

Sermon for 11th April 2010
Being Real
Easter 2 (John 20:19-31)

Do you know what it's like when someone asks you a big question? It happened to me a few months ago, here in church, last Christmas, there had been a lot going on, it was just before the start of a service, I was just 'collecting myself' preparing for the worship ahead, and the person sat next to me, quite unexpectedly, asked a significant question: 'Do you ever have doubts?'

Immediately a lot of things ran through my mind. Because if you mean do I doubt the existence of God, that God love us, do I doubt that Jesus is alive and with us right now, do I doubt that the power which sustains us comes from God's Spirit, then actually no, I don't doubt that - in that sense I am blessed with a certain confidence.

But if you mean do I doubt the way I live out my faith then yes, I do have doubts. In the bible, Jesus reserves his harshest criticism for the religious community who were supremely confident in their religious observance. Yet it was the most lowly cast-offs from society whom Jesus commended for their faith. God commands us to put 'all our eggs in one basket' (if I can extend an Easter metaphor): I recall the first commandment 'I am the Lord your God ... you shall have no other gods but me' (Deut 5:6-7); and the Great Command 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Deut 6:5). And I know I don't. I know I have one chance at this life, to learn the lessons and follow God as Jesus showed me. And that after his conversion, St Paul said everything I once counted as gain I now consider a loss. I fear arriving in front of God at the end of my life and God saying 'You never knew me, I never knew you, sorry Kevin, you got it all wrong'. So do I have doubts about whether I'm living out my faith as God commands me to? Yes, I have.

But all this flashes through my head in a few moments, and the service is about to begin. Whatever I say has to be brief and straightforward. So what did the Lay Minister say in response to the question 'Do I ever have doubts':

"No, not really".

A pretty useless answer, I think you'll agree. I fell into two traps:

- Saying what I think I *should* say, rather than what I *really* think/feel.
- Trying to be too brief. Some questions are too important to be dealt with in three words.

So you'll have gathered by now this is the annual sermon on doubt. Each year, the Sunday after Easter we read about Thomas, the world's most famous doubter. This year I want to commend Thomas' approach to doubt (and other things). What I'm going to call *being real*.

First, Thomas was real. He didn't say what he thought he ought to say, he was honest about how he really felt. How much easier if, when the disciples came to Thomas saying 'we have seen the Lord', Thomas had said 'Great, I wish I had been there too'. That would have been it, over and done with. But no, thankfully Thomas said what he thought – until I see for myself, I won't believe.

Second, being real requires time. Because of Thomas' honesty, he had to wait another week, Jesus made another appearance in the house, this time with Thomas present.

Thirdly, being real and acknowledging our doubt can help us to overcome it. Look at the dramatic turnaround in Thomas' view. When he finally sees Jesus, what does Thomas say? Not 'Oh yes, the others said they'd seen you' but 'my Lord and my God!' Thomas had made the journey from deepest scepticism to the high-point of faith.

What does this have to say for us? Well, I want to suggest that being real helps us with much more than just doubt.

We need to be real ourselves. We need to accept that the world is not perfect, that people are not perfect. The world is obsessed with perfection, burning itself out striving for perfection: whether it's the perfect Christmas, the perfect wedding, the perfect job, the perfect house, the perfect body. Especially the perfect body. On TV this week I watched open-mouthed as one programme interviewed a woman who calls herself the human Barbie – 50 years old, she has spent half a million pounds on beauty treatments and cosmetic surgery.

We need to acknowledge that there's no such thing as a perfect Christian (well, there was Jesus but he was a Jew), that we are far from perfect and that what we do as a church also falls short of perfection. We must be honest – Christians need to be known for telling the truth.

None of this means we shouldn't care about these things. We must care deeply. We *should* take care of our bodies, we *should* take our faith seriously, but we *should* be real in the sense that we can find ways to live with the imperfections – accepting that others are imperfect and that we too are imperfect.

Then, if we are to be real like Thomas, we need to take time with people, to be real with them and for them to be real with us. Too often we are in a rush, or other things we'd rather be doing. When I'm at work I have a frequent conversation, usually that goes like this:

"Hi, how are you"

"Fine thanks, and you?"

"Yes, great, see you around"

I do this about a dozen times a day, it's totally automatic and we all do it with each other. A while ago, I made a point of trying to have two conversations a week with people I don't normally work with, that go beyond the normal clichéd pleasantries. Just a few minutes here and there round the coffee machine. And now there are a whole bunch of people who know about me and I know about them. And sometimes the familiarity and trust that builds up lets them talk about the challenges they face, and occasionally that allows us to talk about faith. But they do it because they know I'll spend time with them, because I'll be real and honest, because hopefully they feel they won't be judged and I won't go gossiping about them afterwards. Remember that Thomas was being real, not with random strangers in off the street, but with other disciples who knew him well, and he knew them too.

And you will have the chance to do this for yourselves in half an hour when we go for coffee. Spend time with people, especially spend time with people you don't know well, rather than with those you do. Go and say hello to people who are visiting or new or come here only occasionally. This is work which can and should be done by the whole body of Christ.

But I am convinced that if we are real, acknowledge our doubts and imperfections, and spend time with each other, then God will get to work on us. I think it is interesting how often God shows up, not in our perfections, but in our *im*perfections. Thomas needed to acknowledge his deep doubt in order to experience the height of faith when he exclaimed 'My lord and My God!' Remember: Moses was a rubbish public speaker. Jacob conned his brother out of his inheritance. The disciples constantly failed to understand what Jesus was telling them. Brothers and sisters, we're in good company.

Amen.

Blessings,
Kevin