Sermon 4.7.21 St Thomas the Apostle (tr) SL

It’s a humbling and refreshing sensation to stand on the top of St Thomas’ Mount, on the edge of Chennai, Madras, in South India as aircraft land at the airport nearby and view a totally different perspective on the spread of Christianity. We are so eurocentric in our vision of the spread- and nature- of our faith that we overlook, at our peril, the world church, of which we are now, but a very small- and dwindling- part. St Thomas’ Mount, a substantial hill, is regarded as the place where Thomas the Apostle was martyred on 3rd July AD72. Indian Christians, ascribe the roots of their faith to the arrival of Thomas the Apostle on the Malabar Coast, now Kerala, in about 52 AD. Ancient manuscripts point certainly to the presence of Thomas- or one calling himself by this name- and the earliest historians of the church, by the 4thC, talk of Thomas being active in India and being martyred there.

Thomas- whose Feast Day we celebrate today, was martyred 200 years before Alban, Britain’s first martyr, 500 years before Augustine’s mission to Kent and the founding of Canterbury. And of course, look at the trading patterns of the ancient middle east, of Christ’s time, people were more likely to follow the well-worn paths east than to the frozen wastes of the outer Roman empire in the north west of Europe.

So it’s not surprising that the Christians of South India, including the Mar Thoma Church (the St Thomas Church) and the Church of South India, with both of whom we as the CofE are in full communion, regard themselves as ancient inheritors of the Good News, and us as somewhat late to the party. And it was a great joy to see inheritors of that early Christian tradition at Fr Samuel’s priesting recently as a member of that community was ordained to serve in our diocese.

We’ve come to see- I hope that Thomas’s nickname, Doubting Thomas, is just plain wrong. Thomas- in three of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, never speaks- we only hear his name as one of our Lord’s close followers. But in John’s gospel, we hear his voice- a voice of one committed entirely to this friend Jesus of Nazareth. We hear him 3 times. In John 11, after the raising of Lazarus, he commits himself to go on with Jesus, whatever happens ’even to die with him’. In John 14 he asks how can the disciples know the way to go, and Jesus says,’ I am the Way, the Truth , the Life’. And then, perhaps, most famously, in John Ch 20, in the Upper Room, Thomas says unless he sees the marks of torture on Christ’s body, placing his finger, his hand on Christ, he can’t believe he’s present still. And yet, when the disciples next feel Jesus to be present among them, Thomas affirms- yes, this is true, death has not destroyed him, his presence goes beyond human limitation and sight. I am convinced.

This conviction, certainly seems every bit as powerful and revolutionary to Thomas’ life as Paul’s blinding light on the Damascus Road. So we should hardly be surprised that this experience fired Thomas to engage in telling others about his experience. The fact that Thomas turned East out of Jerusalem, rather than west doesn’t make his commitment, experience or ministry any less, just because we don’t have as many documentary sources as we have for Paul. Indeed, it looks like Thomas and Paul shared the same tactics- they sought out initially pockets of the scattered jewish community and taught among them, baptising whole households and establishing what today we might call house-churches amongst suspicion and competing faith traditions.

So what’s new? How are we, individually and as a christian community, living out that same commission and conviction to show the Good News, to minister the sacraments of God, to act with Christ’s compassion amongst those with whom we have to do? Yet, also- whether consciously or sub-consciously making, or living out, rather Thomas like bargaining strategies with God.

Sometimes they are banal- If I get to pass that exam I’ll go to church every Sunday for the next month. Sometimes they are more subtle negotiations, when my health is restored I’ll volunteer at the food bank, when I feel my prayer is answered I’ll think again about what I believe.

But, if anything, Thomas’s engagement with his friend Jesus blows all this out of the water. It says we can’t control or explain God, we can’t organise our relationship with God to fit into our timetable or financial spreadsheet or career plan. Thomas’ experience teaches us that we are not in control with God, but are drawn, challenged, fired to act, to speak, to move.

Is that what we are prepared to commit ourselves to?

It’s humbling to stand at St Paul’s West Hounslow, as aircraft pass so close overhead, landing at Heathrow, to think that perhaps we have come full circle. For St Paul’s, West Hounslow hosts a vibrant Mar Thoma, St Thomas Community, from South India. Their conviction, their tradition has travelled with that community in migration to Britain, to West London, just as it did with Thomas from Jerusalem to the Malabar Coast of India, just as it did with Augustine coming to Canterbury and the Celtic saints to Iona and Lindisfarne. The world church is present in the world’s people, God’s children, in God’s creation, in our midst. Are we prepared to allow God to break in to our living, overturning our bargaining positions, to carry the Good News of Jesus Christ on our journeying? Like St Thomas, that’s for each of us to answer.

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