

Thomas Our Brother

Introduction

This study is about our brother Thomas. There is little we know about him, because not very much is written about him. It is true that he is generally known outside our own circles, in the world at large, but that is based largely on an undeserved reputation. Yet what little we know about him does give us a clear enough picture, if only we are prepared to take the trouble to see it. I am not of course referring to the brother Thomas of the 19th century, whom we generally view as the founder of our movement; I am referring to our brother of the 1st century, who was one of the chosen twelve who were privileged to walk with our Lord. Most of us are familiar with apostles like Peter, or John, or Paul. But Thomas? Thomas...?

The usual opinion about him

In your language, as in mine, he is known as 'doubting Thomas', a byword of unbelief. Commentators tend to describe him as a hypochondriac and a notorious pessimist. A textbook case of how not to be a Christian in fact. But is that correct? Let us see.

What do we know about him?

In the Bible we find the following list of references:

1. He is mentioned in the synoptic gospels in the lists of the 12 selected apostles.
2. He is mentioned again in the list of the 11 remaining apostles in Acts 1.
3. He occurs in a short list of 7 apostles in Galilee, in John 21.
4. There are three specific places in the gospel of John where he plays a part.

The places mentioned in 1-3

The lists of the synoptics only mention his name, Thomas, without any further details: he was only one of the twelve. Only one of the twelve? All twelve had been chosen by Jesus! After a full night spent in prayer, as you well know (Luke 6:12). All twelve (with the possible exception of Judas) must have been men of exceptional qualities. If we call him unworthy we are criticising Jesus, or in reality God Himself.

His name is Aramaic for 'twin'. Where was his brother? Was he no longer alive? Or was he just not of a similar mind to Thomas? In any case Thomas was not just anybody. Acts 1:13 confirms that, with the exception of Judas, all to a man were still there, Thomas included. And the short list in John 21:2 shows him as one of the smaller circle of seven in Galilee, around Peter, waiting for Jesus.

The occurrences in the gospel of John

There are three passages in John's gospel which give us an insight into the character of Thomas. In the first and third John gives us the translation of his name as Didymus (twin). Does he do that to lift him out of the relative obscurity of being just a name in a list? Or does he want to stress the fact that he had a twin brother who was nevertheless not selected? Is this a subtle echo of the principle that, even of seemingly identical pairs, only 'the one shall be taken and the other left'? He is mentioned by name on three different occasions, although in the first two of these cases there seems to be no specific reason for doing so. Given the fact that nothing in the Bible is there without a reason, this must mean that John wants to draw our attention to something: watch this man. It is an open invitation to compare these three passages. So let's do just that.

Thomas in John 11

In John 11 Jesus tells His disciples that He wants to visit Bethany because of Lazarus. The twelve (all twelve!) protest: it is too dangerous. Then Thomas is mentioned separately, by name:

Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus, unto his fellow-disciples: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." The emphasis is usually laid on the second half of his sentence to argue his 'inborn pessimism'. But is this correct? It really was not safe; all twelve had said so (vs. 8). They point out the earlier attempts to stone Him (John 10:31, 39). And after Lazarus' resurrection Jesus does indeed withdraw again, apparently for reasons of safety (John 11:54). In fact the authorities did not even hesitate to plan the murder of Lazarus, a man that God had brought back from death! They were prepared to fight God Himself. So the conclusion must be that it really was not safe. And that on that account Thomas was not a pessimist, but a realist.

Next, note what he does not say. He does not say: 'if He wants to go, He can go alone; I will not join Him'. What he does say is: 'let us go with Him and die with Him'. What does he mean by that?

An aside

Peter too was prepared to die with Jesus. He said so at the last supper (Matt. 26:31-35). But all were speaking like that; only Peter is singled out and mentioned by name. Why? Obviously because of what was going to happen later (his denial). Mentioning him here by name prepares us for what we are going to be told later. Likewise when John mentions Thomas by name, it prepares us for what he will show us later.

But there is more that may be said about Peter. Jesus tells Peter in the upper room that his faith will be put to the test, and that he has yet to come to repentance (Luke 22:31-32). Yet in the first instance Peter lives up to his words: against a complete cohort of Roman soldiers (500-600 men!) he draws a sword and starts fighting. He is really prepared to die, fighting for his Lord. But maybe this was only his usual impulsive reaction; maybe he had not considered the situation realistically? Later that night he could not resist the temptation to avoid an inconvenient problem by being a little 'flexible' with the truth: "I know not what thou sayest". But once you have started on such a way, you cannot very easily go back (like: "well, in fact, on second thoughts, I do seem to remember him somewhat, as a matter of fact, after all"). And so the order of events is: 1) deny, 2) deny with an oath, and finally 3) deny with cursing and swearing (Matt. 26:69-74). Once he had chosen this road he was, not by accident of course, forced to follow it further only to realise the true nature of his choice. He did not mean to go that way when he made his first denial, but got into difficulties when 'circumstances' forced him to face the consequences of that initial choice. And by the time he realised where he had gone wrong it was too late. And the result was bitter remorse, but also the repentance that Jesus had announced, and as a consequence his return to his master; unlike e.g. Judas who, after a wrong choice, opted to depart and to accept the final consequences of that decision.

Back to Thomas

In the reactions given in John 11 Thomas too is 'singled out'. Is this a similar case? No, or at least not fully so. For he does not propose to die fighting; he just wants to die when Jesus dies. Nor is this an impulsive reaction on the spur of the moment. What then does he mean? May I make the following suggestion? Thomas is fully convinced that life without Jesus is without purpose or hope. Without Him there is no way out of the death-trap of sin: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." In Isaiah (22:13) this sentence was an expression of the people's lack of trust in their God. But for Paul (1 Cor. 15:32) it is the inevitable consequence of a rock hard reality: without the resurrection (i.e. without the Redemption) life is indeed without hope. So in that respect Thomas was fully right again; in that case you might just as well die today. He may not yet have seen the necessity for Jesus' sacrificial death, or the unavoidable necessity of His resurrection, but his perception of the necessity of Jesus' involvement in this Redemption was

fully accurate. Maybe it was still too hazy to have a clear view, but his radar operated faultlessly: he could make an unfailing approach to the only correct reconnaissance buoy (for those of you who do not know what a reconnaissance buoy is: it is the first buoy you have to locate, when coming from sea, to navigate your way safely into the harbour). So he was not a born pessimist at all; he was a hard realist, who was perfectly right!

Which poses the question: do we have such an absolute perception of the necessity of Jesus' presence? And if not, why not? In that case we'd better take a leaf out of Thomas' navigation handbook.

In the upper room, John 14

In John's account of the discussions in the upper room, Jesus tries to comfort his disciples: "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:1-3). And He adds: "And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know" (vs. 4). With the knowledge we now have about Thomas we can perhaps better understand his reaction: "Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; how can we know the way?" (vs. 5). Jesus' words unsettle him; he does not like what he hears. Is Jesus really going to leave them behind after all? Note that Jesus does not rebuke him even mildly (in contrast to e.g. Philip, in the very next incident: "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip?). He must have appreciated Thomas' attitude, although Thomas had yet more to learn. Thomas is still navigating in a fog, and now his radar image seems to disappear from his radar screen. But his appreciation of the importance of Jesus' involvement is still undiminished. Again that is a lesson for us.

In the upper room again, John 20

In chapter 20 of his gospel John relates the early appearances of Jesus after His resurrection. At His first appearance to His disciples in the upper room Thomas had not been present (John 20:24-25). Why not? Apparently as he was the only one of the eleven missing? May I make another suggestion? He may have been the only one who fully appreciated the 'disaster' to its full extent: without Jesus they simply were 'having no hope, and without God in the world' (Eph. 2:12). The others were looking for support and comfort from each other in the loss of one exceptionally beloved, but Thomas seems to have realised that there was much more the matter than that. Maybe he felt that he had found insufficient appreciation of that view from the others. Anyway, he had decided to try and get to terms with his loss in isolation.

Seen in that context he refuses to be comforted at his return by what he sees to be a collective hallucination of the others; there is far too much at stake. He reacts like Ahithophel, who realised as clear as daylight that he had in fact rebelled against God and that without God there is no hope. Like Judas, Ahithophel stepped out. But where Judas acted out of desperation, Ahithophel acted with a full realisation of the situation, making all necessary arrangements for his house, and then drawing the inevitable consequences. Thomas seems to have had the same degree of realisation. But where Ahithophel had caused his own problem, Thomas was faced with a disaster beyond his own control, though with no less drastic consequences. Jesus had been 'God (elohim) walking in their midst'. That was now an irrecoverable past, as it had been for Adam when he had been expelled from the Garden. What remained was: 'dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return'.

And then suddenly, the next week, he is confronted with his Redeemer! When we realise the full extent of this situation we will also see the real meaning of his answer: "My Lord (adonai, the one to follow) and my God (elohim, the mediator between God and himself)." This is not the mathematical conclusion in the sense of Jesus = God, that some theologians want to see in it; this is the shout of joy by a man who sees his only hope in this life, the Jesus on whom it all depended, alive again. It proclaims his joy at the victory that had been won after all. He had not believed in what he had regarded as vain hope, but now he is convinced. Seeing was believing. John himself had come to believe when he had seen the empty grave, with the empty linen cloths (John 20:8). Thomas had to see Jesus Himself; but when that happened he actually had no further need to touch Him, as he had earlier proclaimed to be his condition for believing. When there had still been that fog, his radar had served him faultlessly; after the fog had lifted he had left it too late to switch back to visual navigation. But now he had made that switch nothing could shake his faith anymore. All the time there had been nothing wrong with his perception of Jesus, and hence with his faith in that. His only possible 'shortcoming' had been that he had been late in switching back from his 'radar' to navigation on visual observation.

In passing it is significant that the three synoptic gospels all include Peter's 'confession', shortly before Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain. In John's gospel it is lacking. Are we to assume that Thomas' confession in chapter 20 is supposed to take its place?

The lesson

Jesus' reply to Thomas' reaction is, in my opinion, one of the outstanding statements of the New Testament: "Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (vs. 29). That is a declaration that concerns (amongst others) us. We are among those that are asked to believe without seeing, to show a faith that is even greater than that of Thomas. So the lesson of the three incidents in John's gospel involving Thomas is: take for an example the faith of Thomas in Jesus' power to save, and add the testimony of John himself to convince us of the reality of his resurrection ('the Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Thomas'). Then Thomas' radar will be our radar, and his faith will stand there as a towering lighthouse for our navigation, so that we do not have to navigate in a fog. Then we will be able to take our bearing on the understanding he had before Jesus' death, and upon his belief in the reality of His resurrection after that had occurred.

Thomas a hypochondriac? A born pessimist? A doubter and unbeliever? No way! Quite the contrary a shining example to us all!