



Thomas the twin

Before considering, and making sense of, John's account of Thomas and the risen Jesus (John 20:24-29), it is worth considering what we know about Thomas before and after this event. Thomas is known as the twin; in fact, the name 'Thomas' means twin, and his real name was Judas. There are two pre-crucifixion mentions of Thomas, apart from him being one of the twelve. One is found in John 11. Jesus and the disciples had gone across the Jordan, 'to the place where John had been baptising earlier' and remained there (John 10:40-42). Here Jesus hears that Lazarus has taken ill and, later, died, and Jesus decides he needs to go to Judea to 'wake Lazarus from his sleep'. The disciples remind Jesus that there had been attempts to stone and kill him there last time he went. When Jesus insists on going anyway, it is Thomas who says to the other disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

The second reference is John 14:5 when, in response to Thomas's question about not knowing where Jesus is going, Jesus responds that he is 'the way and the truth and the life' and goes on to say, 'If you know me you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him'. We never hear in the gospels, or Acts, again about Thomas after the John 20:24-29 account.

Strangely, Christian tradition has left us with twin understandings of Thomas, and they are far from being identical twins. In the western church he is defined by his initial doubt that Jesus had risen and his one contribution to Christianity, and the world in general, is to become the person that the term 'doubting Thomas' is based upon. The bravery of his willingness to go with Jesus to Judea and face the likelihood of death with Jesus is forgotten and he is forever remembered as a doubter.

As the early church developed and spread in the Roman Empire it became focused initially around four centres - Rome, Jerusalem, Antioch (Syria) and Alexandria (Egypt); later Constantinople would become another centre. Thomas is particularly associated with the Syrian branch of the church. Church history gives interesting insights into the nature of the church that Thomas founded. According to tradition, Thomas took the gospel to India and was allegedly martyred at St Thomas Mount, in Chennai, on 3 July 72AD, and his body was interred in Mylapore. Whether this is factually true, we don't know, but we do know that Thomas's followers did establish churches in India in the first or second centuries. When western missionaries 'took the gospel' to India during the colonial expansion, they discovered that the Syrian Orthodox were well established in India, especially in Kerala, and had survived and thrived as a small minority in a Hindu and Muslim country.

After Constantine's death, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Constantinople became the main centre of Christianity. Christian leaders were free to travel to meet at what were known as Ecumenical Councils. This was an opportunity to establish doctrines and to formulate creeds, but was also an opportunity to disagree and create schism. In the Nicene Creed we affirm that Jesus was both fully God and fully Man, at the same time. The differences in doctrinal understanding probably weren't that great, but it was the Greek and Latin speakers, at the centre of the Roman Empire, who held power linguistically, economically and politically and there were two different schisms which meant that only Rome and Constantinople, at the heart of Roman Empire, were seen as the true church.



Two of the churches that were marginalised by these processes were the Assyrian Church of the east, centred in Persia, and the Syrian Orthodox Church, both of whom looked to Thomas as their founder. Being churches that were religious minorities within their home countries, they found that no longer being associated with the Roman Empire was generally a very positive factor. The Assyrian Church of the east expanded east and took the gospel to China, establishing a church there that adjusted well to Chinese culture and survived for many centuries before being eventually being wiped out. The Syrian Orthodox Church, as well as establishing the church in its region and India also appears to have been instrumental in establishing the church in Ethiopia.

If we look at the history of Christian mission, we generally find that Christianity has been spread by the powerful. Initially there was the growth of the Roman Empire and a history of countries invading and occupying and dominating other countries. European colonial expansion took the church to the Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania. The gospel was spread through military power and also by economic power. In contrast the Syrian and Persian Christians established their churches through being minorities, often persecuted minorities, who tried and succeeded to embed their lives and witness within their host community. These churches have a history of living alongside other faiths: Hinduism in India, Islam in the Middle East and Central Asia and the Eastern faiths in China. Often persecuted, they persevered and continued to witness. As Christianity is so closely associated with the west, the growth of organisations such as Al Qaeda and Daesh have had a devastating impact upon Christians in Iraq and Syria, but Syrian Orthodox communities continue to live out their faith in these areas.

We don't know about Thomas's teaching to his followers, but we do know that the churches that look to him as their founder are the ones that seem to have got to the heart of what the incarnation was about: embedding themselves within other communities and living out and witnessing to God's love, revealed in Jesus. They have also got to the heart of what happened through the cross and Jesus' resurrection and put into practice the fact that God's power is most strongly revealed through human weakness.

Whatever the doctrinal differences really were, I am sure that the example of Thomas's bravery in agreeing to go with Jesus to Judea, and the later example of Thomas's followers, and their incarnate and sacrificial witness, was a real spiritual challenge to the power and authority of the church of the Roman Empire. Perhaps the way that more powerful churches have avoided facing up to that challenge is by finding it easier to just remember Thomas as 'Doubting Thomas'.

What experiences do you have of God's power being revealed through human weakness?

Touch the wounds

Given that the churches that saw Thomas as their founder were later caught up with controversies related to Jesus being both fully God and fully human, it seems fair to ask which nature of the risen Jesus was it that Thomas didn't believe in? I wonder if part of the problem lay in the fact that Jesus had appeared to the other ten disciples in a locked room. If a group of your friends told you that they



were in a locked room and someone you knew, whom you believed was dead, had suddenly appeared in front of them, would you assume that they had seen a physical person or seen a ghost? On the other hand, if they described seeing the latch lift and the door being opened from outside, then you would be more inclined to believe that it was a physical presence that they had seen.

The disciples had all seen and believed Jesus' miracles. There is evidence in the gospels that they had begun to see Jesus as being God in some way. What they hadn't expected was that Jesus, who in some way was God, could suffer and die in agony, in such a human way, on the cross. Perhaps it was the human nature of Jesus, the Jesus who had suffered and died as a human, that Thomas struggled to believe in. If so, I can empathise with him. I don't have a problem with the Jesus who can do miraculous things and answer prayer and show that he is God. But I sometimes struggle with the Jesus who doesn't seem to show these divine abilities when I would expect him to, and want him to; with the Jesus who seems to not only allow suffering and death but also appears to enter into it, and take it upon himself.

When I feel like this, I am sure that Jesus' answer to me is the same as his response to Thomas, to 'touch the wounds'. In the west we live in a world where we expect things to get better. When they don't, or when bad things happen, we easily say, 'Why did God allow that to happen?' In contrast we usually find that in parts of the world where bad things usually happen, and where things can be expected to get worse, people find it far easier to believe in God. In the face of adversity we in the west will often respond by saying that we don't trust God. In the parts of the world where so many bad things happen, people often conclude that they can't trust other ethnic groups, or governments or other countries; the only person that they can trust is God. The history of the church often shows that it is in suffering and persecution that faith develops and the church grows. During the cultural revolution in China, when Chinese Christians were cut off from the west, there was huge growth in the number of Christians. Similarly there was growth in the number and commitment of Christians in Southern Sudan during the Sudanese civil war. Late in the second century, during a time of severe persecution, Tertullian summed up this phenomenon by saying that 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'.

The experience is that in times of pain and despair, people sense that Jesus is there alongside them. Jesus is the one who entered into our humanity through his incarnation; the one whose parents found there was no room for him at the inn; who escaped persecution by fleeing as a refugee to Egypt. Jesus is the one who had comments made about his legitimacy; who was rejected by the religious authorities, before suffering and dying on a cross. Jesus is the one who is experienced as the one who draws near to those who are marginalised, persecuted and suffering. It is this Jesus, that those who suffer feel is able to understand their situation and enter into their situation with them; they believe this because they know that Jesus, himself, has had similar experiences.

Like many of us, I am squeamish about medical things and don't like looking at wounds. I find that when I sense Jesus telling me to touch the wounds I want to look away and think of nice things instead. But Jesus says to touch the wounds, and it is only when we obey and draw alongside those who are wounded and suffering that we can begin to see Jesus at work amongst the pain and dirt and squalor; this is because we are allowed to see Jesus through the eyes and experiences of those

who are suffering. It is only when we enter into that suffering that we can really see and experience the humanity of Jesus at work. It might not be the physical healing that we want to see that is happening, but Jesus will be there sharing in the pain and suffering, and there can be healing of relationships and of hopes and aspirations. It is the Jesus who became incarnate to enter into our humanity who calls us to follow his example of being incarnate.

It is when I allow myself to touch the wounds that I can enable Jesus to heal some of my misunderstandings. Jesus doesn't want us to stand as a bystander, keeping our distance, but he wants us to follow his example of incarnation. His response to the doubts that we might have is not to keep a safe distance and to look away, but enter with him into the suffering. So when I, like Thomas, have doubts, then I too need to more deeply engage with Jesus' humanity and accept Jesus' invitation to touch the wounds. It is in doing so that we see the real power of God at work in human weakness and vulnerability. It seems to be this ability to 'touch the wounds' that lies behind the witness of the churches which look to Thomas as their founder.

Interestingly, Thomas' response to meeting with Jesus, and being invited to touch the wounds, is to declare that Jesus is 'My Lord and my God'. In saying this, Thomas appears to be the first person to actually recognise Jesus as God and declare him to be God. The lesson from John 14:7, that 'if you know me you will know my Father', clearly was understood by Thomas in recognising the risen Jesus, and was affirmed by Thomas.

What experiences do you have of recognising Jesus through 'touching the wounds', of seeing God at work within human pain and sorrow?

Doubt and faith

Doubt is the overriding theme that runs through the post-resurrection accounts. Those at the empty tomb experience doubt. With Jesus' final appearance to the disciples in Matthew's gospel, when he gives the Great Commission, we read of the disciples worshipping Jesus, but some doubted (Matthew 28:17). Thomas, having been absent when Jesus appeared to the other disciples in the locked room, doubted the account of these disciples and wanted physical proof himself of Jesus's resurrection. For this reason he gets the reputation for doubting, but doubt seems to have been the initial reaction of most of Jesus' followers.

We are tempted to see doubt as being the opposite of faith. It is not. Doubt is the opposite of certainty and certainty in one perspective is the barrier to faith developing in a different perspective. Being open to doubt is a necessary step in the journey of growing to a mature faith. The only way that we can come to faith in anything is to lose our certainty in our previous way of looking at things. For that to happen, we need to be able to doubt the initial viewpoint. All of us try to make sense of the world as we understand it. This way of understanding the world is our 'worldview'. Our worldview is shaped by our knowledge and our experiences and very much by the community that we are part of, so that usually we would expect to find that our worldview resonates with, although is not necessarily identical to, the worldview of other people that we relate to.



For our worldview to change, we need first to understand an alternative worldview and then realise that this alternative worldview makes more sense to us than our original worldview. This can usually only happen when we see that those who hold this alternative worldview have something about their worldview, and the outworking of that worldview, that we don't have and which appeals to us and inspires us. Moving from one worldview to another worldview means taking the step of faith to leave one community of belief behind and seek to become part of another community of belief. Taking this step of faith usually lies beyond mere knowledge, but will require some form of 'nudge'. Usually, when we are speaking of someone becoming a Christian, or significantly changing their Christian understanding, we would refer to this 'nudge' as being convicted by the Holy Spirit. Often when we explore how someone has been convicted by the Spirit in this way, we discover that there has been prayer involved, often prayer over a period of time. Let us consider some biblical examples of how this works.

The example that comes from these post-resurrection verses, although it is clearly pre-Holy Spirit, is the encounter on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Jesus meets with the two followers, who were discussing the events of his death, and joins and walks along with them. Their worldview includes the hope that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel (v. 21). By this they primarily mean free Israel from Roman occupation; Jesus needs to present them with an alternative worldview. He does this by explaining that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and then enter into his glory (v. 26), then beginning with Moses (that is, the first five books of the Old Testament) and all of the prophets (referring to both the historical books of the Old Testament and the prophets) he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. It is sad that Luke does not give us details of this overview of the Old Testament, but the church in its liturgies, especially for Lent, Passiontide and Easter, has identified many of these references for us.

The two followers walking on the road have already shared with Jesus that some in their community were beginning to believe that Jesus might have risen (vv. 22-24). There was potentially a community available for them to belong to with this new worldview. But there was still the need for the 'nudge'. The nudge is not immediate; although they walk with Jesus they do not recognise him. The nudge occurs when Jesus breaks bread and their eyes are opened and they are aware, as they say, of their 'hearts burning within us' (v. 32). Often, as suggested here, the process of recognition is not an immediate one, but it will take time for the different factors to come together and recognition to occur and for a move from one worldview to another.

Another example of the move from one worldview to a Christian worldview, which mentions eyes being opened, is the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-22). This event has given us the term a 'Damascus Road' conversion, implying a sudden and immediate occurrence. I wonder. Although the nudge factor, the light from heaven flashing around him accompanied by the voice, is sudden, we know that Saul had been persecuting Christians since the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 6:8-8:1). Saul had heard Stephen presenting an alternative worldview (Acts 7) and heard Stephen forgive his killers. Saul is part of the further persecutions and would have witnessed how those with a Christian worldview lived out this faith in the risen Jesus. A different worldview had been presented to him; he witnessed the impact of this worldview upon the lives of its followers and was aware of an alternative community of faith that existed. I imagine that there was a struggle between



head and heart that had been going on for a while. Paul's head had a Jewish worldview, but his heart was being increasingly exposed to a Christian worldview. When the nudge occurred on the Damascus Road, the impact was immediate.

These passages show us how faith came about in biblical times, but also help us to understand conversion in our own day and age. For people to come to a Christian faith, the same stages will be necessary. The final stage will be the 'nudge factor'; it is the Holy Spirit that will convict someone in their faith, not us. Our part in encouraging the 'nudge factor' will include prayer; often this requires prolonged prayer over a period of time.

If someone, or a group, is going to move from seeing their worldview as the only worldview that makes sense, to also seeing our worldview as making sense then, as well as sharing our worldview with them, we will need to understand their worldview and understand the differences. This isn't a superficial exercise; it involves real listening and understanding. We might find that the same vocabulary is being used, but words have quite different meanings. It isn't about point scoring, or trying to show that we are right; it is about sensitive listening and trying to enter into their perspective.

There will also be the need for there to be a community of Christian believers that the person might feel attracted to join. This means a community of believers who are open and welcoming to other people and who share a lifestyle, based upon their faith, which is attractive to other people; a lifestyle that appears to put belief into practice and shows that belief gives people purpose and joy in their lives; a Christian community which reflects Jesus' love and is able to 'walk the talk'.

As well as prayer for the person or people, there needs to be prayer for the Christian community that it is able to reflect the love of Jesus and prayer for those who will be involved in listening, understanding and speaking that they will be able to hold on to the hope within them and sensitively witness.

Given the understanding of conversion, given above, how can you and your church help enable the Holy Spirit bring people to faith in the risen Jesus?

Growth

When Jesus reveals himself to Mary Magdalene beside the empty tomb (John 20:17), he says to her 'Do not hold on to me.' All of us, when we have a powerful experience of Jesus, are tempted to try to hold on to this experience. The story of the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9) gives a strong hint of this. Peter's first response to the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and the transfiguration of Jesus, is to want to build three dwellings. We can all be tempted to want to hold on to Jesus and enshrine specific memories and experiences and worship these. God makes clear with the transfiguration account that the important thing is to remember that Jesus is God's chosen one and to listen to him, not to enshrine specific memories which stop us from continuing to listen to Jesus. Jesus then leads the disciples down the mountain, where they experience a new kind of challenge that his disciples



had been unable to respond to (Matthew 17:14-16). We can easily be tempted to try to hold on to Jesus and to particular experiences of him. In contrast, Jesus tends to want to move us on and reveal new things to us.

We find the same thing at the end of the account of the road to Emmaus. As soon as the two followers recognise Jesus, he vanishes from their sight (Luke 24:31). In the pre-resurrection gospel accounts, Jesus moves smoothly from one place to another. In the post-resurrection accounts he suddenly appears and disappears; he breaks into a situation and reveals himself in new ways when no one is really expecting him, then vanishes. In the post-resurrection appearances, Jesus was preparing his disciples to be able to recognise and respond to him in different situations, rather than to hold on to the previous appearance and expect the next appearance to be similar to the last appearance. We live in a rapidly changing world and so, even more, we need to be able grow and develop in our faith by discovering Jesus in the unfamiliar; in new, different and challenging experiences.

Another example of the move from one worldview to another helps illustrate this. In the story of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1–11:18), the conversion of Cornelius and his family starts with Cornelius' prayers (10:2), but his worldview is changed by listening to Peter's explanation (10:34-43) and the nudge factor is the Holy Spirit falling on all who heard the word (10:44). The fact that the Holy Spirit fell upon the whole of Cornelius' household, and Peter ordered them all to be baptised, meant that there was a new Christian community, who Peter then gave further instruction to. In the west we very much emphasise personal faith, but in many places life is far more communal and decisions are far more communal, and in Acts we get used to seeing families and communities coming to faith together. The story of the conversion of Cornelius's household fits the usual pattern of events for those coming to faith mentioned in the previous section, but also introduces us to a story which could be described as the conversion of Peter and, subsequently, of the conversion of the church.

At the beginning of this account, Peter has what is primarily a Jewish worldview. This would include the assumption that God's purposes are for the Jewish nation and that Gentiles lie outside of God's purposes. The only way around this would be for a Gentile to first of all convert to Judaism. We also see in Peter's vision (10:9-16) that he firmly accepted the Jewish food laws. As well as meaning that certain foods were considered profane or unclean, this would mean that Peter could not offer hospitality to, or receive hospitality from, a Gentile. The first nudge that Peter receives is referenced in Acts 9:43, when we are told that Peter stays with Simon a tanner. Tanners work with the skins of dead animals, so the house would have been considered as ritually unclean. The second nudge is when Peter is told to kill and eat and not consider anything that God has made clean as profane (10:13-16). This all modifies Peter's worldview enough for him to offer hospitality to Cornelius's men and then to receive hospitality from Cornelius.

The final, and biggest, nudge comes when Cornelius's household have heard Peter's words. They appeared to be accepting what Peter had said and Peter must have been wondering what he should do next. Surely he would now need to convert them to Judaism. But no; the Holy Spirit was poured upon them and the proof of this was that they began to speak in tongues. Peter is forced to realise



that Gentiles could become Christians without first converting to Judaism (Acts 10:44-48). God's powerful message is that when we are involved in sharing faith with others we can't just expect their worldview to change, but we must be open to the fact that our own worldview might change as well.

This isn't just a one-off historical example. When I share my worldview with someone who is also sharing their worldview with me, then, if we are both being open, I need to take on board what their worldview says to me. In such situations, I need to be open to God's nudge. If someone share their hesitations and doubts with me, or shares their previous religious experiences, then I need to take these seriously and be open to the fact that my worldview might need modifying. I need to enter into such conversations with faith that I will be aware of the Holy Spirit's nudge that will, in time, move my understanding to a new, and possibly broader, one that gives me a deeper understanding of God and his purposes.

But this process doesn't stop there. Peter has gained a new and deeper understanding of God's purposes but this needed to be shared with the wider church. It sounds very straightforward in Acts 11:1-18. This is helped by the fact that Peter was accompanied by six brothers (Acts 11:12) so that there were seven male witnesses to the events. This was enough to legally prove the case. We know from Acts 15 and Paul's comments in his epistle to the Galatians that the matter wasn't resolved as easily as this, but it was eventually resolved. Coming to faith requires people to doubt their previous worldview before accepting a new worldview, but might also have repercussions that mean that we need to doubt and then review and modify our own worldview to move to a new understanding and that this, in turn might lead to the church needing to move to a new understanding. Such changes can take a long time and it is important that all concerned are open to sensitive and prayerful listening and understanding.

Thinking of your own experiences of growing in your faith, what have you needed to let go of in order to gain a new understanding of your faith? Did any of these have implications for you in relating to other Christians?

I have believed

Writing this, it is understandable that I find myself forced to re-evaluate why I believe. I have argued that the nudge factor of the Holy Spirit is essential to convince us of the reality of the risen Christ, so perhaps it isn't surprising that my conviction doesn't come directly from any of the post-resurrection accounts, but comes from the verses that just come shortly afterwards. In the account of the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) we read about how those frightened disciples, who had felt the need to hide behind locked doors in Jerusalem, are transformed into those who are brave enough to witness to their faith in the risen Jesus. This transformation of who they have become, and their willingness to suffer and to die for their faith, is a theme that constantly runs through the whole of the Acts of the Apostles. In response to these accounts, I could do no other than to say that I believe.

I am also privileged to have seen the same transformation in many people's lives and this has been a great encouragement to nurture and develop my faith. Yes, I have also seen attitudes and behaviour



among Christians that I do not feel is at all appropriate or Christian, but this can't detract from the very real witness I have seen in so many whose lives have been turned around by their faith in the risen Jesus. I also feel that within my own Christian journey I have needed to learn to not hold on to specific encounters with Jesus and to be able to let go and be prepared to recognise him afresh in different situations. As ever, recognition isn't always immediate and there has been the need to let go of a partial revelation in order to grasp the bigger and deeper revelation that Jesus wants to offer me.

During my formative teenage years, in the mid-1960s, our family worshipped at a Presbyterian church, in a middle class area of West London. The majority of the congregation were exiles from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. As with other United Kingdom exiles, there was a tendency to be more patriotic than your compatriots who had remained in their home country! Our minister was a powerful Welsh preacher. Despite the Welsh Rugby team never being mentioned in any biblical text, it did appear very often within his sermons and you could be forgiven for wondering whether he loved the Welsh rugby team more than he loved Jesus - until one particular sermon.

It was the height of apartheid in South Africa, not so many years after the Sharpeville massacre and the white South African rugby team was in the United Kingdom playing, and generally beating, the home nations. The match where Wales beat South Africa had been televised on the Saturday and you knew that the Welsh rugby team would feature strongly in the sermon; but not in the way that we expected. Our minister shared the anguish that he had experienced as he had wrestled with his conscience and concluded that as a Christian he could not watch that match on television. It was a long, eloquent sermon, but the heart of it was that he believed in a God who had made all people in his image and apartheid was a denial of this fundamental truth and that Christians needed to take a stand against this evil. I began to be introduced to a Jesus who challenged some of my middle-class values and showed me that being a Christian meant making choices and not all choices would be simple ones.

A few years later, at Nottingham University, I was on the fringe of the local campaign of the Stop the Seventies Tour. The South African cricket team was due to tour England that summer and one of the test matches was scheduled for Trent Bridge. That national campaign was successful, and the tour was cancelled. There was a realisation that people could change things and, among Christians, a realisation that Christians could be involved in changing things. Nottingham was, for me, the time of beginning to encounter and recognise the incarnate Jesus. If you asked me when did I become a Christian, how should I answer? I don't remember a time when I didn't consider myself as a Christian, but it was at Nottingham that I first made decisions about what my faith really meant to me. It was at Nottingham that I first saw that my faith had implications for me that were different from the Christian understanding that I had inherited.

From Nottingham I moved to a Christian community house in Rochdale. We lived in an inner-city, multi-racial area which faced typical inner-city challenges. Many of the Christian population had moved out of the inner areas and churches were declining or closing. As well as our day jobs we endeavoured to work out, and live out, what it meant to be an incarnate Christian presence in that area. Through members of that community, working with others, an adventure playground was



brought into being. There were initiatives with Asian young people from both Pakistan and East Africa, those recently expelled from Uganda, and also initiatives to try to break down barriers and create understanding between the Asian and indigenous populations. We also started a Christian-Muslim-Marxist dialogue group. When a commercial hostel for homeless men closed, we were involved in a temporary response that led to a new permanent facility being developed and we often put up people for social services when they had run out of temporary accommodation and spent our evening being caring, listening hosts.

We saw death and decay; we experienced both the painful realities of inner-city life and also witnessed the joy and hope that the new life that the incarnate Jesus could bring into such situations. We made career choices and we made lifestyle choices. We developed liturgies to express our experiences of pain, joy and hope; both for our own internal use, and also for a wider, local, worshipping community that joined us for a monthly service and we engaged with others in similar initiatives in other inner-city areas. We didn't see ourselves as natural evangelists, but those who lived in the inner-city area and others working with these inner-city issues would ask what we were doing and what motivated us. In openly responding to these questions, we often found that we were speaking of Jesus and the hope within us. Very clearly, I could affirm that I believed.

What were the key elements involved in you first coming to faith? What, if any, difficult choices did you find yourself needing to make?

I believe

Through both a celebration and also a farewell to a dying friend, I recently met up with some from that era of being involved in incarnate mission in Rochdale and other inner cities. I admire the way that some, compared to me, have stayed so committed to living in the inner-city areas and to the lifestyle choices that they made back then, but also realised that the incarnate Jesus is no longer a central part of the picture for all of us. I realised that I have seen this losing focus on Jesus at other times in my life; both as a student and within Christian organisations. It is possible that when we get the opportunities to create exciting, focused, Christian worship, with other like-minded people related to particular, interests, projects or work, then that can tend to replace church. If that happens, then it can become far harder to find Jesus in the more ordinary worship of a local church. If we are worshipping with people who don't share that same focused vision, then, if we are not rooted in the wider church, some might find it easy to lose sight of Jesus. I feel that I have been fortunate to find and recognise Jesus in different ways over the years.

In Quaker worship I could continue to worship with people who thought like me on certain issues, but I also experienced Jesus in the corporate silent worship and became aware of the Holy Spirit as a silent communicator when, so often, we realised after an hour's silence that we had all been led in similar ways. Anglican liturgy gave a more formal structure and direction to that sense of listening and Jesus could be encountered in different ways as I became familiar with the different seasonal liturgies and Jesus could be experienced within the sacraments. Anglican worship also meant experiencing Jesus in other people, who were different to me, as I allowed myself to meet Jesus



outside of the bubble of people who thought and acted like me.

Interviewing people about their faith and calling, for one of the Anglican mission agencies, meant taking seriously the Jesus who had revealed himself to other Christians. I didn't always initially feel comfortable with the Jesus I was encountering in other people's lives, but Jesus was patient with me and allowed me to gradually grow and broaden in my faith. Through interviewing, I met with the Jesus who could answer prayer, forgive sins and heal past hurts within other people's lives; the Jesus who could answer my prayers, not necessarily in the way that I had hoped, forgive and heal past hurts in my life if I asked him to. Not so much letting go of who Jesus had been, but grasping the bigger picture of who he could become, for me, if I allowed him to do so.

Through reading about Jesus in the gospels, and becoming familiar with liturgy, I could discover more about God the Father that Jesus reveals to his disciples and to us. I could also discover more about the Holy Spirit who was sent to his church by the Father at the request of the Son at Pentecost and found I could better understand and experience God as Trinity. Through trying to make sense of what Jesus might have revealed to the disciples on the road to Emmaus when, 'beginning with Moses and the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures', I started to learn how to view the Bible as a whole, instead of as a mixture of bits that I felt comfortable with and bits I felt uncomfortable with.

Through this I learnt to see the Bible as the story of God's plans for salvation for his whole world. I realised that the Bible starts with God affirming the goodness of his creation (Genesis 1:31) before the narratives of the rebellion of human beings (described in Genesis 3–11) which lead to the breakdown of relationships between God and people, people with each other, God, people and creation and people with themselves. The Bible then ends with the vision of the new creation (Revelation 21–22); of heaven coming down to earth and fallen creation being renewed and restored. In between, told in a variety of writing styles which include narrative, history, parable, poetry, praise, prophecy and letters, we have the account of God taking the initiative in restoring these broken relationships to bring the whole of fallen creation back into full relationship with God. With that overview, I could learn how to discover God's purposes in the sections of the Bible I had previously tried to ignore.

Through ecumenical involvement, I could discern the insights about Jesus that I had not seen before within my own denominational traditions. Through getting to know Christians from other cultures, I could begin to identify which parts of my understanding of Jesus were cultural, rather than authentic. I realised that at the local, national and global level, I could only really recognise Jesus by being part of his body on earth that we call the church, which tries to live out the new life promised by Jesus. In conversations with those of other faiths and worldviews I found myself answering questions, either posed by them or that were formulated in my own mind, about the nature of the Trinitarian God that I believed in and found myself seeing aspects of Jesus that I had not been aware of before.

In the period during which I have believed in Jesus, I have become increasingly aware of how Christianity and Christian thinking have become marginalised in our society. Taking Jesus out of our



national worldview and understanding the increased separation between church and state has not always been a comfortable experience, but it had made it easier to recognise what is authentically of Jesus and what was just part of our prevailing Christendom culture. In the same way that the experience of exile for the Jewish people was an opportunity to really work out who God was and his purposes for his people, I believe that the current challenges that the church faces are an opportunity for us to clarify our identity as Christians and the purposes that God has in mind for us.

I don't see my own encounters with Jesus being any sort of role model, or pattern, for how others should meet with him, but I do feel, within a rapidly changing world, that my faith has benefitted from the opportunities to recognise, and meet with, the risen Jesus in a variety of different ways. From these experiences, and in the hope that this will continue, I can say that I believe.

As I read the gospels, I often notice that the disciples are asking Jesus the wrong questions, and for them to fully understand him he needs to show them that their question is wrong. At some point in my spiritual journey I realised that the question of whether or not I believe was the wrong question. The real question was whether or not God believes in me. This has enabled me to look back at my strengths and weaknesses and realise that, despite all of my weaknesses and failings, God has found tasks for me to do; I realise that I am experiencing a God who believes in me and is able to use me for his purposes.

This might sound rather egocentric, but reflects the fact that it is not just about our own searching; it is also about God seeking us out. The post-resurrection appearances are about Jesus seeking out his disciples and taking the initiative to appear to them and them being open to recognise him in those situations. It is my understanding that the God who can be experienced in this way, rather than just reflected upon, gives me a far stronger sense of belief than the head level understanding that I might have. It is because I have experienced God at work in my life, challenging and shaping me, as I have attempted to follow him; a God who seems to persevere with me, despite my own self-doubts, that I can confidently say that I believe.

What have been the subsequent 'conversions' or developments within your faith journey?