

In one of Conan Doyle's stories Sherlock Holmes and Watson go on a camping trip. After a good talk and a bottle of claret they go to sleep. Some hours later Holmes wakes and nudges Watson. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see". "I see millions of stars", replies Watson. "What does that tell you?" Watson ponders for a moment. "Astronomically", he replies, "it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I observe it is a quarter to three. Theologically, I am in awe at the creative power of God. Meteorologically, I suspect that tomorrow will be a lovely day. What, Holmes, does it tell you?" "Elementary, my dear Watson", Holmes replies, "it tells me that someone has stolen our tent".

Well, many people today claim that we Christians have lost our tent. A recent survey found that most of the population in this country no longer claim to have any connection with Christianity. Our culture has become increasingly opposed to the values that our faith espouses, so this is hardly surprising. We are encouraged to value individual autonomy, to put our personal needs and rights first and foremost, to see ourselves primarily as consumers. But Christian faith teaches us that we are at our best when we give ourselves away, when we practice generosity, when we recognize that we are members one of another. Of course, the fact that these attitudes are not generally esteemed does not imply that self-giving, generosity and learning to live together in community are any less authentic and important than they have always been. If we have any sense of historical perspective we will recognize that the faith we live by has formed our culture and brought comfort and hope to countless millions for many centuries. But down the years, its' power to capture people's imagination has always ebbed and flowed, and although in the west the influence of Christianity may be in decline, elsewhere in the world the Church continues to grow and flourish.

Today is St Thomas's Day, and if ever there was a Saint for our times, it is he. It takes courage to buck the trends, to live by values that go against the generally-accepted beliefs of the age. These days, it's not fashionable to declare your faith in Christianity or your allegiance to the Church, but Thomas reminds us that this is not a new phenomenon. In the last days of Jesus' ministry, when he had been hounded out of

Jerusalem, he was staying in a village a few miles north when news came that Lazarus was ill at Bethany which is only a mile or two away from the city. Jesus immediately decided to go to him. Everyone realized that this would be dangerous, but it was Thomas who verbalised the rest of the disciples' thoughts: "Let us also go, that we may die with him". Following Jesus is not about being comfortable, or successful, or appreciated. Being a faithful disciple may involve hard decisions, going against the grain of the times, coping with unpopularity, persecution and even death. This is how it has always been and we should not expect anything less. It's not a matter of being successful, in terms that the world generally understands success. What really matters is faithfulness.

In our country, we have become used to Christianity being part of the fabric of our way of life. Every community has its' church, a sign of the role that the gospel has played over past centuries. It's very sad that this influence now seems to be waning, but we should not be unduly worried. Just because the Church is getting smaller and less influential, that does not undermine the essential truth of the Gospel itself. The Church exists as a minority in many places in the world, and many Christians are living out their lives in alien environments and cultures. In fact this is more usually the case than the situation in which we find ourselves. Many would argue that the establishment as we have known it in Britain involves too much of a compromise, and the Church will be healthier and capable of a more prophetic ministry if and when she becomes less entangled with the powers that be. Perhaps though this ongoing process we are being taught to listen a little better and to learn a little more humility.

Of course St Thomas is best known for his response to Jesus' resurrection. When the other disciples tell him how Jesus had appeared to them, he can't believe it. His reply to them is typical of the man, absolutely practical: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails and place my finger in the mark of the nails and place my hands in his side, I will not believe". A week later, when all the disciples, including Thomas, were again together, Jesus comes again. He calls Thomas to touch the scars of crucifixion, and in that moment he must have made the connection between the physical body of the One before him, and the tortured figure of the man on the cross, hanging by hands and feet with his side opened with the soldier's spear. As these two figures fused together, Thomas made the leap between loyalty to a friend and teacher, and adoring

faith in God himself. His scepticism and doubts dissolve and he responds: “My Lord and my God.”

Thomas reminds us that it's ok to question. Out of struggles and doubts and questions, many find that their response to God can deepen and faith can grow. In fact the opposite of faith is not really doubt. After all, Thomas did not so much doubt as not dare to believe. The opposite of faith is really fear. Fear in the sense of not being able to trust. Which is why taking the risk of trusting life, trusting the future, trusting other people, trusting God's love – is so central to Christian faith. Of course we need to question. Of course we need to be alert to the way the world is going. Of course the struggles of the Church in our times should concern us. But deeper than all these concerns is our response of trust in the God who loves us and calls us and who has made us for himself.

Christians confront the same world, the same problems, the same mystery, as everyone else, but we see them in a different light. We stake our lives on the fact that God was in Christ, making our life's work to help people to see with new eyes. Michael Mayne puts it like this: “In the light of Good Friday and Easter everything must be redefined: God and us, life and love and death. *God* redefined as our loving compassionate Father. *You and I* redefined as made in God's likeness and therefore of irreplaceable worth. *Life* redefined as a journey on which we are called to learn how to trust, how to forgive and how to love; and *death* redefined as part of our journey home to God. And *love* redefined as a profound giving of attention to another person, that self-giving love manifested in Jesus. Even the *spirit of God* himself redefined as Holy Spirit, embodied as the Spirit of Christ in the new fellowship of the Church, and recognized wherever the Spirit-given virtues of faith, hope and love are found”.

Holmes and Watson looked up and saw the stars. Today we need to lift our eyes beyond the immediate problems that so easily depress and demoralise us, and recognize that this is God's world and that he loves us all, and that he has placed us here for a purpose. There is an eternal dimension to our existence, and it is not our job to imagine that we can solve all the problems of life. Probably the most important thing we can do is to recognize the love that is at the heart of our existence, and which

is mediated to us through those around us, and to respond in thankfulness. St Thomas teaches us the words: “My Lord and my God.”