is the first of five occasions where Thomas's name features in a list comprising apostles of Jesus. Cf. Mark 3. 18; Luke 6. 15; John 21. 2; Acts 1. 13.

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⁴ John 11. 16; 20. 24; 21. 1.

⁵ John 20. 25.

⁶ John 10. 31, 39.

⁷ John 11. 8. The Lord explained that the reason He needed to go to Bethany was because 'Lazarus, *our friend*' – including the disciples in the circle of friendship – had now 'fallen asleep'. Interestingly, the disciples expressed no surprise at all when the Lord spoke of Lazarus as then being asleep – they simply took it for granted that somehow He just knew! After all, there was never a dull moment with Jesus! And they were greatly relieved – 'Lord, sleep is a good indication – it's one of main symptoms of recovery'. Phew, so the perilous journey wasn't necessary after all. But Jesus wasn't referring to literal sleep. He was using a common – and lovely – metaphor for death – one which He had used earlier in connection with the daughter of Jairus – 'Stop wailing', Jesus had said to the mourners, 'She is not dead but asleep', Luke 8. 52. In the face of the disciples' misunderstanding, Jesus made it plain to them that Lazarus had died.

⁸ John 11. 16.

⁹ In contrast therefore to Jesus' words about them accompanying Him to Judea '*that you may believe*', Thomas puts it to the other disciples, '*that we may die*'.

¹⁰ John 11. 15.

¹¹ Thomas was certainly no coward. I have read that 'When Wellington saw a man turn pale as he marched up to a battery, he said, "*That is a brave man. He knows his danger, and faces it notwithstanding*"' – 'The Greater Man and Women of the Bible', edited by James Hastings, volume 'Mary – Simon', page 205.

¹² For devotion and heroic love I know of no one to *surpass* Thomas. Young **Ruth** may say to Naomi, 'Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge ... where you die I will die', Ruth 1. 16-17. **Ittai** the Gittite may say to David, 'As the Lord lives, and as my Lord the king lives, surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether in life or death, even there also shall your servant be', 2 Sam. 15. 21. And **Elisha** may say to Elijah, 'As the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, I will not leave you', 2 Kings 2. 2. Clearly each of these was made of the same stuff as Thomas, but in terms of loyalty and devotion I would not say that they *excelled* him. Perhaps 'Doubting Thomas' should be revised to 'Devoted Thomas'!

¹³ John 14. 2-3.

¹⁴ John 14. 4.

¹⁵ John 14. 5.

¹⁶ John 14. 6.

¹⁷ We meet Thomas once more in the Upper Room, Acts 1. 13. I suspect that there is a sermon is waiting to be preached on 'The Apostle Thomas in the Upper Room'!

¹⁸ The same greeting as on the previous occasion; cf. John 20. 21.

¹⁹ According to the closing section of 1 Samuel 17, when young David emerged from the valley of Elah having slain Goliath of Gath, the Philistine champion, 'Abner took him, and brought him before Saul with the head of the Philistine in his hand'.¹⁹ In his hands, David carried – and displayed – the proof that the battle was well and truly over – and would never need to be re-fought. And there, in the upper room, our Lord showed in His hands the evidence that His work on earth was finished – that salvation was complete. Truly, '*His own wounds in heaven declare His work on earth is done*', J. G. Deck.

²⁰ Thomas was the first apostle to explicitly acknowledge our Lord's deity.

²¹ John 1. 34, 49; 11. 27.

²² John 1. 49.

²³ John 4. 42.

²⁴ John 6. 69.

²⁵ Not that Thomas would have doubted (sorry!) that the Lord Jesus was a real man – the Word who had become flesh, John 1. 14. And we note that the Saviour took back to heaven not only His *nail-print* and His *name*, but His human *nature*.

²⁶ Luke 24. 11.