

Readings: Acts 2: 14a, 22-32; John 20:19-31

Lord, be with us in our doubt and give us the courage to stand up for our beliefs.
Amen.

Thomas, known as 'the twin', is one of my favourite people in the New Testament. This isn't just because he was a twin – after all I do have a soft spot for twins. It is because he is also known as 'doubting Thomas'.

Humans as a species are very good at doubt. This is partly because we just think too much.

I remember as an undergraduate spending a tutorial discussing Descartes' famous statement "I think therefore I am". What Descartes was saying was that the only thing we can really prove is our own existence. I may have imagined you, this church, even the entire universe, but I can be certain that I exist - otherwise I couldn't be thinking all this!

What this means is that we can prove almost nothing, instead what we can do as rational beings is review the evidence and come up with a stance on whether something is likely to be true or not.

On that basis I do not believe in ghosts, werewolves or, unfortunately, fairies. I also have severe doubts about the existence of Australia, never having been there.

In today's reading Thomas doubts that Jesus has risen from the dead. How easy it is to be judgemental about Thomas. Come on, we might say, you knew Jesus really well. You spent three years with him – learning and listening. You saw him heal. You saw him raise people from the dead. He told you what would happen. How could you possibly have any doubts, Thomas?

Yet, of course, Thomas had also seen Jesus arrested, then crucified. He heard him gasp his last words. He had watched as the soldiers checked Jesus was dead by pushing a spear into his side. He had seen his lifeless body put into a tomb. The evidence suggested Jesus was definitely dead.

Poor Thomas must have had many doubts. He must have doubted his friends. They'd always seemed quite rational before, yet here they were claiming that they had seen Jesus alive. Where they mad? Deluded? Mistaken? Their claim to have seen Jesus must have seemed as unlikely as one of us claiming we have spotted Elvis Presley shopping in Waitrose.

And, Thomas must have also doubted his own judgement. He had followed Jesus for all that time, believing that he was something really special. Now Jesus had been put to death like a common criminal.

Thomas must have wondered whether he had been wasting his time, possibly risking his own life, for nothing.

Worse still, this self-doubt in his own judgement, must have made Thomas doubt Jesus. What if Jesus had fooled them all? What if the signs and miracles were just smoke and mirrors? What if the whole thing was an elaborate illusion?

And then Thomas must have doubted God. Whoever Jesus was, Thomas had loved him. He had seen him suffer and die. How could God have let this happen? Thomas must have questioned where God was in this – was he absent, was it beyond his control? Questions we continue to ask whenever a tragedy happens.

When you consider all the evidence, you can see why Thomas doubted. I think you and I would have doubted too. Thomas' doubts were so deep, that he needed proof that Jesus was alive.

And Jesus gave it to him.

Thomas saw Jesus and spoke to him. He touched the wounds of the nails and spear. Now at last Thomas could believe – My God and my King he says, recognising Jesus for who he truly is.

Jesus shows no sign of holding Thomas's lack of faith against him. Thomas needs proof and what Thomas needs, Jesus gives. Thomas goes on, like his fellow disciples to devote his life to spreading the Gospel and dies for his faith.

I reckon Thomas would have been really good at addressing people's unbelief as he preached the Gospel, for he knew first-hand just how that felt. It goes to show that God can use the most imperfect of us in his service – including those of us who doubt.

Many believe that faith involves showing no sign of uncertainty, but I would say that not only is it acceptable for us to have doubts- it's inevitable. There's no proof of what we believe, we have to accept that the absence of certainty is the normal state of affairs. God designed us with questioning, thinking, doubting minds of our own, and our faith would be worth a good deal less if we did not acknowledge our doubts and our struggles to overcome them.

I suspect that's a common misconception about Christians, that we are unquestioning, with our belief giving no room for doubt or even debate. And unfortunately, there are people of all faiths and none who are indeed dogmatic to the point of scariness.

Yet while to doubt can be healthy, it can also have its dangers. It can lead to inaction, to a lack of ability to do anything to address that doubt.

We have all seen people drift away from church and from their faith, when their doubts have become so overwhelming that they cannot believe any more.

For many more their doubts lead them never to start to explore faith or to try to engage with the church at all. They presume that we have no doubts and so theirs would not be welcome.

You and I share something very special - our belief in God and in the reality of the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We do this not because we have been brainwashed or are too dim to think through the alternatives, but because most of us have to work constantly to overcome our doubts. Our task is to take our faith and our doubts outside this building. To let others know that a very little faith will suffice – because we all know what God can achieve with a seed of faith.

Amen