

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

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## Believing Thomas

On this Second Sunday of Easter we read the climactic conclusion of the Fourth Gospel, the end towards which the whole book journeys. It's strange that the star role should be entrusted to the previously somewhat secluded Thomas, rather than to (say) the Beloved Disciple, who is the hero of this Gospel, or Peter, the acknowledged head of the apostolic college. Thomas, called the Twin (whose? We don't know) has appeared before in the Gospel: he first appears when Jesus announces his going to Judaea, to the dead Lazarus, saying to the other disciples, *Let us go too, and die with him*. So already Thomas seems to have a spontaneous readiness to follow Jesus which marks him out from the others, a certain passionate discipleship that is ready to see meaning in Jesus' death even before it comes: the others, by contrast, do not understand, but say to Jesus: *Rabbi, it's not long since they wanted to stone you; are you going back again?*

### Let Me Come To You

He is less certain at his next intervention, at the Last Supper. Jesus has begun to teach them that his departure must be a lonely one, that they cannot come with him yet. So Thomas says, *Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?* This separation from Jesus is something he can't fathom; perhaps his closeness to Jesus is all-important to him, and now it is to be taken from him. This elicits from Jesus the sublime words, *I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*; Thomas is simply asked to trust Jesus, not to demand knowledge, much less certainty, beyond that trust. Peter and the others will all have the same demand made on them, as Jesus refuses their help and goes alone. The Fourth Gospel will promise Peter his share in the Cross at last, but for now he will face the same dismissal from the Passion as his colleagues.

### Thomas Was Not With Them

If Jesus was alone in his Passion, so the man called "the Twin" is now alone in his mourning: the only one who was away when the world suddenly exploded for his fellows into the Paschal world of Resurrection realities. No wonder, on his return, he finds them all on a different planet, perhaps even disgusting him by their assault on his feelings. A failed disciple, Thomas is still reeling from the knowledge of the Cross - not a dramatic climax of divine drama, or the shared martyrdom he seems to have expected, but a routine Roman

obliteration of the one he had called *Lord* at the Supper. It is intolerable to him.

### Intolerable Language

It was in the context of feeding that the Fourth Gospel used the term *intolerable language*; the offending phrase was Jesus' *I am the bread that is come down from heaven*: it is intolerable because it claims heavenly authority for a human being. Thomas is confronted with something similar, when he is told: *We have seen the Lord!* They are offering to wrench him from the mourning state of shock which had driven him out alone, a gibbering group of his former comrades which seems to deny the reality that is crushing him. So he deliberately evokes the wreckage of the crucifixion. Reminding them brutally of nails and spear-thrust, he tries to silence the Easter Gospel - which has so sharply cut across his lonely struggle.

### Getting Christian

It is only when the Cross has been planted in us that the *shock* of the faith can be administered; and it has to be all intolerable at first, if it is truly the Cross. I remember the hard shocks of my encounters with death, the bitter cup of mourning and loss. I expect death to do that to me. But the Gospel that is unveiled through it also seems intolerable. Does our following of Jesus demand the intolerable? Must I, also, find the Easter reality in this intolerable way? *I am the Way*, says the Lord. *Leave your way, put down your weapons, you have not chosen me, I have chosen you*. He is asking a surrender of us. We properly surrender our lonely independence to only one authority: the face of the Risen Lord, transfigured from his encounter with death, is strange and barely recognisable to his disciples. The disciple most devastated is the one who finally speaks the Gospel: so-called "doubting" Thomas is the only man in the Bible privileged to put it into plain words: *My Lord* - he has said that before - *and my God*.  
*Fr Philip*