

Sermon – Easter Two (Year C)
Focus Readings: John’s Gospel – The Thomas Story
Acts 5

A few weeks ago I went to see the bittersweet film from playwright Alan Bennet called *‘The Lady in the Van’*. For those of you who haven’t seen it, it centres on the eccentric woman in the title, Mary (or Margaret) played by Dame Maggie Smith who takes up residence in her various mimosa painted vans in Alan’s driveway. A solution that is meant to be temporary lasts fifteen years.

The great mystery lies in her identity and what has transpired in her life to see her so reduced from the confident and gifted young woman who graces the screen for a few moments at the beginning of the story. The narrative unfolds gradually for us to see the accident that changed her life and also the greater story of personal tragedy that overthrew her mind and her soul. Her world rather than rippling outward like waves in a lake, slowly tumbles in upon itself, growing smaller and smaller until it finally compasses little more than the limits of her cluttered van.

I think we approach this Gospel today with the eyes of ones who know the ending and so we risk perhaps shutting our minds to the beginning. We can forget that the world for Jesus’ followers stood on the edge of a precipice in those early days after the dawn of the first Easter. Their world was threatening to collapse in upon itself, until it compassed the spaces of their hiding places.

I think we are pretty hard on Thomas. We demonise Judas Iscariot, we exonerate Peter, and we have labelled ‘Doubting Thomas’; three friends who so obviously acted upon their human frailties. Judas, crippled by guilt and shame, takes his life in the same day that Jesus loses his own. Peter, following Jesus at a distance, denies him three times and is restored in three statements by Jesus later on, but Thomas gets what appears to be the equivalent of a slap on the upside of his head for articulating a view that perhaps was shared by more than one of them.

Here’s a thing: the story of Thomas has a deeper purpose than to be a platform for Jesus to utter statements down the ages to all who have genuine doubts and crises of faith. It’s not a way of saying to people on the margins ‘get a grip you idiot. People of faith don’t ever experience doubt or loss or grief.’

The story of Thomas allows us not only to explore doubt (an essential part of faith); but it allows us to ask ourselves the question: What limits do we place on God, and thereby the way we live out our faith, our life?

‘The Lady in the Van’ it emerges, has been a gifted pianist; so gifted that she was been tutored by a master in France. She is also a person of deep religious conviction and during her time in a Convent, she is admonished for straying from her prayers to play the piano. She can’t help making music, it is within the very fibre of her being, the natural and graceful breath of a gifted soul and yet, the religious leaders tell her her musical ability is a block to her spiritual journey; her playing is a conceit and a

distraction from prayer. Guilt ridden, laden with anxiety and self-doubt, she is inwardly crippled by a faith whose Saviour came to liberate the weary.

How often do we do that? How often do we stray into the comfortable places of our familiar beliefs, and look with judgement or kindly tolerance, or sympathy, or with a shrug of our shoulders 'there but for the grace of God, go I!' How completely arrogant! How lacking in the gift, the compassion to truly listen, and to respond without correction or moralising. What do we know about the heart of another except this: that God loves and sees that heart more truly than we do.

Thomas has his doubts and Jesus walks into the closed room and opens Thomas's mind to a different way of looking at life. He overturns grief and shame and pain and all that constricts the world in a tight knot and as he does with Peter, he offers compassion. 'Put your hands here in my side; put your fingers in my hands... and do not doubt, but believe.' It is the ultimate moment of 'metanoia' – a word that we translate from the Greek as 'repent' which means literally 'change of mind'. That's what Jesus does for Thomas he changes his mind; he takes all he knows about faith and God and expands it outward in ever-increasing circles.

The Book of Acts has the same goal in mind; when Peter and Apostles are questioned by the Council, they make a truly astonishing claim (though generally we don't realise the magnitude of what they're doing). They say: "*We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.*" (Acts 5: 29-30)

Now, the Jewish Leaders would have been well-versed in the laws of the first five Books of the Bible. There is a small but toxic passage that makes provision for parents to request the public execution of this disobedient and unrepentant son (Deut 21: 18-21). Immediately following this passage, there's another interesting little law that reads thus: "*When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree,²³ his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse...*" (Deut 21: 22-23)

The Council says that the Apostles are trying to blame them for the death of Jesus and bring his blood on them; these passages may well have assisted them in getting off the hook. Jesus could have been viewed by them as a disobedient, unrepentant, blasphemous trouble-maker. Certainly his death outside the city on a tree may have been confirmation of his guilt in their minds. What the apostles then tell them is that the world has changed, that the rules attributed to Moses do not apply to Jesus. That God's authority, God's compassion has made a new way plain. "God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins." (Acts 5:31) And there's that little word again – *metanoia* - that he might change the mind of a nation. Change your mind. Take everything you think you know about God and Faith, and Life and throw it out, because God is doing something new in Jesus and it's about liberation from fear and restorative grace. Those very scars, that tree, signs of shame, pain and violence are the instruments

that bring healing and peace and forgiveness and make the whole world bright with love.

So look over that Gospel again in a quiet moment, that passage from Acts and let's ask ourselves this: what do we do, what do we say, that expresses a small, limited view of God? In what ways do we make faith a tool that whittles away at the hearts and minds of others who are in search of meaning and hope and identity? Do we truly welcome, do we truly seek to honour the encounters we have with those outside this Church (and those who stray inside it)? How does God's love within us make us alive with joy and delight? Do we even bother discerning that love at work in those we deem different?

When I watched 'The Lady in the Van' I wept over the hard-heartedness, the spiritual arrogance and blindness of those priests and nuns who broke that woman's spirit. It is the antithesis of the metanoia experience that Thomas discovers in the Gospel. His experience is one of liberation, and it causes him, this man wrestling with doubt and pain and fear to articulate the single most radical statement made by a follower of Jesus through the Gospels: he realises that what he is looking at. The person who is his friend is not just Kyrios (Lord) or Rabbi, and he utters what in that world would have been utter heresy: 'my Lord and my God.' In those five little words he expresses a complete transformation of heart and soul and mind and a truly unlimited, beautiful new vision of God and faith and life is conceived. A metanoia moment.

Is this same unshackled, wild and amazing vision of God one that touches and transforms us or are we operating with a much more limited edition?

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