



La Côte Anglican Church

First Sunday after Easter – Sermon from Clare Amos

7 April 2024 – Holy Communion in Gingins

Thomas is one of the most fascinating of Jesus' disciples. We don't hear much about him in the New Testament – almost nothing other than in the Gospel of John – but there are extensive Christian traditions linked to his name, which speak of him taking the Christian faith to the lands of the East, Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, Arabia and even India.

To this day he is a figure who is cherished by many Christians in India. Once, when Alan and I were at a meeting in Chennai – Madras – we were taken to see the hill just outside the city where, supposedly Thomas was eventually killed as a martyr for the faith, incidentally by having his side pierced with a spear.

Some years ago Alan was talking to one of our Eastern Christian friends and referred to the way that Thomas had touched the wounds of risen Jesus. Alan was duly rebuked. Our friend pointed out that if you read the Gospel passage carefully, nowhere does it say that Thomas actually did so. Yes, he had previously blurted out, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe' but when it came to it a week later, Thomas responded to Jesus' invitation which quoted his own words back to him not by touching Jesus, but by making that profound statement of faith, 'My Lord and my God'.

On the whole throughout history most Christian artists do not seem to have read this memo. Almost invariably they paint a picture of Thomas reaching out with his finger and just about touching the wounds in Jesus' side. I am showing a few examples on the screen. **(Slide 1 in pdf)** The artists almost seem to have relished the gory artistic possibilities that could be linked to the idea of Thomas touching Jesus.

Which makes it even more intriguing to compare the tale of Thomas with the first half of John 20 which is used often as the Gospel on Easter Sunday. Towards the end of the passage the story focuses on the meeting between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, who recognises Jesus at the moment when he calls her name. But then listen to the conversation which then follows between them as Jesus says to Mary 'Don't touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' Or does he say exactly this? Well, once again Christian artists have

had a field day with the passage. I am showing some examples here. **(Slide 2 in pdf)** What they seem to be suggesting to us is a Jesus who – if I can put it like this – is tensed up with horror at the idea that Mary might be about to touch him. I can almost hear, ‘Keep this woman away from me’ coming out of his mouth.

The pictures are suggesting to us that Jesus was telling Mary not to touch him – and that certainly was how the story has been generally understood. But the translation ‘Don’t touch me!’ is not correct here even though it was widely used in the past. There are two forms in Greek of what we call a negative imperative. One instructs a person not to start doing something; the other is telling a person to cease an action that they have already begun. And it is that second form that we have here. Modern versions rightly offer us translations such as ‘Do not continue to hold on to me’, with the clear implication that Mary is indeed touching Jesus at that moment, and that Jesus is requesting her to let him go. In parenthesis I have to say that those pictorial traditions which imply Jesus saying, ‘Don’t let this woman get anywhere near me’ feel to me a bit like expressions of the kind of misogyny which has lurked around Christianity on and off throughout its history.

But it is intriguing to have these two encounters with Jesus, that of Mary Magalene and that of Thomas, in both of which touch is an important component, set alongside each other in this crucial chapter of the Gospel of John. In the one case Mary touched Jesus, although the pictures seem to be unwilling to acknowledge this, in the other case Thomas probably didn’t physically touch him – though the pictures suggest that he did. I think presenting them in this way as a complementary and contrasting pair is intentional: indeed at several other points in the Gospel of John there are other contrasting pairs: think for example of Nicodemus the ultimate insider, who came to Jesus by night and the Samaritan woman, perhaps the outsiders’ outsider who met Jesus in the full glare of noonday. Both there – and here in the accounts of Mary and Thomas and his fellow disciples – I think that we are being offered hints that Jesus’ ministry, his life, his death, his resurrection is a new creation in which human beings are being invited to encounter God, and each other with new eyes for seeing, as age old fears and hostilities and separations are overcome. And in this new creation touch has an important part to play.

One of the features of the account of Jesus’ passion, his arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection, is the way that all five of our physical human senses seem to have a part to play in this passion story. Sight and hearing are perhaps the most obvious, and they appear throughout the whole story but it is interesting how they are stressed here in John 20: because you have **seen** me, you have believed, says Jesus to Thomas; and then there was Mary who recognises Jesus when she **hears** him call her name. But smell makes its appearance too:

remember how Mary had anointed Jesus with ‘a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard’ and we were told, ‘the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume’. Taste is there in the bread and wine shared by Jesus and his disciples during their final meal together, but also to be found in the sour wine offered to Jesus himself as he hung on the cross, which was what enabled him to make that gift of bread and wine, body and blood, to us.

And then there is touch, perhaps the most primal and basic human sense of all. It is mentioned, as we have already suggested in the encounters of Jesus with both Mary and Thomas. But it is there earlier also, not least in two episodes, that time when Mary had anointed Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair, and then five days later when Jesus himself had washed the feet of his disciples. Both were actions for which touch – in quite an intimate form – was essential. I cherish this painting of the footwashing created by the modern Roman Catholic artist Jyoti Sahi. **(Slide 3 in pdf)** Given that we are thinking about Thomas today it is appropriate that Jyoti is himself an Indian Christian. I particularly appreciate the way that the painting by enclosing the figures of Jesus and Peter inside the leaf of the sacred Bodhi tree – or is it a heart – or is it both - squeezes them so closely together. It is as though the intensity of the incarnation, of God identifying himself closely and intimately with humanity has been pulled into this tiny space of time and place.

Norman Autton, an Anglican priest who had extensive experience in hospital chaplaincy, reflects ‘God sent his Son in order that we may touch God, and that God may touch us. In all the miracles of Christ we see the link between touch and the Word. He touches the eyes of the blind man, and he touches the leper, and says that they are clean. It is touch and the Word: the body and the Word. Autton goes on to say how in his hospital ministry touch is important but it is vital that it is a touch that gives security and peace, rather than being in any way abusive.

‘God sent his Son in order that we might touch God’. I expect most of you recognise this famous picture from Michaelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. Those almost touching hands of God and Adam. **(Slide 4 in pdf)** But is that almost touching finger of the divine about to caress his human creation or withdraw from it? In that ambiguity lies both the terror and tragedy of the human condition and the mystery and joy of salvation. I have hinted how in the ministry of Jesus, and specifically in his passion, we hear the echoes of creation and God’s relationship with humanity made new: of that renewed divine walk in a garden – only this time leading to joy rather than sorrow – and of the Spirit of Life once more breathed into human beings. Indeed our Gospel reading for today closes by summing up what has been the purpose of the writing of the Gospel of John, ‘that you may have life’ a word that in itself leads us back to reflect on Genesis’ story of God bringing the whole of life into being.

I spoke above of the intensity of the incarnation, summed up through the mutual touch of God and humanity. In the milieu for which I believe the Gospel of John was being written, a milieu in which the earliest retelling of the story of Jesus was now beginning to move out to be confronted by the Graeco-Roman world, such a focus on ‘touching God’ was almost incomprehensible or scandalous. The essential premise of Greek philosophy was that God and creation, divinity and humanity, the spiritual and the material, Spirit and flesh were literally aeons apart from each other. In a context such as this the Christian story of the Word becoming flesh and a God who identified with human pain and death challenged the intellectual givens of the Graeco-Roman world to their very core.

It would become the challenge of the following four centuries of Christian history to try and hold together the truths of what has been called ‘this particularly incarnational religion’ with the philosophical world in which this religion found itself. And the Church did not always get it right.

But the story of Thomas, and his encounter with the risen Jesus, is a vital stepping-stone on this journey. It is widely suggested that this Gospel was being written as the last of the direct eyewitnesses of the life and ministry of Jesus had died, or were shortly to do so. So those who now read this book were not people who had physically seen and touched Jesus for themselves, nor even seen and touched those such as the apostles who earlier had had the privilege of physical sight and touch. Perhaps that is why this particular Gospel has spoken so deeply to people through the ages – because we are folk in precisely that situation.

The Christian readers of the Gospel of John – which include us here today – are being asked – invited – to live in the exquisite paradox or tension that this particularly incarnational religion confronts us with. We must never forget the importance of the specific, the historical, a particular time and particular place, and a particular human person who could be touched and seen and loved by his friends. And yet we must not allow ourselves to be trapped by them into a sort of antiquarianism. Jesus asks Mary not to hold on to him so that he can enable the divine to meet with human beings in places far away from first century Palestine. Even in twenty-first century Switzerland and France.

However we also need to respond to the question that Pilate infamously asked, ‘What is truth?’ even if the answer we might give is very different to the one Pilate himself offered. It is no accident that ‘true’ and ‘truth’ are words that are repeatedly used in the Gospel of John. ‘Truth’ in biblical thinking is closely linked to the idea of strength and trust.

Perhaps, somewhat surprisingly, Thomas himself has vital wisdom to offer us here. For chapter 20 is not the only time that we hear Thomas speaking in the story told by John's Gospel. His voice has been heard briefly twice before.

When Jesus takes the decision to return near to Jerusalem to restore Lazarus to life, in spite of knowing that it will put himself in danger, it is Thomas who says, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him'.

And then during the Last Supper it is Thomas who asks the question, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?', prompting Jesus' response, 'I am the truth and the truth and the life'.

What I take from these two brief comments is that the life of the resurrection that Easter offers to us and the world, needs to be marked by two features. The first that resurrection cannot be understood apart from the passion and the cross, a cross that Jesus' disciples may also be asked to bear. The second is the resurrection invites us to become pilgrims on a way, a journey for which Jesus is both our forerunner and our guide.

Having shared with you one of Jyoti Sahi's paintings, it feels appropriate to end with another by this Indian Christian. It is called 'Resurrection', or sometimes, 'the Sign of Jonah'. **(Slide 5 in pdf)** Now Jesus is no longer tightly enclosed but bursting out – is it from a fish, and are those lines we can see marking the bones of the fish, the skeleton of the cross, or the branches of the tree of life? Or indeed all? And what of the human shapes that you can just make out near the bottom of the fish shape. Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration? Mary and John standing by Jesus at the cross? The myrrh-beating women visiting the tomb? Or an invitation to you and me to place ourselves in the scene as part of this resurrection story? That is the challenge for which the Gospel of John was written and which I leave with you.