

UNLESS I SEE THE MARKS
Sunday 3rd April 2016
Easter II
St Michael, Cornhill
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Not being in of an evening regularly, my television viewing is pretty sporadic. I have, however, seen a number of the Grantchester series – based on the short stories of the clergyman cum detective created by James Runcie, whose father was Archbishop of Canterbury. They've received rather underwhelming reviews but the filming and locations are splendid and there is a curiosity about the stories. The thing I can't quite get my head around is the amount of time Sidney Chambers, a parish priest, spends on detective work with his friend Geordie – played by Northumbrian actor, Robson Green.

Today's gospel, however gave me a clue. For it raises an interesting tension, irony, contrast or whatever. Thomas presents as the classical sceptic. 'I'm not believing that until I have plain proof', is effectively what he says. Then some time later, Thomas has the chance to test this out. Jesus says, 'Put your fingers into my side.' We're not told whether he did so. Perhaps the visual evidence was enough – perhaps even Jesus' presence does it. Whatever the case, with great immediacy, Thomas exclaims: 'My Lord and My God.' He becomes one of Jesus' most devoted disciples.

John's Gospel carries with it this feeling of contrast virtually all the way through. The faith or mystery side is there in the great 'signs' Jesus performs, beginning with the water into wine at Cana in Galilee. The feeding of the 5,000 and classically the raising of Lazarus indicate a similar mystery. That mystery element is there in the extraordinarily powerful tones of the prologue: 'In the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and the word was God' . . . and so on. Mystery sets the atmosphere for Jesus meeting with Nicodemus – it is by night; it is secret.

Yet elsewhere there is utter clarity – the very essence of the everyday. After the resurrection, Jesus eats a hearty fish breakfast – he is no phantom who's returned to haunt the world. In the trial, Jesus is direct – so direct about the *truth* that he elicits from Pilate the immortal words: 'What is *truth*?' In a way this encounter of Thomas with Jesus brings together mystery or faith *and* certainty and evidence. So, there is something of the detective about Thomas and presumably about John, who wrote the gospel. Maybe Sidney Chambers' obsession with crime and its solution is now more credible. After all, enough clergymen and clergywomen enjoy thrillers and crime novels.

At the heart of all this lies a key issue for all believers, indeed for all humanity. For faith and knowledge are not the same thing, although they are inextricably entangled. Let me expand on this a little more. Take the issue of facts. When I was a youngster my father instilled into me countless geographical 'facts'. On a Saturday morning early he tested me on the states of the U.S.A., or of Canada or Australia. So, even before I was ten years old I knew that Canberra, for example, was the capital of Australia.

But facts like this I knew by faith or trust. I believed what my father had told me. Furthermore he too believed what others had passed on to him. He'd never visited Australia. He'd not seen the Parliament buildings or whatever else it is that goes to make a city a capital city. *Now I have* been to Canberra and seen the outward and visible signs of the instruments of government there. Evidence and experience have come together.

This stands at the heart of the New Testament witness to Jesus' resurrection. Nowhere, not in any of the gospels, is the resurrection itself described. In one apocryphal gospel, however, that is one which was never accepted into the Bible, the canon of scripture, does attempt to describe it. It's mawkish stuff and 'unbelievable'.

Yet in the New Testament there is plenty of evidence and experience of the resurrection. At the heart there is the 'empty tomb', but also there are resurrection appearances – the road to Emmaus. There are experiences with crowds of people and with individuals catalogued by St. Paul. The evidence and experience is manifold and varied. But perhaps at the heart is the impact on people changing their lives then and ever since. That is the 'evidence', if you like, for resurrection.

Thomas is a test case almost. Ultimately it was not a matter of digging his fingers into a recent wound that transformed his life. It was an encounter with God in Jesus. That is what we rehearse weekly, as we celebrate the mystery of our faith – Jesus' passion, death and resurrection in this amazing sacrament of the eucharist. How then does our commitment to the gospel and Jesus' resurrection change our lives? Do I, and does this community, present in such a way that we challenge the values of our consumerist and often trivial society? For Thomas, his life changed powerfully, he became a witness to others. That is the imperative for us: are we doing our job as a Christian community or indeed as individual believers? Maybe we need to follow up that question as the year unfolds. Amen.

Readings

Acts. 5. 27-32.

Revelation. 1. 4-8.

John. 20. 19-31.