

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 15 APRIL 2012

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John 20: 19-21

“Our Brother Thomas”

There was Thomas, in the Iona narrative, thinking that Jesus would be cross with him, not because of his doubting..... but because he was making conditions. What surprised you as you responded to Barbara & John’s interpretation of John 20: 19-31? No surprise, I’ve heard the Thomas story so often!!

Thomas is mentioned in John 11:16, when other disciples didn’t want to go up to Jerusalem for the Passover, being rather frightened. Thomas said: “let us also go that we may die with him.” Are we like Thomas? could he be our brother? – Bill Loader suggests that we, like many of the gospel characters, have a lots of ambiguity in us, just like Thomas.

A quick recall reminds us that Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the beloved disciple all had different reactions to the empty tomb.. Thomas just happens to be missing when Jesus came to the frightened disciples.

So the first emphasis in the passage is of the warm, friendly greeting which the risen Jesus gives to these frightened Galileans: Peace be with you. Twice Jesus gives this greeting. What does “Peace be with you” mean?

Peace does not mean no persecution; peace is not the absence of war; peace is at least the more wholistic Shalom.

It includes ‘inner peace’; This Peace is not just an individualistic thing we get or own, inner tranquility, but the way people and all creation and God will relate to each other.

Jesus is enfolding them all with this greeting of his future hope: and goes on to give the disciples their commission; the mission of bringing wholistic peace and shalom - the mission of the Johannine community, and our commission.

A commission which includes: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” We’re not to be the arbiter of right and wrong, but to bear unceasing witness to the love of God in Jesus, to the gracious, prodigious love which Jesus has shown in his ministry, in his journey to Jerusalem, on the cross, and his gentle yet bracing words to Thomas. If sins aren’t forgiven, then the wholeness of John community life is threatened, similarly our community life will be threatened.

After being given their commission, Thomas came back, blustering, probably feeling very left out - Thomas was *a-pistos* – un-trusting, not-believing. The next scene is eight days later; and still the group were sheltering behind closed doors. The difference is Thomas is with them. In this appearance, Jesus repeats his previous greeting: “Peace be with you”.

Jesus invites Thomas to put feel the holes in his hands and his side. Feel my wounds. Do not doubt but believe. What doesn’t happen is Thomas actually needing to feel, to put his fingers into Jesus’ wounds.

In the NRSV Jesus says, blessed are those who have trusted! There are many variations on this translation – do not doubt, but believe. In my Greek interlinear Bible, Jesus says: don't be faithless, but faith-ful. Another translation says: do not be untrusting, but trust.

David Ewart suggests that 'believe' in John is better translated 'believe into.' It does not mean "hold an opinion about", rather it means 'trust', 'bond with', 'be loyal to'.

Is there a difference between those words: faith and belief?

In the 21st. century, belief is mainly a cognitive function, faith or trust more an orientation of a person's entire being. Marcus Borg helps us untangle the different way these words have been used in early Christian times until the 17th. century, and the way modern people use the words. The verb *believe* did not mean believing *that* a statement is true, with varying degrees of certainty, but more like what we mean when we say to somebody, "I believe *in* you." In a Christian context, it meant having confidence in God and Jesus, trusting God and Jesus. (Marcus Borg: Speaking Christian: why Christian words have lost their meaning and power; and how they can be restored; Harper One, 2011, NY)

Is this word *believe* totally different from the word *faith*, which some translations use? *Faith* is often identified with believing; it can also mean "what faith are you?" (meaning which religion do you belong to.) These are modern meanings: the ancient meanings are expressed by the Latin words *fidelitas* and *fiducia* and their Greek equivalents.

Fidelitas means 'fidelity' or 'faithfulness'. So, in our context, that understanding of *'faith'* means commitment, loyalty, allegiance and attentativeness to our relationship with God. *Fiducia* means 'trust.' More than commitment, it means deep trust in God. And the opposite is not infidelity but 'mistrust' – that is anxiety. There's such a difference between the understandings of *fidelitas* and *fiducia*, and the understanding of faith as believing a set of statement to be true.

The way I feel, that is, my gut instinct after thinking through the way words and their meanings have changed over centuries, is that Jesus is saying to Thomas, as he said to Peter: "Peter, do you love me?" **do you give your heart to me? do you give your whole self, do you hold me most dear?**

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55) a great 19th. century theologian and philosopher said that faith is like floating in seventy thousand fathoms of water. Not because any ocean is that deep. What he means is that if we are fearful and struggling in a deep body of water we'll sink and drown. If we trust that the water can keep us up, we will float. Recall Peter sinking on the sea; and Jesus giving him his hand and asking gently, "give me your trust."

What about when we're experiencing severe doubt? Frederick Buechner says that honest doubt is helpful to us; "let your doubt be the ants in the pants of your faith." Or as another person says: Let your doubt be the wind at your back to propel you toward the holy mystery of God. Doubt can be a wake-up call to faith.. Doubt can be good news: a sign that we are moving from the stage of passively receiving our trust in God, to signaling the birth pangs of a mature faith.

On the other hand, sometimes our doubts are different: we don't worry about creeds or doctrine in the middle of the night. We have more significant personal questions that cannot be answered simply. Why did someone I love die? Why is there so much suffering in the world.

Exploring these words: doubt, faith, trust, believe – where does that take us? It takes us to the other

half of the greeting: **Peace be with you;** (repeated 3 times – maybe a theological underlining by John) **to the PROMISE of Jesus that we will have life in all its fullness. The promise of post-resurrection life.**

But how do we get there? We practice. Just like learning the piano, learning to walk – we practice – And we practice together. We help each other to practice trust. To practice love, To practice forgiveness. Sharing our doubts and fears with each other, Practicing love, is the work of a lifetime. It is both giving and receiving, action and reflection.

It means helping each other trust that even in this desperate, and crisis ridden world, there still can be harmony and good.

When we are seen to be a loving community, loving each other as Jesus loves us, we reveal God to the world, God's vision, God's shalom; thus making it possible for 'the world' to enter into relationship with the God of limitless love. Amen.