

St Thomas 2020

I'd like to claim St Thomas as the patron saint of evidence, if it has not been done already. St John's account is very clear – Thomas wants evidence: 'Unless I see the mark of the nail on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will never believe it'. Jesus produces the evidence, indeed he is the evidence. Thomas responds with those wonderful words: 'My Lord and my God'.

Since a visit to Deptford a long time ago, I have always associated that phrase with the Eucharist. It was at a black-majority church in South London, as the sacrament was elevated at the consecration, a woman's voice rose above the small crowd – she had seen and believed – "My Lord and my God" she said.

In these strange times when we have been largely deprived of the sacraments, I'd like to ask the question: is there evidence of these sacraments operating in any other form? To answer this we need to go beyond St Thomas the saint, beyond this St Thomas church, and into the local St Thomas community, the West side of the Exe. For a number of weeks, there has been a regular community meeting on zoom on a Thursday morning to catch up with what support is available, what different groups are doing, to share information. This has included councillors, representatives of charities and community groups, of the doctors' surgery and the local Co-op, plus the leaders of local Churches.

Sharing the story of our local community, reflecting our hurts and suffering, offering support and hope: this seems to be the stuff of the sacrament of the Eucharist taken out beyond the church building. The Community Larder in particular might be called sacramental as food is taken, blessed by its giving and reception, and then distributed where there is need.

But in turn that begs another and potentially sharp question. To reverse the order – are the sacraments that we formally and traditionally celebrate inside the Church truly sacraments if they have no representation outside? The final words of the Mass, *Ite missa est*, which we translate roughly as 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord' trip off the tongue too readily, as we begin to think about coffee and chatting to friends, and we respond 'In the name of Christ. Amen'. A better phrase would be 'Now go and get on with it' or 'Make what we have done real'. An alternative acclamation before the distribution of communion (sometimes used by Desmond Tutu) says this more gracefully, 'Behold what you are. May we become what we receive'.

As this plays on the different ideas around the Body of Christ – the crucified and resurrected Christ of the wafer, and the Church as the corporate Body of Christ – so Thomas' statement is given a hope and an aspiration. We are something already, but we have some growing and changing to do.

One of the ways of being transformed is to open ourselves to the needs of a local community, and to become vulnerable in discovering the vulnerability of others. We become the Church therefore both outside and inside a building: what we do outside is made holy by what we do inside, and what we do inside is made real and holy by what we do outside. But more than that, our faith is read through our actions, and as we encourage others to join in, they may catch something of our love of Jesus – what led Thomas to proclaim in the days following the resurrection 'My Lord and my God'.

Fr David