

Sermon 26th April 2009 (John 20:24-31) “The Thomas Tension”

Now, I don't think Ant and Dec are the world's greatest theologians.

But the story of Susan Boyle is really a modern day parable.

That's not just because it is a Cinderella story with a happy ending for Susan, but because it gives us a very strong social commentary, but it exposes a popular worldview that says singers are young, beautiful and sexy: a worldview that connects ability and with looks and says that plain-looking working-class plump women don't count for anything.

And as she sings her beautiful song, it is not just that we begin to see her differently, but there is a worldview shift, where we begin to see ourselves to realise our own assumptions and prejudices: our deeply engrained acceptance of the media spin, the prioritising of gorgeousness in its prime, the airbrushing of wrinkles, the lies of the make-up department and the assumption that fame, talent and virtue are always beautiful.

One of the judges, Amanda Holden said this: “I am so thrilled, because I know everyone was against you. I honestly think we were being very cynical and I think that's the biggest wake-up call ever.”

There is a shift of perception that changes everything: a reality shift that moves the paradigm

And then, there's Thomas.

Faced with a claim more improbable than “I want to be like Elaine Paige”:
the claim that Jesus has risen, a man he knew for a fact to be dead – is alive.

And everything in the worldview of his culture says: “dead men don't rise”.
And so it is going to require a paradigm shift, a worldview change if Thomas is to believe:

“Unless I see....I will not believe”

We call him Doubting Thomas,
which is a little unfair.

Sure, he didn't believe the disciples until he saw for himself, but then the disciples didn't believe the women, until they saw for themselves.

Actually, if you trace Thomas in John's gospel, you'll find not so much a doubter as a blunt-spoken realist.

John 14:5 – Jesus says “I am going to prepare a place for you, and you know the way I am going”.

And Thomas says “Lord, no, we don't know the way or the place”
“What are you talking about?”

John 11:14 – Jesus is determined to travel to Bethany near Jerusalem and it is dangerous.

Thomas throws up his loyal hands and says “fine, let's all go and die together”

Thomas has a worldview of realism – facing facts.

And now?

Well, Jesus is dead.

His Kingdom has come to nothing.

The dead don't rise.

That's that: the end.

Obvious answers of the common worldview

But you see, Jesus has been teaching another worldview:
a God's worldview

John introduces it in the first chapter of his gospel

“In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.

The Word creates – it brings life.

It shines in the darkness and is never extinguished.

And the word becomes flesh.

And the world rejects him – but to those who believe he gives the right to become children born of God”

And what does this look like?

Well, Jesus spends three years travelling - Jerusalem-Galilee -Jerusalem- Galilee -
showing what it is like.

It is new wine that does not end – because he is the true vine.

It is bread that multiplies – because he is the bread of life.

He is the I am:

that offers new birth

that shows us the Father's love

and that lays down his life for his own.

These are not just the wise words of a prophet

they are the description of a new reality.

God doing something new:

smashing old assumptions and impossibilities for those who have the eyes to see.

But Jesus is clear:

the world will not understand this reality

it will hate, it will reject it

it will disbelieve.

But to those who see, God's Kingdom bursts forth in Jesus

And Thomas?

Thomas is caught between realities.

For three years he followed Jesus;

he was taught this new reality;

he didn't understand it all, sure;

but he was committed to it – he'd given up everything to follow Jesus. He was even
willing to go and die.

And he was committed to the Jesus people,

three years with the disciples

sharing everything – hardship and danger.

The Jesus worldview was strong with Thomas -

yet, the human reality – the world's assumptions

death is the end – crucified people are defeated

there is nowhere to go.

And here are his friends – men he'd trust with anything,

ten of them, all saying that Jesus is alive:

excited – swearing they've seen him.

And Thomas is caught between realities.

Now, I suspect we can all identify with the “Thomas tension”.

“I want to believe ... but”

“I think I believe it’s just that”

“I do believe but I can’t...”

“I love God’s word but this does not make sense”

Struggling between worldviews.

One of the keys here is the sharing of experiences.

Why does Thomas struggle with the resurrection worldview of the apostles?

It is because he has not shared their experience.

Why not?

Verse 24 “Thomas was not *with* them when Jesus came”

On Easter Sunday, Thomas skipped church
and from that point, he became semi-detached from their faith.

The Christian worldview is a shared worldview – and if we allow ourselves to become semi-detached then it becomes far more difficult.

And the key to Thomas believing again, is sharing again.

The next Sunday, (v26) a week later

Thomas is in church.

That must have been difficult.

All these disciples, with their resurrection faith

All their excitement, with which Thomas is struggling

He must have been so tempted to say “I don’t belong here”

But he sticks with it,

until he comes to share their experience.

And then, when he sees for himself,
when he experiences what they’ve experienced,
he falls and says “My Lord and My God.”

It is a strange thing to say.

Why didn’t he just say “Wow, you’re alive”?

The reason is that it is not just about the resurrection.

It is that Thomas now sees the whole worldview.

He grasps all that he’s been taught.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

You are the I am!

You are the bread of life!

You are the resurrection and the life!

You are the Lord of the world!

And you are my God!

And he falls down and worships.

We need that Christian worldview,
a worldview that enables us to believe
to worship and to see a different reality.

We need a worldview that allows us to recognise the cynicism, the false perception, the godlessness, and the wrong assumptions of the world around us: the assumptions that we have so often made our own.

How do we do that?

Well, there is a sense that we don't.
Until Jesus grabs us, and introduces himself
it will not happen.

But there is also a sense that worldview is shaped by who we are with, and what we learn.

Thomas only says "my Lord and my God" because
for three years, he's been part of a community of faith – which has shared experienced – even as they struggled and doubted
and because for three years, Jesus had taught them a new way of looking at reality.

And those three years were quite intense – we aren't talking about 25 min each Sunday – or a quick new communicant's class. This was a big commitment.

What is it that shapes our worldview?

What teaches us about reality?

About priorities, about morality, about the nature of goals and happiness and success?

How much is it God's Word and the sharing with the people of God, and the experience of worship?

How much is it the TV, the newspaper, and the chat at work?

There is a problem that for most of us, it is not the Christian worldview that is forming who we are (and who our children are).

And so, even when we are asking "what should a Christian think, or do?" so often it is the world's thinking that dominates us.

Take sex and relationships,

the world's view in western culture today is fairly clear:

"If they're adults, and if it is loving, why not? And what's your problem?"

And one of the things I'm noticing is that that ethos is shaping how many Christians are thinking today.

But what does the Bible teach?

What does it mean to say we are created in the image of God?

What does it mean to say that the Christian gives every part of their lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ – our Lord and our God?

And does that, perhaps, give us a different view?

(We're going to look at Scripture and sex in Corinthians over the next few Sunday evenings – be there.)

What about Euthanasia?

What about the environment?

What about money, careers, attitude to other religions, spending priorities, sharing our faith, fair-trade, abortion, the lottery, raising children, and every part of life?

What does it mean that that the Word became flesh, and that we have seen his glory, and Jesus is my Lord and my God in every aspect of life?

We really need to be opening our eyes, stretching our minds
challenging our assumptions
and learning to grasp this brand new world that Jesus Christ has made a reality.

We need to work at removing the common worldly assumptions that just creep in –
and that Jesus warns us about.

And through our teaching, our sharing, our study of Bible, our worshiping and our
praying to enter into the new reality that God has created.

And, that takes more than 20 min on a Sunday.

In the early church, if someone wanted to join, they might spend anything up to two
years in catechumate programme
which was intense training, mentoring, and teaching
and at the end of that, they could be baptised.

Part of that was to allow pagans to “de-tox”
to get the whole pagan worldview out of their system.

I’m going to start an enquirer’s class tonight.

Anyone who’d like to find out – or be refreshed in the basics of Christianity, perhaps
with a view to joining, is welcome to attend in the vestry.

I promise it will not last two years.

Although, actually, perhaps it should last for the rest of our lives.

Maybe we need Sunday School for adults every week.

(Watch this space.)

So, Thomas

caught between worldviews – like most of us

Committed, yet struggling;

wanting to believe – yet needing to be honest about doubt;

willing, but conflicted.

I think that’s most of us. That’s why we are here.

Some of us are not believers – but we want to be.

Some of us are – but we are struggling between Christ and the world.

And some of us are not sure just where we belong.

Recognise the reality needs to shift – and ask God to open your eyes to see.

Renew your commitment to this shared journey.

Look and learn and discover all that Jesus has done

until we can all say:

“My Lord and my God”

To him, who with the Father Almighty

and through the Holy Spirit, be all glory, honour and praise

Amen.