

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

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 is 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 as Jesus announces his going 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 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 is 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 lone one, that they cannot come with him yet. 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; 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 or 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

The Twin was alone, 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 "off the planet", even perhaps disgusting in their assault on Thomas' feelings. A failed disciple, he 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.

Intolerable Language

It was in the context of feeding that this Gospel used the term *intolerable language*; the offensive phrase was Jesus' *I am the bread that is come down from heaven*, and 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!* He is being wrenched from the mourning state of shock which had driven him out alone, into this gibbering group which seems to have lost touch with the reality he must cope with. So he deliberately evokes the wrecked flesh of the crucifixion-scene, brutally reminds them of nails and spear-thrust, and tries to silence the Easter Gospel - which has so sharply broken into his reflections.

Getting Christian

It is only when the Cross has been planted in the world that the *shock* of the faith can be administered; and we can surely say that the same shock comes to all of us, as the Cross takes its personal form for us. It has to be intolerable at first, if it is truly the Cross. But the Gospel that is unveiled through it is also intolerable. Will you ask me to follow you in this intolerable way, Lord? Must I 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.* The authority of that call is only to be ascribed to One: and Thomas is the only man in the Bible to say it: My Lord - he has said that before - *and my God.*
Fr Philip