

We're going to look at scripture together, and we are looking at John 20:24-31.

[Reading John 20:24-31] Amen.

I love those little asides you get in John: he's sort of giving you his instructions as to what this book's about – it's sort of his side comments that are coming through.

**Into closed minds:** this is the last our Easter Series, and, as Crispin picked up earlier, last week we were thinking about “Behind closed doors” - Jesus' ability to appear in places, and once again in this passage we have Jesus appearing in a room that was locked. There's no explanation as to how that happened, but we believe that in his resurrected body Jesus was able to do things that he didn't do prior to his death, but his body was changed. And now we look at this idea of “Into closed minds”.

Oliver Cromwell, who was of course The Lord Protector during that 10-year period when the monarchy was abolished. Charles I's head was chopped off and then 10 years later we thought, actually, we might like a monarchy back again, so we he put his son Charles II on the throne. But it did mark the beginning of a Constitutional Monarchy, whereby the monarchy was restricted in what it could do. But Oliver Cromwell said these words (you may have heard phrase “warts and all”, and actually what Oliver Cromwell said) to the artist who was about to paint his portrait. Back in those days portrait painters would tend to make you look a bit better than perhaps you were, make you look more handsome or more beautiful than you were, to try and make sure the reputation went out: if you want to look really good then this is the person to go for, for your portrait – a bit like, what do they call him now, when you can get photographs sort of like air brushed and you can look so much better, and you think that person looks so good they don't look like they look like in reality. But Oliver Cromwell said to his portrait painter: “I desire that you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, but remark (in other words note) all these roughnesses, pimples, warts and everything as you see me.”

I think it's fair to say that the gospel writers give us a “warts and all” account of how Jesus' disciples responded to his suffering (his death), and even his resurrection. If someone was going to fabricate, or make up, an account of how Jesus' closest followers responded to the rumours that Jesus had come back from the dead, surely they would have done a better job: they would have painted them in a better light than we have in the gospel accounts. This it true of no one more than of Thomas. Surely we would have portrayed these followers as trusting him through the difficult times, and then their faith is rewarded. But the reality is: when the soldiers came to the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus, we're told that the disciples ran off into the darkness and left him. Even Peter, who said “I will never leave you. Even if all these others should leave you, I won't do that. I'll be there with you.” And he had much time to reflect on his response, Peter and the other disciples.

So we have in this passage, presented for us, this idea of the battle with unbelief. The battle with unbelief. I think we're often very hard on Thomas – I mean, you know, he gets called “Doubting Thomas”. But would we have acted, or reacted, so very differently? You know, if we hadn't been there when he'd appeared to all of our friends, would we have been so different in our response to Thomas? All of his friends – as we can see in that picture – all of his friends as saying “He's alive, he's come back! We've seen him.” The fact is that Thomas, in his response, illustrates for us

that doubt and unbelief is part of the human condition.

You've got the difference between iron and steel: iron is very hard but it can be brittle, and so if you drop iron on the ground, or you drop it on something also hard, it can tend to splinter and smash; steel is so much more useful because it has give in it, it can cope with being dropped and it won't smash, and that's where it's strength comes from: that, actually, it has give within it. My experience of the spiritual life is that your faith can be like iron, or it can be like steel. I know of people whose faith has seemed so rock solid, and yet the troubles of life, when they come, can cause their faith to smash. Faith needs to have give to be able to cope with the changes in life, to be able to respond "Ok, Lord, this isn't what I expected from my life, this isn't what I wanted for me, but my faith has not disappeared, or smashed, because my experiences have not been what I expected."

Developing give, developing an understanding that my circumstances may not be what I want, but has God changed? No he hasn't. God is still there. He's the God of the universe. And to develop that flexibility in our faith, to respond to the troubles that come.

Doubt and unbelief is part of the human condition, and so it's nothing new. Even the people who wrote the scriptures down for us recorded many examples of their own doubts. The psalmists: sometimes people tell me "I feel guilty because I am so lacking in faith". Sometimes they say "The troubles in my life: I'm always saying to God: 'Why is this happening to me?'" and I so often say "Go to the Palms. Every experience, every human experience under the sun, you'll find there somewhere."

And it's not saying that everything that is said in the Psalms is right or righteous. There's an awful psalm where the psalmist says "I hate my enemy so much, I wish I could take their children and smash their heads against a rock." Now that's anger. It's not justified. What the Lord is saying, what God is saying, to us is "You have these emotions: don't deny it, don't pretend they're not there. You have to deal with it." How do we feel? We feel angry, we feel hard done to. It's not wrong to feel like that - it is what we do with it.

So these famous word that Jesus himself spoke out on the cross: "My God, my God: why have you forsaken me?" Why are you so far from saving me? So far from my cries of anguish. My God, I cry out to you by day but you do not answer; by night but I find no rest. Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One. You are the one Israel praises.

It's what we do with our negative feelings that matters, not the fact that we have them. Ecclesiastes: "It's useless. It's useless" says the philosopher. Life is useless, all useless: you spend your life working, labouring, and what do you have to show for it? Generations come, and generations go, but the world stays just the same. How contemporary is that to the reality of our situation today in this world? Those feelings of doubt, is God there, does he hear the prayers and cries that we've uttered this morning in this service? It's not wrong to ask those questions.

Perhaps you, like me, have sometimes wished that you could have met the resurrected Jesus. What it must have been like to be in one of those locked rooms when Jesus just appears! But it's interesting: in Matthew 28:17 we're told that when they saw him - the risen Jesus - they worshipped him some, but some doubted. Seeing Jesus himself wouldn't necessarily be enough. And as Jesus said: "You believe Thomas because you saw. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet still choose to believe." And the lovely thing is those words roll down the centuries and they wash over us: blessed are we - we choose to believe even though we have seen physically.

I don't believe that the opposite of faith is doubt. I think doubt is part of faith. Like I've said: faith without doubt is like the iron that can so easily smash, faith with doubt is like the steel that can have give where we can have an interaction with God on how our lives are. The opposite, I think, of faith is disbelief – not unbelief – is disbelief. The wilful choice not to even allow for the possibility that something could be true. And sometimes disbelief is expressed as apathy, as though, you know, 'oh don't give me all that I'm not interested'. For me apathy is just disbelief in another set of clothes. Choosing to say no I don't give any space to all of that religion rubbish, all that faith stuff; I'm not interested. It's a choice we make.

To come back to the scripture passage that we're looking at this morning. One of the things about Thomas is that he wasn't there. Verse 24 says "Now Thomas was one of the 12. He was not there with the disciples when Jesus came." One of the things that can feed our doubts is choosing to cut ourselves off from our fellow believers. That can feed into doubts and it can cause them to grow, and we can start to develop a narrative whereby "Huh, all of those others might be fine, they've got no problems in their lives like I have." But the reality is: if we stay in fellowship we discover all of us have issues, all of us have stuff that challenges us so much in our lives.

We aren't told where Thomas was. But perhaps he felt put out because he hadn't had this special experience that the other disciples had had. The lovely thing is, in the scripture there is Grace for those who doubt. This little book of Jude, it's the one of the shortest (in fact I think it is the shortest book in the Bible): it's a letter, but it's the sort of letter (well we don't really send letters anyway, but it's probably a long email to put it into today's context) and verses 22 and 24 (and it's not got a chapter because there is only the one chapter) says: "Be merciful to those who doubt. Save others by snatching them from the fire. To others show mercy mixed with fear..." (fear is awe of God) "...hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh. To him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy."

Even those who doubt, because of the offering of Jesus, can be presented without fault before the father. Doubt can rob us of the gifts of joy and peace that God wants to give us. But these verses remind us of how merciful God is to us when we doubt. These verses also tell us that even Christians who doubt are counted by God as faultless because of what Christ has done to gain our healing and our forgiveness. He's able to uphold us even when we stumble, as we all do.

So we have the danger of isolation. But we also have the breakthrough of faith pointed out for us in this passage. And in the original Greek we have the idea is: stop being unbelieving, stop being in that place of unbelieving, stop being that state of unbelieving and show yourself to be a believer! That's the sense of those verses, that verse. Stop being choosing to be unbelieving – show yourself to be a believer.

I think there's an element of humour in the way that Jesus, you know, he appears in the room and the first thing he does is: "Thomas, Thomas! I think you had something to say last week. Where are you?" You can imagine Thomas is tucked away at the back of the room, trying to hide behind one of the other disciples: "What me?" Because of week later is when Jesus appears, says "Thomas, come and put your hand in my wounds. Put your hand in my side. This is what you said you needed to do to believe. Come Thomas, and believe."

Although we nickname this man "Doubting Thomas", actually he makes a statement of faith about Jesus that the gospel writer John makes the pinnacle – he makes it the high point – of his whole book when Thomas says "My Lord and my God." The high point; not just my Lord, the one whom I

choose to allowed to be the one who directs me, but my God, the divine one who is over me and over all things.

I want to finish with a story about...well told by a catholic writer, Morris Nissan. And he wrote about a friend of his who loved holidays in Cornwall.

One afternoon this friend decided to go out for a long walk, but unfortunately didn't know Cornwall as well as he thought he did and he got lost. The afternoon drew on and it started to get towards evening, and the light was starting to go. And he started to get a bit worried because he knew well enough about Cornwall is that you have disused tin mines all over the place. And he thought to himself "Lots of the mineshaft haven't been filled in, and the light's starting to go, and I'm getting worried."

But it was too cold for this guy to sit down and try and, you know, survive until the morning; so he thought "well I've got to keep going". So he did. Inevitably, as he was walking he missed his footing and he slipped and he found that he was starting to slither down a bank. And it was loose stones and he couldn't stop himself. And as he began to slither down he thought "I'm going to end up going down this mineshaft". As he slid he managed to find a large rock that was actually stuck into the ground. He grabbed hold of that rock sticking up. He was able to hang on to it for about 20 minutes.

But the agony in his arms was getting worse and worse. He knew that he wouldn't be able to hang on for much longer. And, of course, then he would just start to slither again, further and further down. Potentially to his death. He was about to let go because he couldn't hold on any more when to his intense relief he saw a tiny light in the distance, which grew larger and larger. And he knew that people were searching for him. He shouted out with all of his remaining energy "Come and help me!" And the light started to move in his direction.

When the rescuers arrived they shone their light down on him, and saw that his feet were indeed dangling right over the mineshaft. But the shaft was only a foot deep; this mineshaft have been filled in!

You see, faith is to believe that, however deep the mineshaft is, whether it's filled in actually your feet are dangling over a foot deep, or whether that mineshaft is hundreds of feet deep, God is still with us. He doesn't change just because the depth of the mineshaft changes – he is the same God.

As Thomas says: "He is our Lord and our God."