

## *Doubting Thomas, the Unconvincing Disciples, and the Church's Public Relations Problem.*

**T**his morning's gospel picks up essentially where last Sunday's leaves off. It's the Sunday after his death, and the risen Jesus appears to the woman during the morning, and to the other disciples sometime later that day. But for some reason, Thomas is not with them, and so he misses out on all the initial excitement.

However, when they all do get together, and they tell Thomas what has happened, he refuses to believe them. And this is when he makes his famous statement: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my ... hand in his side, I will not believe." And it's because of this statement that, Thomas has been given the nickname of Doubting Thomas.

However, if you really think about it, it's not an entirely fair moniker. For, if you look at all of the references to Thomas in the gospels, it's obvious that he has an extraordinary amount of faith and dedication. And if you consider everything that is attributed to Thomas in all of the ancient legends – not the least of which is his founding of the Christian community in what is now India – it becomes clear that people have been entirely too unfair to Thomas.

Equally clear to *me*, however, is the fact that Thomas needs to own up to some of that label. After all, he's been with Jesus for several years, and he's seen what Jesus is capable of. So, when the other disciples tell him that Jesus has just accomplished exactly what he predicted, I would like to have seen a bit more of an open mind; I would like to have seen Thomas a bit more guardedly optimistic. But that's *my* opinion.

So, what we have here is a fairly simple situation: the other disciples have had an experience that Thomas did not have, and when they try to talk to him about it, Thomas does not believe them. And so, the problem, as I see it, is not with Thomas but with the other disciples. The problem is not that Thomas lacks the faith, but rather that the other disciples have no credibility in the eyes of Thomas.

Think about it. The other disciples have just had this wonderful experience; they've seen the risen Jesus, they've been gifted with his peace, and they've been commissioned to share the good news of his resurrection to the rest of the world. But when they try to do that, their witness to the resurrection is not compelling enough to convince even one of their own. And it wasn't that Thomas was an especially tough audience; he *wanted* to believe; he was *ready* to believe. But what got in the way was this credibility gap. Because, although Thomas had seen and heard enough of Jesus to want to believe, he had also seen and heard enough of the other disciples to find it hard to believe. Eventually, and fortunately for all of us, and with the help of the Holy

Spirit, those disciples overcame the problem with their credibility, and went on to establish what would eventually become the world-wide Christian community.

However, having said all that, I am becoming concerned that Christianity is beginning to suffer from another credibility gap, which is resulting in many churches losing not only attendance but also membership. Now, obviously, if you look at membership and attendance figures for the Church over a long-enough period of time, you can see that it's fairly cyclical. The figures go up for a while, and then they go down for a while, and then they go up again. Clearly, we're in a time of declining popularity, which, again, is nothing new. For the church has always had, in *any* given generation, not only its share of detractors, but also its share of supporters. And during those times of decline, it's been easy and popular to point the finger of blame outside of the church. Lately, it's been popular to lay such blame upon the culture, and accusing it of turning the hearts of the people away from the church. Or to claim that people have become too busy to bother with church. Now, all of this is true, to some extent. However, it's probably truer to say that church's problem with attendance and membership has more to do the church, and how it's being perceived by outsiders.

Again, in every generation, the church has had its share supporters and detractors. But what *is* starting to worry me, is the fact that in one particular current generation, those between the ages of 16-29, the number of detractors seem to far, *far* outnumber the supporters. And I'm getting this information from a book that I've only just started reading; it's entitled *UnChristian: What a new generation really thinks about Christianity ... and why it matters*, and it was recommended to me by Christina Waggoner, the leader of our youth ministry. Apparently, the author of this book is reporting on the results of extensive surveys done with people in this age bracket. And one of the persons surveyed made this interesting statement (on page 26):

“Most people I meet assume that *Christian* means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, antichoice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn't believe what they believe.”

Apparently this opinion is not all that unique. Now, right off the bat, I would be tempted to write this sort of thinking off to adolescent angst or the rebelliousness that is so common among young adults. And especially if *none* of the claims that were being made in that quote rang at all true. But the problem I'm having with this quote is not only that much of it *does ring* true, but that I know much of it *is true*. Well, at least to an extent. I'm sure we've all known Christians who were “very conservative,” but we've also know Christians who were very liberal. We've all known Christians who were “entrenched in their thinking,” and we've all known Christians who were balanced and open-minded in their thinking. But the difference, between what we're going through now, and what the church has gone through in the past, is the technology that's available to us today. While a local news affiliate may show us one brief film clip of a lovely Easter service somewhere in town, that same affiliate is going to show us, over and over again, clips of Pastor Jeremy Wright saying things that are provocative and inflammatory. (Now, I feel like I should say that I'm sure Pastor Wright is a very nice man. He's Democratic candidate Barak

Obama's pastor. And I'm sure that he is much-loved by his congregation, and that he's done a lot of good things for them. And God forbid that my life and ministry should be memorialized by one stupid statement I've made in one of my sermons. Note to self: have ushers check building and people for recording devices.) And it's not just that we're seeing this kind of stuff on the television; it's all over the internet. And the people who are the most acutely tuned in to this sort of technology are those in the 16-29 generation. That is their window into the Christian church.

Again, I have to say that it doesn't bother me so much when I hear that *certain* groups within Christianity are being described negatively. It doesn't bother me because in some cases I know that it's true. Heck, I used to be like that. But what does bother me is when it seems that we are *all* getting painted with the same broad brush, and we are all being lumped together. And that does bother me because I know that's *not* true.

And so, what all this means to me, is that we have a real PR campaign to mount. With so much out there that is negative about the church, we need to start putting stuff out there that is positive. We need to find ways to be just as flamboyantly positive and affirming in the public eye. And that means, especially at the parish level, that, not only do we continue to do the many, many good things that we have always been doing, but now we need to talk more about it, and invite people to share in it, and let them live into the reality of the Christian life. In other words, we need to find ways to get the word out that we are *not* the way that many others make us appear. And we need to act fast, in order to keep from losing a significant generation of young men and women through what is essentially misinformation and incorrect assumptions.

In other words, we are very much in the same boat as the first Christians, who had to overcome the claims that they were body snatchers, and cannibals, and people who sacrificed children on their altars. And like those early Christians, we will need, in no small quantities, the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us through this mess, to get us past this PR nightmare, and help us show the world what real Christians are really like.

The good news of Easter is that God loved the world so much that there was nothing that he wouldn't do for it. And that's still the message that we have to take to the world today. But, now more than ever, we need to be vigilant that this message doesn't get buried under so many sound bites and film clips. We need to work hard at making sure that the news about the empty tomb, and the community it inspired, continues to be received as ... well, as the good news it actually is.

Let us pray: Everliving God, whose will it is that all should come to you through your Son Jesus Christ: Inspire our witness to him, that all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hope of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.