

Dear friends

It seems to me that what Thomas is doing when he refuses to believe the testimony of Jesus' resurrection is not so much that he is doubting, but that he is objecting – objecting to having to see Jesus' suffering and death on the cross as anything other than *the end*.

“You tell me”, he says to his fellow disciples, “that you have seen the Lord. And I tell you that I have seen him suffer and die; I have seen his end, the end of all that he was doing and was capable of doing. Do you not understand that nothing is left of what we had, of what we hoped for and hoped that God would do through him? By your talk of resurrection you're asking me to accept that the end wasn't really that! I refuse. I refuse in the name of all the good he has done in his life, of all that God has done through him, and which now has ended. Your talk of resurrection undermines the only thing that can matter now - his legacy and what we must do with it. Therefore I will not believe, and would only if I knew for sure that the one you claim has risen from the dead is the same as the one they pierced with nails and a spear as they put him to death on the cross!”

When Jesus overcomes this objection, he does it in just this way, demonstrating to Thomas that there *is* more than a legacy, that he is indeed the one that was crucified.

At this Thomas says to Jesus, “*My Lord and my God!*”, because he realises in this moment what he couldn't before (sees what he couldn't see before): That Jesus' death was an act of the living God and the act of His love, not, as he thought, evil's triumph over him; that the cross was not a sign of weakness and impotence as it appeared to human eyes and mind, but that it is “*the power and wisdom of God*”; that it did not put an end to Jesus' career of doing good and making known God's will, but that it was the culmination (!) of it; he realises that all he had seen Jesus do and heard him say did not point *away* from the cross as the end of it, but *to* the cross as its true fulfilment, to the cross as his proper work and the reason for his coming; he realises that Jesus' death, in weakness and defeat, was in fact achieving God's victory!

Now, that this realisation was not meant for Thomas only as a private insight, but was meant for all the disciples, is made clear by the fact that Jesus at his appearance “*showed them his hands and his side*”. Which he did, so that they should realise, and we too.

So let us ask, dear friends: Why does he want his disciples to realise this? Why does he remind them of his cross just as he is convincing them of his resurrection? The answer is: because it is key to understanding what he, as the risen One, says to his disciples regarding what comes next. And given that the church has a particular purpose – and it is good to wonder what that is – these words are of vital importance, for the church then as well as now. He says: “***Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.***”

What does he mean? Perhaps it is useful to say what he does not mean. Jesus is not saying: “I have done my bit, now it is over to you; go and figure out, with help from the Holy Spirit, how I might be sending you.” Were we to think so, Jesus would say to us what he says to Thomas: “*Do not disbelieve, but believe.*”

What he says to his disciples is that the Father's sending of His Son, Christ Jesus, shall now proceed through them – this is the next step: the disciples are to participate in Jesus' own sending, and so to ‘bring it home’.

You see, because Jesus has risen from the dead and lives, the disciples are not now facing the problem of how to carry on the vision and legacy of Jesus. No, they are being commandeered and equipped to carry out his sending – that through them he himself will carry on what his Father has

sent him to do.

And as the cross is central to his sending by the Father, so the cross is central to his sending of the disciples! Through them what Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross and by his death, is to be offered and announced to all who believe as the way and means to life in his name according to God's will.

Paul understood this sending as well as any of the other apostles when he said, 1Cor.2,2: *"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."* Or to the Galatians, Gal.3,1: *"It was before our eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified."* Or again when he says, 1Cor.1,18: *"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."*

Jesus' words by which he puts to the disciples what they are sent to do are clear and concise, and they are given in a way that will make what they do an act of God like the cross was an act of God: *"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."*

It is by the forgiveness of sins, to be proclaimed by the disciples and to be proclaimed by the church, that God saves from death, sets life right with Himself, making it fit for purpose, fit for glorifying Him and enjoying Him forever.

Dear friends, the apostles certainly went on to do what they were sent to do, and it brought into being the church. And the church it brought into being was not just any church, it was one that *sought to obey God* because it saw in such obedience the fruit of faith: freedom from sin as the effect of the word of the cross.

Today, in marked difference, there are not a few churches and believers who think little and superficially of sin, whose notion of sin is such that the forgiveness of it is hardly the big deal it seems to be in the mind of Christ and on the cross, who don't think that the unforgiven sin is, or should be considered to be, any serious problem, and who believe that sin is not something God really minds nor the world needs forgiven because it is under it. There is consequently little heat in the zeal to obey God (from the heart!) and little appetite for becoming aware of what sin is and what constitutes sin and how one is guilty before God, so that one might receive forgiveness.

But here the cross of Christ has become insignificant and the sending of the church is not what mainly it ought to be.

But the disciples were sent to forgive sins in the power of the Holy Spirit, thus applying the power and wisdom of God (!), because of the significance of Christ's cross, which lay in the fact that he bore the punishment for our sin and overcame the penalty for sin that is death for our justification through his resurrection from the dead.

Dear friends, Jesus said on the cross: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing!"* Surely this prayer, offered with his own life, was heard. And forgiveness in his name since then and now is offered to all who believe, so that instead of not knowing what we are doing, in that we sin while thinking that we're not, we may knowingly and with repentance turn to Christ and in him find grace and life, a living Saviour.

AMEN