

NEW TESTAMENT PERSONALITIES

"IV. Thomas"

INTRODUCTION

We know next to nothing of the details in the life story of the disciple named Thomas. Where he came from, who his parents were, what trade he followed, what he was doing when he encountered Jesus - none of these was recalled or related by the men who wrote the four Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke in their Gospel accounts give him no more space than the simple inclusion of his name in the lists of the disciples. But John's Gospel tells us more, and on the basis of two scenes from that Gospel, history has drawn a picture of Thomas as "the first man from Missouri" - the great doubter among the disciples.

THE FIRST SCENE

The first scene was on the other side of the crucifixion, when Jesus was sharing with his disciples his faith about the future for himself and for them. "I go to prepare a place for you. And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also". Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" It's doubtful that any of the disciples fully grasped the significance of the words, but it remained for Thomas, with furrowed brow and perplexed expression, to raise his hand and interrupt, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, and how can we know the way". Thomas, who liked the feel of solid fact beneath his feet, was here raising a question that disturbed him.

THE SECOND SCENE

And even more does the second scene, on this side of the crucifixion and resurrection, cast Thomas in the role of the doubter.

For some reason, Thomas had not been with the other disciples when Jesus had made himself known to them on that first Easter Sunday evening. And when at length Thomas rejoined the other ten, they viewed with one another to tell him about the risen Lord. He could only shake his head, and with a look that must have been a mixture of pity and incredulity, he said in effect to them, "Now see here, you've been under a great strain. You've been seeing things. What we all need is a good rest. Why, I couldn't believe what you've just told me unless Jesus were here and I could see and touch the nailprints in his hands". But some days later, confronted with his Master, Thomas became the last of the eleven to be convinced that Christ was alive. There he found all of the evidence needed to remove the cataracts from his soul-sight. In that moment, he made one of the most forthright confessions of faith to be found in the Gospels - "My Lord and my God".

REFLECTING ON THESE SCENES

Knowing what we do about these two occasions, it becomes a bit easier to reconstruct other pages from the life story of Thomas. I wonder how it was when Jesus invited him to discipleship. Did Thomas say something like this? "Well, Lord I think you should know the kind of person I am. I'm forever asking questions. My parents tell me that the first word I learned to say was, 'why'. The rabbi in the synagogue got tired of seeing me linger on the sabbath, because I always wanted to question something he had said. My

friends laugh at me when I start on a journey with all of my maps and equipment to meet every emergency, but you see.....I've got to be sure". Does it seem strange to you that Jesus should include such a doubter among his disciples? No more so, surely, than that he should include such a delinquent as Matthew, or a doormate as Andrew, or a thunderstorm as Simon Peter. And perhaps Jesus was thinking back to that day when he had baffled his parents by staying behind in the Temple to deal with his doubts and questions. At any rate, there was something about Thomas which Jesus liked and loved, and to him, the Master issued the invitation that he reserved for a relatively few, "Come, live with me and work with me".

All the way between there and Calvary, so far as we can picture it, Thomas was still the doubter. How do you suppose it was with Thomas when Jesus charged "his disciples to take nothing for their journey except a staff - no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics". Did Thomas say, "But Lord that goes against everything I've ever done". "I've always taken an extra bit of bread, an extra coin, an extra tunic, because I've wanted to be prepared, just in case?". How do you suppose it was with Thomas when Jesus said such things as "Moses said unto you, but I say unto you". Or "it has been said, 'Hate your enemies', but I say 'Love your enemies'". How do you suppose it was when the crowd of five thousand people gathered about Jesus and realized that it was mealtime? Can't you see Thomas taking inventory and then reporting to Jesus, "Here are the facts, Lord - five loaves and two fish. There's nothing to do, Lord, but to send the crowds away and go into the villages and buy food."

TWO KINDS OF DOUBTERS

There are always two kinds of doubters, as far as I can tell. There is the society of cynics, the professional pessimists, who seem to delight in subscribing to the most dismal, dark view, and if they are outvoted and outvoted, they retreat to their cellars of gloom, hoping that subsequent events will prove them right. But there is also the society of sincere doubters - of which Thomas seems to be the honorary chairman - made up of honest people who simply must ask questions, pose problems, take time, weigh possibilities. If meantime the rest of the team or firm or family decides to move ahead, they'll do their best to catch up and they're not at all unhappy when their fears and doubts prove to be unfounded.

Thomas was like that. I'm glad that all of the disciples were not like Thomas in nature, for I wonder if Jesus could ever have worked through them if as a group they had demanded facts before faith, proff performance performance, answers before adventure. But still I'm glad that Thomas was one of the disciples, because then as now, he's a real and valuable part of the human race. Thomas is the person in your family who says, "But maybe we'd better figure out how we're going to pay for this before we order it". Thomas is the person in your office who wants all the facts and plenty of time before he makes up his mind. Thomas is the member of any board or group who raises honest, searching questions about policy, who often disagrees yet manages to do it without becoming disagreeable.

Whether we recognize Thomas as ourselves or not, we all know that he's at least a relative, and there's something of him in each

of us. We, too, have our doubts, and I'm not just talking about religious doubts at this point. At its best, this capacity to doubt is glorious, and we are in immense debt to some of the great doubters of history. Columbus doubted that the earth was flat and discovered a new world. Florence Nightingale doubted that her sex was helpless in the face of the injuries and disease that riddled the ranks of British soldiers in the Crimean War and began the profession of nursing. Branch Rickey doubted that Major League baseball was an exclusive all white corporation and with Jackie Robinson challenged an old and tired tradition. So today an intense game of "I Doubt It" is being played all around the world as some people by their deeds declare their doubts, for instance, that cancer is without a cure, that the black and white races can mix and live together side by side in goodwill, that war is inevitable.

JESUS WAS A DOUBTER

The more you let your mind play around with this, the more things it suggests to you. In a way, Jesus himself was a tremendous doubter. For one thing, he doubted the ecclesiastical rigmarole of the Pharisees. He doubted those laws that said "an eye for an eye", and so on. He doubted the traditions that put Sabbath observations above human need. He doubted other things, too, and proceeded to challenge the status quo of his day.

Yes, I think there is something of the doubting nature in each of us. Harry Emerson Fosdick strikes a familiar chord in the experience of many a person in this autobiographical passage:

"When I returned to college for my sophomore year, my friends who had known me as a devout Christian were astonished. Wild horses could not have dragged me into church. My real struggles concerned the intellectual credibility of the Christian faith.

I said to my mother....."I'm going to clear God out of the universe and start all over to see what I can find". But behind closed doors I began to doubt some of my doubts. My rebellion came full circle and I started questioning my answers. There was no thought of returning to old positions, but I began to see the possibility of new positions - old spiritual values in new mental categories".

And thus were laid some of the foundations for one of the most powerful ministries that this nation has ever seen.

It is surely too much to say that all religious doubt results in strengthened faith. Doubts can do all sorts of things to people, and from the ranks of the doubters come saints and sinners, the pious and the profane. But it is not too much to say that the noblest faith and action in Christian history have emerged from struggles with doubt, nights when the stars could not be seen, stretches when people felt spiritually lost, times when the questions loomed larger than the universe. Let no man despise his kinship with Thomas. We're reminded of the words of Tennyson in his great poem "In Memoriam" - "There lives more faith in honest doubt believe me, than in half the creeds".

THOMAS HAD FAITH, TOO

But again, we are all relatives of Thomas because he had faith. He never would have become a disciple if his life had consisted solely of doubts and reservations. Think, for a moment, of the people whose applications for discipleship with Jesus were rejected by him because they hedged on their commitment with so many provisos and conditions. "No" said Jesus in effect. "If you have to bring your safe deposit box with you, if you have to check on a pair of oxen first, or if you have to attend a funeral first, then forget it all". Still we find Thomas as one of the 12 who left all and followed him. Thomas had faith enough in the way of Jesus to try to make it his way. He had faith enough in the words of Jesus for Jesus to make him as one of his spokesman. He had faith enough in God that Jesus loved him. Thomas was not all doubts; he was faith as well.

And so are we and in other realms than what we call the "religious" realm. Surely - in getting an education and choosing a vocation; in standing before an altar with one person and promising, "Until death do us part"; in accepting a position and moving to a new community; in walking out of our home any morning and saying, "Good bye for now.....see you later". Faith is the zest and stuff of life. Without it, life can become little, timorous and paralyzed.

This is true with religious faith in particular. We see a sunset or listen to a symphony and we feel grateful to Someone or Something. We build a home and hold a babe in our arms and we wonder if the love we have for that infant is a hint of God's love for us. We are confronted with powerful biography - Christ, Lincoln, Schweitzer, Helen Keller - and who of us can be satisfied with the notion that we reside in a purely materialistic universe. We drive out to a cemetery with all that is mortal of a loved one, and something within us cries out with Tennyson: "Thou madest man, he knows not why, he thinks he was not made to die".

Yes, we have our doubts - but, we have our faith, too. And it is on that faith that we must build the life we call our own. A faith in the power, purposes, promises of God - faith in the words of the Bible, "That all things work together.....for good.....to those who love God".

THE MASTER CONFRONTS US

Yes, the Master confronts us and calls to us - "Learn of me". Some things he requires us to leave behind - composity, prestige, passion for possessions, ~~if~~ we are going to take seriously his word and way and walk with him. But about our doubts, he says, "Bring them along and see what happens". And we start with many a stumble perhaps but with sincerity, at least. We study his words. We stretch to meet his ways. We keep examining our lives in the light of his life. There are times when we get discouraged, weighted down by doubt. The fog seems so thick.

The story of Thomas is not just a first century story. It is thank God the story of countless souls in conflict and growth, the story of people who heed a call, bundle together their doubts and their faith, and proceed to follow Christ as the best and truest they know, until at length they stand above the mists and fogs of doubt.

and who - like Thomas - find their way from doubt to certainty and in their lives exclaim, "MY Lord and My God"

PRAYER: And now may that spirit that was in thy servant
 Thomas be also in us - that we may have faith
enough in the way of Jesus to try to make it our way. Help us
to overcome our doubts, our reservations in the way of life he
proclaimed. Strengthen our faith. Deepen our convictions. We
ask this in his spirit. Amen

A strange man set foot on the shores of India a long time ago.

He spoke of a man crucified between two thieves on a hill called Golgotha.

For he was there when Jesus walked on water. And he was there when they put a crown of thorns on Jesus' head.

They called him Thomas.

He spent just twenty years in India. During which time he laid the foundations of a whole new religion.



Coins issued by King Gundaphar in foreign St. Thomas visited India



Christianity. And he built seven churches on the Malabar coast under the benign patronage of the Hindu kings of the time.

All this happened between 52 A.D. and 72 A.D. Just twenty years after Jesus suffered on the cross.

Having completed his mission, Thomas died in India on the twenty-first of December in 72 A.D.



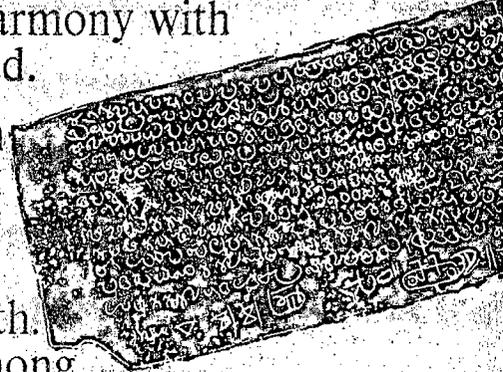
1900 years. It's a long time.

Kingdoms come and go. The political map changes like a kaleidoscope. But beneath the surface, certain concerns remain central to man.

A copper plate decree from the third century The Hindu King Vir Raghava Chakravarti grants privileges and lands to a Christian subject, Iravi Corttan

How is man to live in peace and harmony with man and God.

This man St. Thomas still lives. 19 centuries after his death.



Not only among his people but in the whole of India. Because if St. Thomas was welcomed with open arms and allowed to preach freely by India, so have Christians in India identified themselves totally with national aspirations. Aspirations which permit complete freedom of worship to people of all communities.

India remembers St. Thomas as part of

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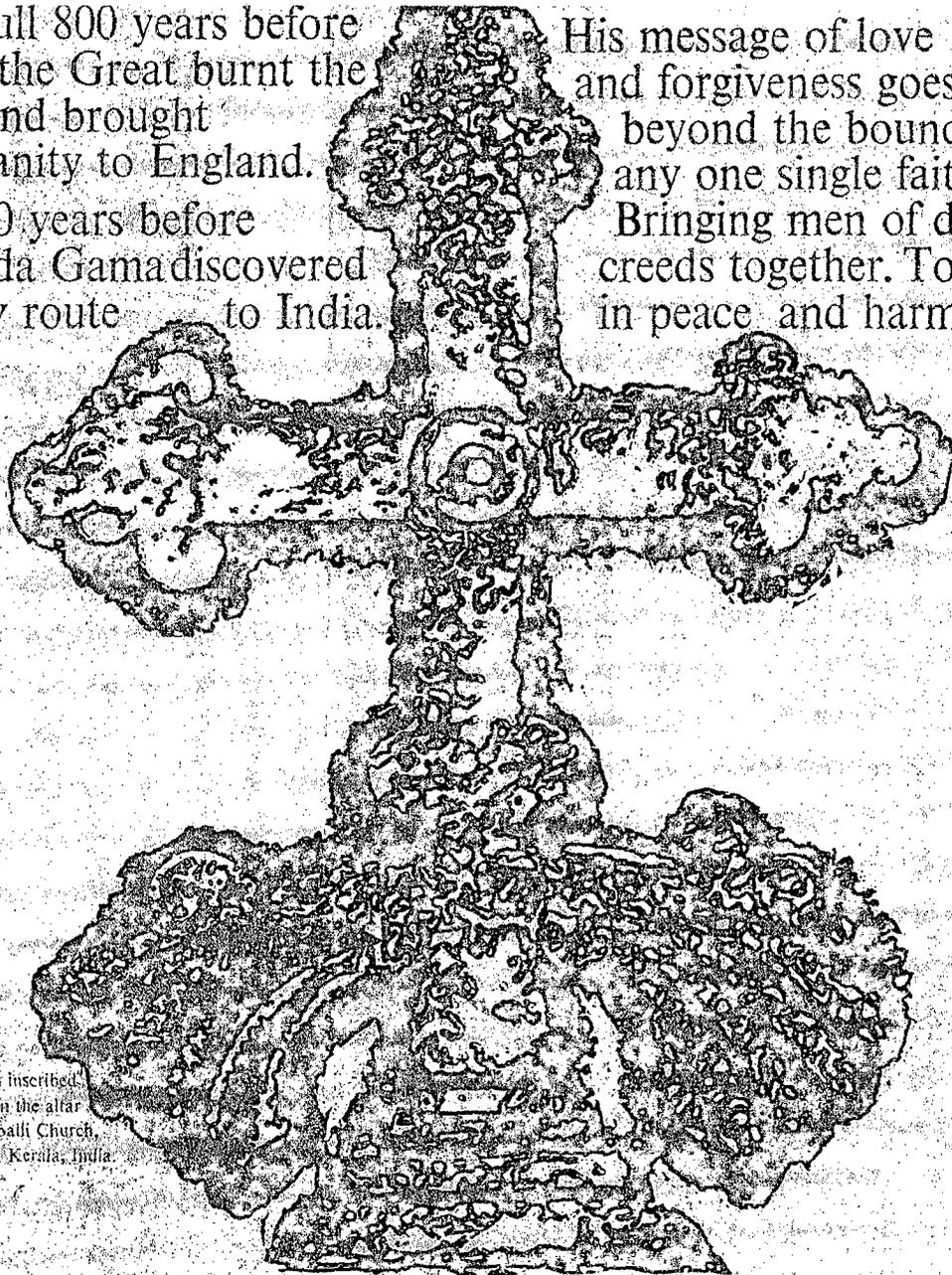
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A full 800 years before
Alfred the Great burnt the
cakes and brought
Christianity to England.

1400 years before
Vasco da Gama discovered
the new route to India.

His message of love
and forgiveness goes
beyond the bounds of
any one single faith.
Bringing men of different
creeds together. To live
in peace and harmony.



A sixth century cross inscribed
on a stone slab on the altar
of the Valiyapalli Church,
Kottayam, Kerala, India

India remembers Saint Thomas

The National Committee for St. Thomas' Day, 1972 A.D.

Mrs. John Matthai, Chairman. Mr. K. M. Philip, Chairman: National Y.M.C.A. India. Vice-Chairman.