

Meditation – ‘A week of Sundays’

Evening: the first day of the week. In John’s account of the first Easter, while there is recognition and amazement, it still takes time to unfold. The disciples are still afraid when evening comes, and suddenly, Jesus is in their midst.

This encounter redeems the day for them – but not for all of them – and not instantly. Jesus is raised ‘early in the morning...’ and still the day ends in fear and uncertainty; and I wonder about the in-between times...the time between dawn and dusk, when the empty tomb is still just a rumour; when Mary’s encounter in the garden is being debated by the rest.

The sudden and spectacular appearance of Jesus leads to another in-between time in John’s gospel. Because one of the disciples was missing. How long was it before they left that locked room in search of Thomas? What was that first conversation like? We are not told how long it takes, but they eventually get over their collective fear, and we are given a brief insight into the meeting with Thomas:

“The Lord is Risen!”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Thomas is not granted quick relief from his scepticism. In fact, it will be a week before Thomas has a chance to examine this resurrection claim.

Seven days of uncertainty. Seven days of trying to figure out how to ‘get on with life’ following the immense tragedy of Jesus trial and execution – not to mention the feelings of shame that the disciples must have harboured, given they had each fled the scene.

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And even for the disciples who heard Jesus’ words and received Jesus’ blessing in the evening on that first day of the week, there is no indication that they were able to embrace the notion that Jesus is raised.

Seven. Whole. Days.

What was that week like, I wonder? They were given time to absorb/process the appearance of Jesus – time to wonder what it meant to be the carriers of that gift of forgiveness; to be recipients of the Holy Spirit.

The world wasn’t changed by them or for them just yet – the gift needed time to anchor itself in them; the realization took time to dawn on them.

We have all heard stories of instant spiritual enlightenment. People whose lives have been transformed in an instant – in the twinkling of an eye. And when someone shares a story like that with me, my first reaction is jealousy. To have such a clear and gloriously life-changing moment in time seems to me a rare gift. To have an encounter that helps put all doubt to one side – to be granted clarity of purpose, and to have the wisdom to pursue that purpose must be wonderful. I’m jealous because it rarely happens in my life – and where my Spiritual journey is concerned, mine has been less ‘Emmaus-road’ revelation, and more of an ‘I-thought-you-packed-the-map’ family vacation. So, these uncertain moments in John’s gospel – these momentary glimpses of Jesus, granted only to a select few – the plain-spoken challenge of Thomas – all of these resonate with me.

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All these taken together suggest that instant enlightenment is not as common – even in Scripture – as we imagine.

Seven. Whole. Days.

We make a big deal of Thomas’ ‘doubting’, and his sudden, urgent proclamation, but we’d best not forget the seven days between those defining moments.

Thomas’ example also give rise to Jesus’ words of cautious encouragement:

“...Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

All of us who bring questions – each of us who long for concrete answers in an occasionally chaotic and confusing world – ought to be relieved by this gospel declaration, because it suggests that there is room for rumination; there is a place for those who wrestle with things; questions are allowed, and ‘doubt’ is not the enemy of faith. Thomas’ demand for proof was satisfied...eventually. After a week of wondering and waiting, Jesus’ appearance gave Thomas the last bit of evidence, but I ‘m convinced that the questions, the waiting, and the week of uncertainty were all necessary.

It seems to me that the questions – the wondering – the curiosity does not end with a bold declaration of faith. Thomas’s declaration was the end of one stage of his life and the beginning of another. Early Christian tradition speaks of Thomas travelling to India, where he was martyred – and is still much honoured. If you imagine that his life was free from doubt once he was able to ‘see and believe,’ then you underestimate the challenges of his missionary journeys – wherever they took him.

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No, the ability to entertain questions – the capacity for doubt in a life of faith – these things are essential. Challenges persist, and faith can adapt. Faith is what makes us flexible in the face of the impossible. Without the questions raised by faith, we remain behind the locked doors of our certainty. Thomas doesn't doubt so much as he tests. And we who believe without seeing are asked to test that great declaration of faith daily.

We say with authority on Easter Sunday “Jesus is risen – He is risen indeed!” and for many that is enough. But the work of the church all these years has been – not to offer proof, but to search for proof. Knowing the truth, we must also seek the truth. A glorious circle of activity that lets us tell the story as we experience the risen Christ in the story of others.

In John's gospel it took seven whole days. But the work continues through a lifetime of Sundays.

Christ is Risen – Let's go and see.