

St Thomas the Apostle 3 July 2016

In Ancient Classical civilisations, people could tell if a person was dead or alive; and they could tell the difference between a dream, a vision and an apparition. We know that from literature.

At the same time, in a world where science existed but was not very advanced, people were much more open to the possibility of miraculous happenings than most of us are today: reports of strange and remarkable things involving men, birds and beasts were commonplace. With this in mind it's probably true to say that the main point of the passage about doubting Thomas, and his desire to touch the wounds of the risen Jesus, is *not* one of providing us with an accurate description of the exact character Jesus' resurrection body. It's more to do with setting up the punchline, which is Jesus' words: "Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet believe". So the passage quickly moves on from talking about Jesus' resurrection body. It's really all about **faith**, and the position of most, if not all, Christians at the time when John's Gospel was written, which is likely to have been in the 90s AD. More about Thomas later, but now let's jump through history and think about the early Victorians, and their faith and beliefs.

The early and mid-Victorians are famous for the strength of their Christian Faith: they built churches, organised overseas missions and middle-class families prayed daily in their homes.

Most of them found little reason to doubt God's active providence in the world. The stability of society, structured from top to bottom, with everyone from the landowners to the labourers knowing their place, was seen to reflect a God-given ordering. Nobody was expected to subvert this. The French Revolution had happened in living memory, and the English aristocracy interpreted those events as a challenge not just to the French Monarchy and political system, but to the sovereignty of God. Stable government in Britain was living proof of God's work in society, and it helped to confirm people's faith.

A large part of the population held to this view at least until after the First World War when the leadership of both the Government and the Church was widely questioned. For a while both Government and Church had failed to acknowledge the loss of life in the War to people's satisfaction, let alone take responsibility for it, and a breakdown of trust led to widespread public cynicism.

But another realm of living proof of God's ever-present work in the world, at least in the eyes of the early and mid-Victorians, was the Natural Sciences.

Most people took for granted the idea that the glories of nature were a simple reflection of the plan and purposes of a creator-God. To know more about God, you just needed to study

nature more closely. What you were looking at was what God had made, and left us with, from the time when he had created it. Nature was a strong basis for people's faith in God.

But a generation of geologists and scientists including Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin eventually drove a coach and horses through that notion.

The earth, suggested Lyle, was of a great age and had undergone enormous physical changes over the aeons. Darwin, meanwhile, demonstrated a continuous process of evolution and *speciation* among living things.

What all this meant was that if God created the world, the attributes it had when it was brought into being were very, very different from the attributes of the world we now inhabit. Unrecognisably different.

That raises difficult questions about the extent to which the world we now inhabit can really tell us about the plan and purposes of God. It's nice if – today - people take a country walk and then describe how it gives them a sense of closeness to God. And we can observe and describe the glories of nature, but we can no longer use these experiences and observations to 'confirm' our faith in the precise way that the early Victorians did. In fact, some theologians soon began to take the view that the natural world, if anything, is a *distraction* from a true and

deepening understanding of God, rather than a path leading to theological insight.

But our lucky early Victorian forbears, with their firm views about the divinely-ordained structuring of society; and their belief in the religious value of observational science; they clearly had far less reason to experience religious doubts as people do today.

That means that nowadays we Christians need to hold and cultivate a much stronger and durable faith than the Victorians ever did if we want to maintain and develop our lives in Christ. We inhabit a world with fewer God-given 'certainties'.

That's why Thomas, or doubting Thomas, is very much an apostle for our times. He asked the question we'd all like to ask: where's the PROOF? The early Victorians felt that the proof was all around them. Less so for us.

Curiously, in the Thomas episode, it never actually says that Thomas did go so far as to touch the wounds of the risen Christ. He is invited to do so, and he exclaims 'My Lord and my God', but that could have been at the mere sight of his risen saviour. There's no description of Thomas reaching out and actually touching, but for us, perhaps, that would be the most important part.

In the end what really matters (and all we get) is the punchline: “Blessed rather are those who have not seen, and yet believe”...which means *us*. And maybe we are more blessed than our Victorian forbears who inhabited a world in which firm grounds for faith seemed to feature much more prominently than they do today...more blessed with greater faith.

Yet doubt, they say, is an essential element of faith. Our minds are inspired by faith, and exercised by doubt. Maybe doubt is meant to work like the grit which encourages the development of a pearl, a pearl of clear-eyed faith.

But whether we're thinking about Thomas' hesitancy, or our personal faith wobbles, there is a risk that we miss out on what really matters, and which is not affected by the vicissitudes of change, either in history or in ourselves. That is the faithfulness of God. Through the faithfulness of God, the risen Christ came and stood among the disciples. And the faithfulness of God is unaffected by changing social and scientific worldviews of the last 200 years, or indeed the last 2000.

We'll always agonise about the strength of our individual faith, in the face of creeping doubts. But the thing that matters more is God's enduring faithfulness to us.

Stephen Laird 3 July 2016