

St Thomas

Life for the disciples was very different after the resurrection.

From being members of an obscure and persecuted Palestinian sect, they became celebrities. For example, Luke, the author of Acts records in a passage immediately before the one we heard today,

So many signs and wonders were worked among the people at the hands of the apostles that the sick were taken out into the streets and laid on beds in the hope that at least the shadow of Peter might fall across some of them as he went past.

(Acts 5:12-16)

The writer later comments of those brought for healing that 'all of them were cured.'

We also read that Peter and his fellow apostles were transformed from timid men into brave ones, fearlessly proclaiming their faith.

This is all very well - but how does it translate into life in C21st Pudsey ?

For some Christians the answer is very simple - quite directly and literally. And there are churches and places of pilgrimage where miraculous healing is offered and witnessed.

But there is a difficulty: how do we explain the failure of miracles to happen. For there can be no doubt there are thousands of Christians passionately praying for a healing who are disappointed. Instead of healing, they face continued illness or death.

And the answer sometimes supplied by those who offer this healing is that those whose prayers have not been answered have simply not prayed with enough faith. It is their own fault!

By and large I reject this answer. It heaps feelings of guilt on those who feel that their prayers have not been answered. Illness and death become punishments for a lack of faith and good health the reward for powerful prayers. It also turns the Christian faith into a kind of magic: screw yourself up enough into a frenzy of faith and you can make God do anything!

Perhaps the answer to this difficulty lies with St Thomas.

Thomas was a good Anglican: he wanted to subject miraculous claims to hard scientific evidence. He was not going to believe until he saw the holes made by the nails in Jesus's hands and touch the wound made by the spear in his side. I approve entirely of such scepticism! But I approve also of his response when the evidence he demanded was supplied:

'My Lord and my God'

John 20:28

In those words lies the solution to all our difficulties. Obedience and submission to Christ. When that happens all our prayers are answered.

Now that may sound a rather large claim. "Obey Christ and it will rain chocolate Easter eggs if I pray for it?" Yes - but if you obey Christ you will no longer ask for chocolate Easter eggs! Having prayers answered is not about bringing God into line with our desires. It is about bringing our requests into line with what God wants to give us. The end result is in one sense exactly the same: we receive all that we ask for. The difference lies in who is doing the running: it is God himself.

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