



Rev Helen Jacobi
St Thomas and the Way

Acts 1:12-14

John 14:1-7

St Thomas

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St Thomas the apostle was loyal, he was brave, he was a person full of questions, he wasn't afraid to challenge and test ideas.

Thomas was committed to the community of followers of Jesus and cared about them.

He wanted to understand Jesus and stuck with him even when that wasn't easy.

Thomas is a great saint to be named after, I think.

This character of Thomas was to be found in the church community of St Thomas on Union Street from 1877 to 1967, and we are privileged to inherit these qualities in our combined communities of St Matthew and St Thomas.

There are people here in the congregation today who know much more about the St Thomas' Freemans Bay story than I do.

The stories I have been told all speak of a church that was much loved and valued by all who belonged.

It was a church that placed high value on the ceremony of the liturgy, something mysterious and beautiful in a part of town that was pretty poor and that was even called a slum by some.

The clergy of both St Thomas' and St Matthew's spoke out on many issues, including the poverty of the people they worked with.

In the early 20th century sermons were still reported in the newspaper or heard on the radio.

In the 1930s the vicar Rev Arthur Allerton of St Thomas was labelled a communist in letters to the editor.¹

A decade or so later Rev Blackwood Moore, vicar of St Matthew's, lost his radio broadcasting slot for being over critical of the government of the day.²

They were not shy about speaking up.

Every time Thomas appears in the gospels, he too, is speaking up. We get to see Thomas more than most of the disciples and each time with a small description or interaction.

The most well known episode is the one that gets him the name of "doubting Thomas".

After the resurrection Jesus has appeared to the disciples but Thomas was not with them and understandably he is pretty sceptical "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."³

Jesus of course obliges him by reappearing a week later and invites Thomas to touch his hands.

The phrase "doubting Thomas" from this encounter is usually used in a negative way – "don't be a doubting Thomas".

But that is not the way Jesus treats Thomas.

Jesus encourages Thomas, accepts his questions, and meets Thomas where he is.

In today's reading Jesus is trying to reassure his disciples – "do not let your hearts be troubled; I am going to prepare a place for you; and you know the way to the place I am going." (John 14:1-7)

Thomas is the one who says what all the disciples are thinking – what do you mean? we don't know where you are going – how can we possibly know the way?

Thomas is thinking of a physical place – maybe another city; maybe another country; somewhere they will be safe.

¹ Place on the Edge: the story of St Matthew-in-the-City Jack Leigh, p117

² *ibid* p 103

³ John 20:25

Thomas wants a map, a travel booking, a place in MIQ.

The “place” Jesus is talking about is the place where we find ourselves in relationship with God and with each other.

The awkward translation “dwelling places” is trying to get at the double meaning of the word as a place, and as a metaphor for the “indwelling of the Holy Spirit”.⁴

The place where the Spirit dwells – within us.

John’s theology is all about Jesus being the incarnation of God “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God” (John 1:1).

For John, Jesus is God in the world, right there in the flesh.

Knowing, abiding, dwelling, being in relationship; these are the things John writes about.

There are many rooms in my Father’s house; there are multiple ways to be with God because this is about relationship, not about a physical place.

The disciples know Jesus, he has said to them: abide in me as I abide in you; be with me, walk with me, to the cross, and you will know God.

That line “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” has been used over the centuries as an exclusive line, to exclude other religions, and to claim Jesus as The (only) Way to God.

Many a bumper sticker has been sold with “Jesus the way” printed on it.

Theologian Gail O’Day says “this is not the sweeping claim of a major world religion, but the conviction of a religious minority in the ancient Mediterranean world. These verses are the confessional celebration of a particular faith community, convinced of the truth and life it has received in the incarnation.”⁵

John’s community hear these words after and in the midst of persecution and opposition and struggle.

⁴ https://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/jhn/14/1/t_conc_1011002_mone

⁵ Interpreter’s Bible vol IX p 744 Abingdon Press 1995

And they experience the indwelling of God with them, they experience God incarnate in their lives, and they are grateful. Jesus invites Thomas and the other disciples to walk the Jesus way, abiding together in the many dwelling places of the house of God.

But there is no intention of the exclusion of others. We are all invited in our communities and in our homes, our dwelling places to travel the Jesus way.

Today we give thanks for those who gathered during 90 years in the church in Union St and those who carried the St Thomas wairua with them when they joined the St Matthew's community.

It must have been quite traumatic for the St Thomas Community to be told (some 54 years ago) they had to move to a new place of worship.

To be forced to learn the lesson of our gospel – in God's house there are many dwelling places.

They followed the Jesus way which led them here and I am sure to other churches as well.

We are enriched and blessed by their memories and their story.

We carry that wairua with us in our St Matthew's identity.

Loyalty, bravery, questions, challenge and testing of ideas.

Being committed to the community caring about them.

Wanting to understand Jesus and stick with him even when that isn't easy.

That is the heritage we give thanks for, and we claim today.

Our way, our truth and our life.

The way that Thomas showed us, the Jesus way.