



Newcastle City Temple Connected

Reimagining Church Together

Dear Friends

I don't know how many of you have spent time this week watching or reading the various tributes which have been shared in relation to HRH Prince Philip Duke of Edinburgh. When someone close to us dies it's quite normal to want to share personal memories of our experience with them; and quite often in sharing with us others - they will speak of events or attributes which we might otherwise never have known, or in the passing of time had forgotten.

One of the great privileges of Salvation Army Officership is to spend time with grieving families in the course of preparing a funeral - and one of the things I will often say to encourage families to get them speaking about the kind of things which are helpful in formulating the tribute to their loved one is "what word or words do you naturally associate with [*insert the name of the deceased*]".

An example of this would be if I were asked to reflect on my late Grandma, I would instantly think of 'Pancakes, Squash-a-berries, Rich Tea Biscuits and the particular way she would roll her eyes whilst speaking the phrase "do you mind?". My sister remembers 'Fisherman Friends, Freedant Chewing Gum, and the promise of a small glass of Sherry if we managed to walk home from Enfield to Lower Edmonton without complaining ... whilst my brother just this last week reminded me of the converted coal shed which stored the plastic pots and pans, the small tricycle and large washing up bowl which doubled up as a paddling pool - all things we played with when we were very small, and the ha'penny jar—which she would pull out and sharing the contents amongst us - allow us to place our own bets on the horses so that she could watch Royal Ascot or Racing from Newmarket in relative peace. In sharing memories such as these - it's always a joy to observe the smiles and listen to the laughter which breaks through the sniffles and restrained sobbing.

We know that after Jesus had Risen from the dead - He appeared to various people at various times; Firstly to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9-11; John 20:11-18); to Salome and Mary the mother of James (Matthew 28:9-10). To Peter (Luke 24:34). To two men on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32). To the apostles, except for Thomas (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-25), and then to the apostles with Thomas (John 20:26-29) - as we will consider in this issue of NCT SA Connected.

He then appeared to seven of His disciples on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-25). To the apostles on a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-18). To over 500 brethren (1 Corinthians 15:6). To His brother James (1 Corinthians 15:7). To the apostles - where He ate a meal with them (Acts 1:3-8; Luke 24:44-49) just prior to His Ascension (Acts 1:9-12; Mark 16:19-20; Luke 24:50-53). And to Paul (1 Corinthians 15:8; Acts 9:1-6; 18:9-10; 23:11).

In the reports of each of these appearances we learn something new about Jesus—the testimony of these eye witnesses is helpful in our understanding of Jesus mission; but it's also interesting to note the details of how each responded.

And so I hope that you will enjoy the thoughts I share with you on Thomas - and that like him your eyes will be opened to see and know Jesus even more clearly than before.

As always, Stay Safe! Hope you have a great week. With the weather looking reasonable, I hope to be able to share with some of you in your own gardens as I recommence face to face pastoral visitation. In order to have an increased level of confidence in relation to your protection (& mine) - I have started the twice weekly 'self-testing' lateral flow tests for Covid-19; and can confirm that I have had two negative results so far—praise God! Self Testing Kits are now freely available for anyone living in England who is over the age of 18 and can be obtained either by post by pasting the following link [Order coronavirus \(COVID-19\) rapid lateral flow tests - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/order-coronavirus-covid-19-rapid-lateral-flow-tests) into your internet search engine, or may be collected from some pharmacies or Covid-19 Testing sites.

Every Blessing
Major Liz Hancock



SUNDAY 18th April 2021

Theme: Thomas - the one with the enquiring mind

Introduction

J.W. McGarvey writes;

There is a very beautiful and touching hymn the chorus of which terminates with the words, "I shall know Him by the prints of the nails in his hands." The author seems to have conceived that when she enters heaven she will see before her a great host of glorified beings, among whom she may not readily distinguish her Saviour. The thought seemingly arose from John's declaration that "we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is." But she imagined that he bears in heaven, as he did when he appeared to doubting Thomas, the prints of the nails in his hands. The conception, whether true to the reality or not, is a very touching one; for it supposes our exalted Redeemer to continue through all eternity wearing the mark of the keenest pain which he endured in the work of our redemption. We are apt, in considering the crucifixion, to be shocked most severely at the thrusting of the Roman spear into the Saviour's heart, and the stream of mingled blood and water which gushed forth. But that cruel deed gave him no pain. His life was already extinct. We shudder, too, at the driving of the iron spikes through his hands and his feet; and no living person can adequately conceive the torture inflicted when the tender nerves of these extremities were thus lacerated. But this pain, though excruciating beyond all expression, endured only for a few awful moments. It was when the cross was erected and put in its place that his most extreme and enduring torture began. His whole weight was suspended on the two spikes which had been driven through his hands; and this continued for six dreadful hours. Well, then, does the hymn-writer select the prints of the nails in his hands as the badge of his supremist physical agony. If that badge shall be kept visible before us in heaven, how deep and constant will be the glow of gratitude in our hearts, and how constant and full the stream of praise that will flow from our lips!

Song: I stand amazed in the presence (SASB 466) <https://youtu.be/Alk7gQ8iRaw>

'When with the ransomed in Glory, His face I at last shall see, twill be my joy through the ages. To sing of his love for me... How marvellous! How wonderful! Is my saviours love for me'. Charles H. Gabriel (1856-1932)

Bible Text: John 20:19-30

Reflection: I shall know him... By the nail prints in his hand

The words which McGarvey reflected upon, could be found in one of the choruses within the former Salvation Army Songbook, and they come from the song *My Saviour First of All*, by Frances J. Crosby;

1. When my lifework is ended, and I cross the swelling tide, When the bright and glorious morning I shall see; I shall know my Redeemer when I reach the other side, And His smile will be the first to welcome me.	2. Oh, the dear ones in glory, how they beckon me to come, And our parting at the river I recall; To the sweet vales of Eden they will sing my welcome home; But I long to meet my Saviour first of all.
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Refrain:

*I shall know Him, I shall know Him,
And redeemed by His side I shall stand,
I shall know Him, I shall know Him,
By the print of the nails in His hand.*

3. Through the gates to the city in a robe of spotless white,
He will lead me where no tears will ever fall;
In the glad song of ages I shall mingle with delight;
But I long to meet my Saviour first of all.

4. Oh, the soul-thrilling rapture when I view His blessed face,
And the luster of His kindly beaming eye;
How my full heart will praise Him for the mercy, love and grace,
That prepare for me a mansion in the sky.



Continued...

When we think of the disciples, we have certain words that almost always go with them. We think of Judas Iscariot or Judas the Betrayer, we think of Peter denying Christ three times but also Peter the Rock that the church was built on, we think of John, the one Jesus loves, and we also think of Thomas or perhaps more infamously 'Doubting Thomas'.

But is this label truly befitting of Thomas' character? The word doubt or doubting has such negative connotations, doesn't it? Surely there has to be more to Thomas than simply his doubt – which to be fair appears to relate to the one post resurrection incident which John records in his Gospel.

As one of Jesus' chosen twelve – there surely must be more to Thomas than that which perhaps first meets the eye. So what else do we know about him? Excepting what we learn from John – perhaps not a great deal, for John's gospel is the only gospel that makes any mention of Thomas beyond his name simply being included in the list of disciples.

John is the only gospel writer who makes any mention of the fact that Thomas was a twin – John 11:16 says *'Then Thomas (called Didymus)'* Didymus wasn't Thomas' surname as we might perhaps initially suppose, but rather the name Thomas in the Hebrew and Didymus it's equivalent in the Greek both signify a twin, and this has led commentators to believe that Thomas must have been a man of independent judgement for him to break such a close filial relationship to become a disciple of Christ, so was Thomas chosen because of his independence or in spite of it? We will never know – except to say that he was chosen; Matthew 10 says this... *'He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew: James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; **Thomas** and Matthew the tax collector; James Son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.'*

When we read John's gospel we find Thomas to be a brave and zealous man with an enquiring mind. If he didn't understand something, he did not hesitate to ask for an explanation. Examples of this can be found in John chapter 11, which recounts the story of the raising of Lazarus.

Back in John chapter 10 – the Jews had accused Jesus of blasphemy and had prepared to stone him as prescribed by the Law of Moses, way back in Leviticus 24 of the Old Testament. But despite the obvious ill feeling against him that existed in some Jewish circles, Jesus decided to return to the area surrounding Jerusalem and visit Mary and Martha at their home in Bethany. You can almost hear the concerned cries of the disciples fearful at what the consequences of Jesus' decision might be... *"But Rabbi, are you out of your mind? You can't go back there, you mustn't go, don't you Realise the Jews are out to kill you". (Jn.11:8)*. But then comes Thomas' declaration of loyalty – he's listened to Jesus' reasoning and explanation, he understands how determined Jesus is to go, and why he feels that he must go, and so Thomas now turns to the rest of the disciples and says *"Let us also go, that we may die with him."* (v11) Thomas' words are really quite moving, and so I find it quite sad that we seem to have picked out a bad patch in Thomas' life and labelled the whole of it because of that one mistake! Yes, Thomas displayed doubt, but what a display of loyalty too! It's as though he were saying; *"It's like this guys, He's heading back to Jerusalem whether we like it or not, but faced with the option I'd rather die with Him, than have Him die alone – now are you with me?"*

The statement which Thomas made was a very brave statement in that he had assumed that if he went with Jesus it could very well mean the end of his life. He was willing to follow Jesus, in this case, even if it meant death. He was putting into action the teachings of Christ that we find in Mark 8:34-35 *"If anyone would come after me; he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."*

In John chapter 14 - on the eve of his crucifixion Jesus comforts His disciples with these words...

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.'

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me."

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Reimagining Church - Let's Worship Together

Continued...



I don't know if you've ever considered this before - but it was on the back of Thomas' enquiring questioning mind that comes one of the greatest "I AM" statements of Christ. Jesus said "*I am the way and the truth and the life.*" This has to be amongst the most widely known statements in Christianity – and it just thrills me to think that it stems from a question that our doubting Thomas asked.

Jesus had just been teaching His disciples about His imminent departure to heaven, promising that after He has prepared a place for them, He will return to take them to their heavenly home. One of the statements Jesus makes is: "*You know where I am going and how to get there*". Thomas strongly disagrees. Now I'm sure that he wasn't alone in his confusion, uncertainty – call it as you will – but only Thomas had the courage to challenge Jesus; Jesus says "*You know where I am going, and the road I am taking*" and Thomas says "*No, we don't. Master, we have no idea where you are going, so how do you expect us to know the way?*"

Surely we have got to admire the fact that Thomas doesn't hesitate to challenge anything about which he is uncertain, and although some may regard his approach as rude or impertinent, obviously Jesus does not think so for He responds to him by making His point clearer still: "*I am the way and the truth and the life*". What a beautiful all-encompassing description this is, and the point brought home to me through Thomas enquiring, questioning, challenging mind is that we should never be afraid to ask searching or probing questions.

Some might look at Thomas' challenge and say '*What little faith he had – that he didn't just accept the words of Christ and go on his way*'. But I want to say that in Thomas I see one who is so eager to know all there is to know about Christ, one who is willing to go with Him – that he very honestly and passionately says to him "*I don't know the way but I sure want to follow you – please tell me how*". Not only was he so passionate about going with Christ and sticking with his Lord but he also sought out a deeper truth and asked a question that brought out a reply that is at the heart of Christianity and has brought timeless comfort to many.

The deeper I look into the character of Thomas the more I admire him.

Following Christ's death and the apparent end of His ministry, the disciples became afraid of what the Jews might do to them, and so they hid behind closed doors – petrified with fear.

Suddenly, although the doors were locked and guarded against intruders, Jesus appeared in the midst of his disciples and greeted them with the words: "*Peace be with you!*" What a glorious revelation that must have been to those stunned and bewildered disciples – how it must have consoled their drooping spirits and elevated their faith. There is only one sad note to the story: Thomas was not with them when Jesus came!

We're not told the reasons as to why Thomas wasn't there – but what we do know is that the other disciples were eager to tell him of their personal encounter with Christ. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord". (Jn 20:25) and Thomas spoke those infamous words which ever since have been a slur on his character "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, I will not believe".

Let's not be too hasty in our judgement of Thomas. In verse 18 having met with the Resurrected Christ early that morning whilst weeping beside the empty tomb, we are told that Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!". John also tells us that 'On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said 'Peace be with you!' *After* he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.' (v19-20). What this suggests to me is that their response to Mary's Testimony was no different to how Thomas reacted to theirs. Like Thomas they needed tangible proof that Jesus was alive. For me, once again Thomas showed immense courage to stand before his friends and openly confess his doubts - to admit "I will believe what you say, but only after I've seen it for myself".

"Doubts," said Neil Strand, "can be valuable if they are recognised and confessed... and if they force a man to search deeper and longer for answers." Put another way, "To pursue doubts is to discover some new and exciting beliefs".

Who amongst us has never wished that we could actually see Jesus, touch him and hear his words? Have you ever wanted to just sit down with him and get his advice? Thomas wanted Jesus' physical presence. He'd spent three years of his life with him – he was grieving the fact that he'd been taken from him, and in his grief is it really any wonder that he was confused.

We need to remember as we read these post resurrection experiences of Christ in the gospels – that up until this point in time – the disciples had not yet received the promised Holy Spirit – that would follow some weeks later as they met together in the days following Christ's ascension into heaven; and therefore there is a sense in which our faith in the unseen Jesus comes from a totally different perspective. Because of what is written in scripture – we are able to understand that God has not limited himself to one physical body; but rather can be with us at all times in the form of the Holy Spirit – and therefore we are able to talk to him, pray to him and read his words to us in the pages of the Bible. Through faith God can be just as real to us now as he was to Thomas – when he appeared before him and invited him to reach out and touch him.

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Continued...

What I love about this passage of scripture is that Jesus doesn't condemn Thomas for his doubts, instead Jesus graciously helps him to get through the barriers to his faith. *"Thomas, you want proof? Then let me help you"*.

Thomas asked for two forms of proof, *to see* and *to touch* and Jesus offered him three. He said, *see me, touch me and then let me tell you what you said* when you didn't think I was here. In other words, he repeated his words back to him; He satisfied his enquiring mind. How did Jesus know what Thomas had said - Jesus wasn't there when Thomas talked to the other 10 disciples unless of course He was there invisibly, quietly, and spiritually.

Jesus presents three wonderful proofs to help Thomas believe and to encourage his faith. It is a pattern which is repeated in scripture, and is therefore there as an encouragement to us all.

As one writer suggests; God graciously humbles himself and comes to us in personal earthen ways. He knelt down, in Christ, to our earthen floor. This almighty, omnipotent God, King of the universe, comes to us in our language and ultimately in our humanity so that we can know him, so that we too can communicate his love and his grace and his message which is the good news. He did it for Moses in the burning bush; he did it for Gideon in the fleece; he does it for Elijah in the still, small voice; he does it with Thomas, when he says, if you are having a difficult time believing, then touch me, listen to me, know that I am real—and confronted by the evidence, this unbeliever suddenly leaps beyond the other disciples and cries: *"My Lord and my God!"* Up until this time, none of the other disciples had actually addressed Jesus as God. They had called Him "Messiah", "Son of God", "Son of the living God" – but not God. This was probably one of the greatest and most revealing statements to have come from the group of disciples. And it's all the more significant because it comes from a man who, up until the moment of seeing the physical evidence of Christ's wounds, was one who doubted.

Jesus then says to Thomas: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Because of Thomas' honest doubt countless Christians throughout the ages have also believed, and in believing have discovered Christ. And so, the main lesson of Thomas' life is surely this – those who wrestle with doubts (and let's be honest I'm sure we've all found cause to doubt at some point along our spiritual journey); those who wrestle with doubts can, with Christ's help, come through to a glorious certainty of faith and great spiritual effectiveness. Christ has great sympathy with those who with a questioning mind cry out to Him, "I believe help my unbelief!"

Suggested Songs: To God be the glory (SASB 279) <https://youtu.be/hyt694v-XX4>
Lord, I come to you <https://youtu.be/7cl-nYtqcVI>

Songster Piece: I have seen the glory of the Lord <https://youtu.be/ZnbRs40Wdxo>

This weeks chosen Band pieces: Chosen by Tony Stubbs

They shall come from the East' (SASB 1011) by Melbourne Staff Band

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=4nbNeLWmo-o>

Jesus Thou art everything to me' (SASB 502) by the Canadian and Chicago Staff Bands

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=kEZ-PQWzH2w>

A Prayer

Lord, Jesus Christ,

It is hard sometimes to believe.

In the face of frustrated hopes and broken dreams,

Of sorrow, suffering and death,

We too, like Thomas, can find ourselves doubting,

Wanting irrefutable proof before we dare accept what we are told.

You appeared to Thomas and gave him the assurance he wanted,

But you also told him that those who have not seen but still believe are most blessed of all.

Help us then, even when faith is hard,

Even when it's a struggle to hold on,

To put our trust in you, knowing you will not fail us. AMEN

Benediction

Jesus, so dear to us,

Jesus, be near to us,

Jesus, give ear to us

Each as we pray;

Jesus, whate'er betide,

Jesus, be friend and guide,

Jesus, be by our side

Now and forever more. Amen