

RECOGNISING JESUS IN THE NEW NORMAL: 5. THOMAS

John 20:24-29

We've done four sessions about recognising Jesus in the new normal of the first Easter and in our unprecedented circumstances too.

Thomas was missing from the lockdown gathering on Easter evening following the unprecedented experiences of the 72 hours before. Don't ask 'Why?' He probably thought it was safer to shelter on his own. Thomas seems to have been a law unto himself, a sort of Eeyore character but assertive with it; so much so that he had got two mentions over the previous couple of weeks in John's story for being a bit outspoken. When Jesus dropped hints about what would happen in Jerusalem. 'Let us also go that we may die with him.' (11:16) At the last supper he was the first one to take on Jesus. 'Lord, we don't know where you're going so how can we know the way.' (14:5) Explain yourself properly Lord. Thomas was his own person and not intimidated even by Jesus. Just like Eeyore, he could see the dark cloud to every silver lining.

So, when the others catch up with Thomas during the week and tell him all about the latest developments, he comes out as a resurrection denier. He rejects their evidence. 'Unless I see the scars of the nails and poke my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe.' (20:25) He was a bit of a party pooper: a wet blanket. Actually, he was bit arrogant too. Thomas thought he had higher standards than the rest of his gullible friends. Whether it was his personality, the fact he had not been with the group and felt sore that he had missed out on the amazing experience they had shared, or the sheer difficulty of getting his head round the fact that having had things initially turn out as badly as he expected there was now a complete reversal and he had to find a place to hope again. It was probably a mix of all three.

Eventually, a week later the disciples are still under lockdown. It's a repeat of the week before except that this time Thomas is with them. Jesus comes into a locked room, just like the previous Sunday. And stands among them, just like the previous Sunday. Jesus says, 'Peace be with you,' just like the previous Sunday. And standing among them, his reality felt by everybody there, he focuses on Thomas and holds out his hands. '[Poke] your finger in my wounds. Stop doubting and believe.' In the event, Thomas didn't need to touch. Looking was more than enough for him to commit completely to Jesus. 'My Lord and My God!' The last thing Jesus says to Thomas is the punchline of the piece: 'Because you have seen me you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

There's a lot going on here.

- **First** believing is so much more than ticking a box—that a man who was dead came back to life. Believing is a complete commitment
- **Second** We know that working out exactly what Blessed means is not easy.—Lets stay with somewhere around 'Well Done'. There's a special prize for those who haven't seen and yet have believed.
- **Thirdly** this thing of seeing works on a couple of levels.

Luke tells us that when Jesus joins the inner circle in the locked room they **see** a ghost. Mary meets Jesus and **sees** a gardener. The Cleopases meet a traveller and need several nudges to flick the switch and **see**. Now the special prize for believing without seeing wasn't a totally new

thought. The same day that Thomas looks on the bright side of life and says 'Let's die with him,' just before Jesus brings Lazarus back to life, he says to Martha 'Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?' (11:46). So there's a thing. Seeing then believing works, though only for people who are open hearted. But believing leads to seeing, too. For people like Martha in chapter 11 and Nathaniel in chapter 1:49, and everybody who lives by faith, not by what is physically obvious (2 Corinthians 5:7), the special prize (the blessing) is **believing then seeing**. As we believe, in a 'my Lord and my God' way, we see more, both by our outer eye and our inner sight, and so we believe more. John has a big thing about spiritual seeing. It's the reveal, God pulling the curtain back. For him it includes other kinds of spiritual awareness: feeling, knowing, hearing.

In trying to get a shape to recognising Jesus in an emerging new normal, we've seen some great pointers around the unprecedented circumstances of Easter.

- Coming back to the **fact** of God's promised closeness.
- Looking for signs of Jesus presence in different spaces
- Expecting him to stand among us, when we are digitally together and not depending on sitting in the same room for that to occur
- Getting there takes time, if you're slow on the uptake like some of us and most of Jesus's inner circle
- When you do there are others that need help to name the closeness and support that they feel
- We've highlighted the obvious conclusion that we need new resources for our new normal that points to Pentecost.

There's a lot going on here. And it looks like it's going to be a while before we go back to our old familiar ways of meeting together and praying together. We are desperate to see the end to so much grief and loss. We want people to get their jobs back and to be able to hug again. But we could make the most of the situation we're in by paying attention to recognising Jesus in new ways and by helping others put a name to the Spirit they are sensing as well.