

Second Sunday of Easter

11.04.2021
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Introduction

“Mind the gap!” is a cry familiar to users of the London underground but one which is pertinent to our reading today. Is there a gap between the words of the text and what you thought they said? Is there a gap between doubt and faith or between knowledge and belief? And what took place in the gap between Thomas stating his disbelief and Jesus appearing to the disciples once more?

We join the disciples in the locked room, afraid for their lives and doubting whether Jesus really had been the Christ. He was dead and they had been left without their leader. The rug had been pulled out from under their feet. They were lost. They were grieving. They were confused. So it was with genuine, unabashed joy that they received Jesus when he appeared to them in the locked room. Christ has risen – hallelujah! When Thomas heard what had happened, he told them he wouldn't believe it until he saw Jesus for himself and more than that, until he put his hand in his wounds.

And then comes the gap...

We don't know how the disciples responded to Thomas and his remarks.

This reflection explores the gap and what the story of doubting Thomas may have to teach us today. As you read the text, be aware of what else you thought was contained in the story and how you would fill the gap.

Text

John 20:19–29

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘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.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Comment

Reading this text through the lens of conflict, I realised that the initial conflict I experienced was the difference between what the text actually says and what I assumed was contained in the text. 'Doubting Thomas' has been used over the years as a derogatory term and has its foundation in this passage. When others believed, he doubted. I assumed that he had been vilified by the other disciples and that that had filtered down through the centuries. However, this is where we should 'mind the gap.' The text makes no reference to how the other disciples responded to Thomas and simply moves on to tell of Jesus' second appearance to them. This reflection considers how that gap may have been filled and how that difference changes how we approach the whole text.

The reading begins with the disciples locked away in a room, hiding from the authorities because they feared they would meet the same fate as Jesus. Jesus was dead. As far as they were concerned, that was the end of the story. They still didn't understand what Jesus had explained to them many times – that he would die and rise again. Mary Magdalene had told them that she had met the risen Christ but it seems doubtful that her revelation had had any impact on them. The disciples were understandably both shocked and overjoyed when Jesus appeared amongst them in the locked room.

For some reason, Thomas had not been there. I wonder where he had been, while they were locked away in fear. Had he gone about his normal routine? If so, I wonder if that is because he had understood Jesus' teaching and was not experiencing the same fear as the other disciples. Nevertheless, when he arrives, the other disciples excitedly tell him what has happened. He doesn't believe them. I would argue that his doubt is in the truth of their words, not in Jesus and who he said he was. He doubted the other disciples' story in the same way that they had dismissed Mary Magdalene's account of meeting Jesus. And then comes...the gap...

What happened next? Did the disciples meet Thomas' desire to see the risen Christ for himself with anger and frustration? Did they ridicule and vilify Thomas for his doubt? Was he made a scapegoat to detract attention away from their disbelief? Perhaps their state of joy prevented them from remembering the doubt and fear they had experienced prior to seeing Jesus? I wonder if the other disciples, perhaps responding to their own fear and embarrassment, fashioned him as 'other': different to them, not as good as them. This type of behaviour can be seen in situations of conflict the world over – a diminishment of people according to race, religion, gender, sexuality or other factors. To these individuals are accorded

negative attributes in order to establish a hierarchy in which the first group is dominant. In the gap in this reading, I wonder if the other disciples vilified Thomas.

There is an alternative. The gap may instead have been a time of sharing and nurture. Did they listen to his concerns and explain to Thomas that they too had experienced doubt and fear? Did they sit alongside him and share their individual experiences of the previous days and their own reactions to the miraculous appearance of Christ with them? Did they talk about their faith? Were they sympathetic to his disappointment at missing this chance to see Jesus? I wonder if the gap was a positive time of support and growth for Thomas and the disciples together.

When Jesus appeared for the second time, he did not condemn Thomas for his doubt, but simply addressed the need he had voiced. Thomas wanted to see the wounds and to feel them and Jesus allowed him to do so. Jesus' comment, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," is likely then to have been addressed to all of the disciples, all of whom had doubted until they had seen for themselves.

I have always admired the character of Thomas, because he was open about his doubt. The name Thomas means 'twin,' as it makes clear in the text. I've always found this piece of information superfluous. As I studied the text this time, I began to wonder whether this name provides a lens through which to read the rest of the passage. Is it possible that 'twin' guides us to think about two components of an individual: the inner and outer voice or dialogue? All of the disciples experienced doubt but it is Thomas who unites both his inner and outer voice as he speaks his truth. It reminds me of a question we covered in our church Lent study, *Christ and the Chocolaterie*, in which the author Hilary Brand refers to the eleventh commandment, "Thou shalt not get caught." Was there an unspoken agreement between the other disciples that if they didn't mention their doubt, they could not be condemned for it? Or did they talk about it during the 'gap'? Thomas named it for what it was and in so doing, gave an honest and holistic response. He owned his doubt and in so doing, I perceive strength where others have perceived weakness.

This passage is often portrayed as an example of the contrast between faith and doubt: the other disciples had faith while Thomas expressed doubt. I have come to the conclusion that instead it is really an example of the contrast between knowledge and belief. The other disciples had seen Jesus for themselves – they did not have faith or belief that his resurrection was true, they knew it. Did they expect Thomas to believe them and misunderstood his doubt in them to be a denial of his faith in Christ? Or was it subsequent generations who read this into the text? When Jesus appeared to them again, he set the disciples including Thomas back to being equals: all had doubted, all had seen, all now knew. However, he doesn't leave it there. He also refers to the strength of belief of those who did not or would not see him in person. Here is the contrast between knowledge and belief.

What can we learn from this passage? To 'mind the gap.' I have been reminded of the necessity to ensure that I do not read something into the text. However, the gap here offers us an opportunity to think about how we might have responded to Thomas if we were in the shoes of one of the other disciples. Would we scoff at his need to see proof? Would we be hurt at the suggestion that we might not be telling the truth? Would we take time to listen to his concerns and the emotions that inspired them? Would we talk about our faith? Would we be willing to embrace the vulnerability of admitting our doubts? Would we feel able to speak our inner thoughts aloud?

Thinking about these questions and returning to reread the text, I find that my attitude to the disciples, including Thomas, has softened. Before, I saw bullies and their victim. I championed the underdog and felt sorry for Thomas and his legacy, 'doubting Thomas.' If I am honest, my heart hardened when it came to the other disciples. But here we have a bunch of human beings, grappling with their emotions

and their faith. They are just like us.

For me, 'minding the gap' is about having an awareness of what I might read into a text but it is also a reminder that a gap may be filled in different ways. The gap is an opportunity to be aware of our prejudices and to open our minds to other possibilities. The gap can be a place of vulnerability and questioning that leads to spiritual growth. How might you 'mind the gap' today?

Response

In a place where you feel comfortable, take time to acknowledge your doubts and fears about your faith. Name them.

Consider how you have responded or might respond to someone else articulating these doubts and fears to you. Think about how you respond to yourself.

Pray for the Spirit to gently hold your doubts and fears and to embrace you as you grapple with them.

Prayer

God of the inner dialogue,
God of the outer voice,
God of the whole,
we lay before you our doubts,
our knowledge,
our faith.
God of the in-between,
help us to be aware
of the times when
we fill in the gaps.
Help us to name our prejudices.
Open our minds.
Show us alternative ways.
Then make us channels
of your compassion,
acceptance
and love.
Amen.
