

John 20:19-33 Thomas – a crisis of faith.

When I was 17, I had an older boyfriend called Tony, who I met at a Beach Mission. *(Ah Tony...He worked in the city. Such a gentleman. He'd drive from Sydney to Minnamurra where I lived most weekends. He asked me to marry him when I was in my final year at school. Sadly for him, I turned him down - I wanted to pursue a career before I settled down.)*

Tony had a brother who was three years older - whose name I can't remember. Both Tony and his brother were committed Christians, and very active in their church. I went with Tony to his brother's wedding. It was a wonderful affair, and no one could have been happier than the young bride and groom. Unfortunately, only a year later, Tony's brother had a sudden heart attack and died on the way to the hospital. He was 24. His young wife, also a Christian, was completely shattered. She couldn't understand why God had taken her husband from her. She couldn't reconcile what had happened to her with who she believed God to be, and so dropped out of the Church and would have nothing further to do with God.

This young woman experienced a crisis of faith. This is not uncommon. We may know someone this has happened to - or we may even have been there ourselves. Tragedies such as losing a loved one, or experiencing a devastating financial loss, or a career disappointment or an ongoing painful illness - can cause some of us to deeply question our faith in God.

Because we are human, most of the time we look at life from a human perspective. That's natural. Even though we are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit, our humanity sometimes raises its head and skews our perceptions.

We find ourselves thinking that God should work in a particular way. When he doesn't, we can feel let down by God. And that can then challenge our faith. This was what this young woman experienced - and it's what the early disciples experienced as well.

How should we respond when our faith is shaken?

Today's Gospel reading is the story of someone with a crisis of faith, how he responded, - and how God responded. It's the story of Thomas. It's in

our lectionary every Easter Season, unlike other passages which appear every three years. I think that is because not only is Thomas's experience common to so many of us, his declaration of faith in his Lord is the cornerstone of our faith.

The whole of John chapter 20 centres on this issue. Each of the four episodes in this chapter describes a crisis of faith, as each of the characters in the account struggles with the reality of the resurrection. It's interesting to note that with each account described in this chapter, the level of each crisis of faith is deeper.

- John, the beloved disciple is first. We simply see his natural faith in Jesus challenged by the empty tomb.
- Then there is Mary who sees the empty tomb, and is totally devastated. She just doesn't understand. Her sorrow overwhelms her faith.
- Then there are the disciples hiding behind locked doors. Not only are they grieving deeply, as Mary was, they are thoroughly disillusioned and fearful.
- The final account is that of Thomas whose grief, fear and disillusionment are edged with deep skepticism. "I've got to have proof!" he challenges bitterly, when he hears of Jesus' appearance.

A crisis of faith can affect us at many levels. But at whatever level that might be, we need to ask the question, "How do I respond to this situation? How do I deal with these feelings I'm having about God? How do I move forward when I feel like this?"

How did Thomas respond? Can we learn something from how he dealt with his shaken faith that might help us as we face similar struggles?

Thomas wasn't always "Doubting Thomas", as we often hear him described. In John 11:16, Thomas is portrayed as a strong figure. Jesus announces he will return to Judea because Lazarus has died. Things were starting to get rather hot for Jesus, and his disciples feared for him. Thomas's courage stands out when he urges the other disciples to travel with Jesus so that they might die with him! He may not have fully understood what Jesus' mission was at that point, but he showed courage. Thomas was also a leader and spokesman.

In John 14, Jesus comforts his disciples, telling them that though he was going away, he would prepare a place for them, and that they knew the way to where he was going. Thomas speaks for the disciples when he says “How can we know the way, when we don’t even know where you’re going?” (When we find ourselves faced with a crisis of faith, it doesn’t necessarily indicate that we are hopeless disciples. Thomas certainly wasn’t.)

How is it then, that a courageous and outspoken disciple finds himself at a point where he questions the very foundation of his faith?

Thomas, like the rest of the disciples would have grown up with the understanding and hope of the day, that the Messiah would physically deliver Israel from the Romans. Though progressively, Thomas and the other disciples came to understand that Jesus’ mission was somehow different from that, they no doubt could have echoed the words that rang out at the cross. “He saved others – let him save himself!” “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!” Prior to the resurrection and Pentecost, they did not have a full understanding of Jesus mission.

So Thomas would have been bitterly disappointed and disillusioned. And heartbroken. He’d shared his life and soul with this man for 3 years. Shared his dreams. Believed his teaching. Been overwhelmed by his love and his Presence. It’s obvious Thomas had loved Jesus - and now he was DEAD. Thomas would have been angry with God for letting this all happen. He was very human.

So how did Thomas respond to this crisis of faith in his life? He responded the same way that John did. That Mary did. That the other disciples did.

First of all, Thomas found encouragement and solace being with the other believers. After the burial, the disciples soon found their way back to each other. They didn’t hibernate on their own and hibernate - something that is easy to do when we are feeling spiritually low. They stayed together and found encouragement in the friendship and common experience they shared. It was in this context of meeting together, that Jesus ministered to them.

And then, secondly, Thomas responded with honesty. His emotions surfaced. He was angry. He expressed it. “ I will NOT believe!” he said. “Not unless I see for myself the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger in the holes where the nails were, and where the spear went into his side!” I believe behind his heartfelt cry to God at that time, was, “Lord, I WANT to believe – convince me!”

Sometimes I think we are afraid to be honest with God. We have a tendency to reduce God to our level. Perhaps we think he will be offended if we say what we really think. Perhaps we think he will reject us if we voice what we consider are unworthy thoughts and feelings.

But God can cope with our emotion. He can cope with our honesty. He coped with it when Jesus accused him of abandoning him! The Father sees into the deepest recesses of our soul and knows it all anyway, so we may as well be up front with him!

This was how Thomas responded - with honesty. He said what he thought, what he was feeling!

And how did God respond? He met Thomas at his place of need. Just as he met Mary at the tomb - speaking her name and turning her sorrow to joy; just as he met the disciples in the locked room, speaking peace into their troubled spirits. In each case, God didn't condemn his people because they were struggling, or angry or bitter or disillusioned or unbelieving. Jesus just met them where they were.

And Thomas. He'd issued a challenge to God almighty from a place of grief and disappointment. But God didn't zap him for being offensive or heretical. He met his need. Jesus appeared before Thomas and showed him his hands, his side. “Put your finger here,” offered Jesus, “Put your hand in my side. Stop doubting and believe!”

Jesus' appearance and words were enough for Thomas. He didn't need to touch him. Thomas found his faith soaring, and he responded with a cry that is the foundation of the Christian faith – “My Lord and my God!”

How then should we respond in those times when life knocks us hard? When perhaps the very foundation of our own belief in God's goodness is challenged?

We would do well to follow the example of Thomas and those first disciples, by not separating ourselves from our Christian family, and nursing our wounds - which is such a temptation. It's *within* that family that God is so powerfully present, and where we will find healing.

And then, let's again follow the example of Thomas, and determine to be real with God, and with our fellow believers, should we find ourselves in turmoil on the inside. When a Christian brother or sister says to us, "How are you? Really?" We need to tell them. It's in that context of openness and honesty that God is best able to minister to us.

It's as we come to God, in the presence of his Church, willing to share honestly where we're at, that God can take what we offer him, and make us whole.

Pray with me...