

Homily for the Eve of the Feast of St Thomas the Apostle

A homily preached at the Sung Mass for the Eve of the Feast of St Thomas the Apostle on Wednesday, 20 December 2023, in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, Pusey House, Oxford, by Mr Timothy Powell, Chapel Intern, Pusey House

o worthy toucher of God's wounds,
thy doubt maketh stronger faith's bonds.
thou giv'st more comfort and more aid,
than those who such fast faith displayed.¹

These verses from a fourteenth-century German manuscript prayer-book aptly summarise what is so wonderful about Saint Thomas the Apostle, the eve of whose feast day we celebrate in this Mass. One particularly rich element of the liturgy of Pusey House is celebrating the saints. It is deeply inspiring to give thanks for the lives of these people whom God has redeemed and set apart to work His good purposes in this life, and whom He will crown with His glory in the next. However, celebrating the saints can also feel somewhat disheartening when we learn about life after life after life of exemplary virtue led by so many holy people. Just this month, we have already kept six feast days celebrating the life and witness of the saints, and four more are yet to come. It can all too often seem that the saints have attained an extraordinary level of holiness which it is impossible for us to aspire to here and now. How many of us could confidently say that we could defend the true faith as boldly as the Doctor St Ambrose, or preserve our purity as perfectly as the Virgin Mary, or give up our fleeting earthly lives for the sake of our eternal life in Jesus, like the Martyr St Lucy?

This is exactly why the medieval writer states that St Thomas “gives more comfort and more aid/than those who such fast faith displayed”. The Gospels have a very comforting way of highlighting how Jesus' earliest followers – who we reckon as the greatest among the saints – are individuals of exemplary virtue who yet also possess a deeply human side to which every single one of us can relate. St Thomas' own deeply human side is

¹ 'Van sunte Thomas', August Lübben (ed.), *Mittelniederdeutsche Gedichte* (Oldenburg: Stalling, 1868), p. 44; translation my own.

expressed in his doubts, which he articulates twice in John's Gospel: once when he asks, "Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?" in John 14.5, and once in this evening's Gospel reading, in John 20.25: "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe." This doubt is something to which we can all relate. How many times have we been swift to recognise Jesus' saving power in the lives of others, and yet struggled to see it in our own? However, St Thomas' doubts come from a place of love – at the risk of sounding like a low-budget version of Father Mark (!) - a love that burns every bit as ardently as the love for God manifested in the lives of the saints. We can see this love from St Thomas' very first words in the Bible in John 11.16: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." St Thomas loves Jesus so dearly and wants to follow Him so nearly that, like Lazarus, he cannot even be separated from Him by death itself, but it is precisely because of this that St Thomas despairs of his capacity to do so. Likewise, it is precisely the intensity of our love, our desire to offer our whole lives up to participating in accomplishing God's good purposes, that makes us utterly despair of our capacity to do so. But we must remember that if we truly love Jesus like St Thomas, we are already halfway to following Him as closely as the saints.

St Thomas is very comforting because he shows us that our love is far closer to the saints' love for God than we imagine. He is also very comforting – and this brings us to the poem's first point - because his doubts make his faith, and ours, all the firmer. John 20 begins with Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene after His Resurrection. Eight days later, He appears to all the disciples except Thomas; eight days later, he appears to the apostles again when Thomas is present. Jesus thus appears to Thomas on the octave day of the octave day of His Glorious Resurrection, signifying that God's creation of the new world of faith through it has not only been completed, but perfected. Jesus' invitation to Thomas to touch His wounds also represents the counterpart to his command to Mary Magdalene ten verses earlier: "Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father; but go to my brethren and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father and your Father, unto my God and your God". By inviting St Thomas to touch His wounds, Jesus presents him with irrefutable proof that He is risen and has ascended to His Father and our Father, to His God and our God. Jesus has defeated sin, won the victory over Hell and triumphed over death itself – and nothing more can separate us from Him or our common Father and God. And if such irrefutable proof is not enough to convince us of this eternal truth – well, I do not know what will be.

Even though we know this to be the truth, it can be all too easy to lose sight of it and stray from following Jesus so closely that nothing can separate us from him, especially in a world oppressed by hatred, greed and cruelty, which obscure the ceaseless operation of Jesus' grace therein. How do we see past these things and keep our love for Jesus freely burning, striving to follow Him ever more nearly until we cannot be separated from Him, like St Thomas and the other saints? Just as Our Risen Lord provides St Thomas with the means to do so by touching His wounds, He provides us with the means to do so through His seven sacraments. There is no better example of this than in how He invites us to participate in the Sacrament of the Holy Communion this evening.

The Anglo-Catholic theologian Austin Farrer sums up what St Thomas really means when he addresses Jesus in this evening's Gospel reading in a homily from 1962: "That's the sort of man I am: I shan't be able to believe, unless I believe my own hands and eyes."² After the Creed and the intercessions, as we prepare to receive the Sacrament, we will make our confession. I, for one, know that I will be confessing to Jesus with St Thomas: "Lord, that's the sort of man I am: I shan't be able to believe, unless I believe my own hands and eyes". With St Thomas, offer up to the Lord everything that makes it hard for you to believe His truth in the readings and – I hope and pray – in this homily. Offer up to Him everything that makes it hard for you to believe His truth that we are about to affirm in the Creed. Offer up to Him everything that makes it hard for you to believe His truth that He will hear and answer the prayers you offer during the intercessions.

And he will gladly accept all these offerings. He will bless and sanctify them, and He will transform them into gifts far greater than those we believe we can ask for. As you raise your hands to receive the bread, and as you raise your hands to guide the chalice to your lips, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself will come to meet you. He will guide your hands to the wounds in His hands and His side, so that you can believe the truth of His Resurrection with your own hands and eyes. And He will thereby reveal to you His truth beyond all doubt: that with Him, you have died to sin, and with Him, you are raised to new life, like the saints: redeemed, no longer separated from Him by anything, but set apart ever more nearly to follow Him: to whom with the Father and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory, ever, world without end. Amen.

² Farrer, Austin, 'Faith and Crutches', Austin Farrer, Leslie Houlden (ed.), *A Celebration of Faith* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970), p. 79.