

**Sermon by Bishop Tim Stevens on
St Thomas Ipswich Patronal Festival: Feast of St Thomas 2 July 2017**

“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.”

These days the phrase “viewers may find these pictures distressing” is becoming more and more familiar on the TV news. Our minds and imaginations have seen so much suffering during weeks when hardly a day seems to have gone by without a human tragedy unfolding.

News editors have to tread a tightrope between shocking or offending the audience on the one hand, and avoiding the full impact of events on the other. So we catch glimpses of what it must have been like in Grenfell Tower during the horrific fire, but we are spared having to face the effects on the bodies of so many innocent victims.

Yet we know that the traumatic effects of disasters stay with survivors long after the cameras have left and the headlines have changed. This week the families of the Hillsborough disaster have been back in the news, still seeking justice and appropriate responses 28 years after the deaths of their loved ones.

And now the streams of migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe is beginning again with all the risks of drowning which appear not to deter desperate people: a tide which is likely to continue for several weeks.

Inevitably, we need to be shielded from some of this: there is only so much suffering to which we are capable of responding with compassion. Most of us find the instinct to look away almost overwhelming.

Think then about Thomas’ reaction to the disciples’ news about Jesus. He neither rejoices nor disbelieves. Rather, he says, in effect, unless I see and touch the evidence of Jesus’ suffering, I cannot accept what you are telling me. And he is absolutely explicit about the detail of the evidence he needs: *“Unless I see the mark of the nails, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”*

The effect of crucifixion on the human body must have been *horrifying*. *The process was designed to render the victims utterly degraded, humiliated and broken.* No one would want to see it or to face the effects of it on anyone, least of all a friend or a loved one.

Yet this it seems is what Thomas felt he must do if he was to come to terms with the scale and reality of what happened to Jesus. And yet, growing up in Galilee, Thomas and the other disciples must have seen crucifixions before. There had been a revolt brutally suppressed by the Romans, and we are told by historians that there were thousands of crosses by the roadside in that part of the country.

So what might we suppose was going through his mind when he insisted on the closest possible inspection of the bodily wounds of someone who had endured a horrific form of torture?

That question is important for a congregation whose patron saint is St Thomas. Although he is known as “doubting Thomas” because the other disciples were ready to believe without the physical evidence, I have a feeling that it wasn’t just doubt which shaped his response.

Rather, perhaps it was the scale of the claim that Jesus was risen. Perhaps it dawned on Thomas that if Jesus could conquer this kind of death, then his whole universe had changed. Perhaps he knew that if this was true, then he no longer lived in the same world. Perhaps he sensed that this was indeed the beginning of a new creation. That by looking directly at the intense physical evidence of extreme suffering and finding that it could not defeat God’s power, then he could face anything after that.

According to legend, Thomas was to go on to be an evangelist and a missionary in India where one of the world’s earliest Christian churches (the Mar Thoma Church) traces its origins to him. We can imagine him explaining that the world had changed because Jesus had been executed by a death normally reserved for slaves and rebels. That he had been condemned by the state and rejected by the religious authorities of his own people. And he might have added: *“And I saw and touched and felt the hideous wounds inflicted on him with my own eyes and with my own hands. And now I know that if this death cannot defeat him, nothing can. I have looked hard and directly into the worst that human beings can do to each other, and I was not defeated by it. So now, because of God’s love, nothing else will ever defeat me. Neither will it defeat you.”*

What might all this mean for us who are the ST Thomas community here in Ipswich? We live in an age where there is an almost infinite range of distractions from too much reality. As we tire of disasters, or terror attacks, of politics, Brexit or climate change, there is always Face book, twitter or instagrams to distract us. We can live in a virtual world undisturbed by too much reality. Or we can settle for the view that there is no such thing as reality at all – that all news is fake and we can choose what we believe. In short we can anaesthetise ourselves from the world’s pain.

But if St Thomas had chosen that path, we wouldn't be here today, celebrating his life and the patronal festival of this church. Thomas, like all the disciples, was tempted to avoid facing the full implications of Jesus' way of living. They didn't really understand what Jesus meant when he spoke of picking your cross and following him. They had fallen asleep during the night when Jesus was praying before his arrest.

But eventually came the moment for Thomas when he had to choose. Am I going to face the pain of Jesus and respond to it in faith, or am I going to look away?

That's our question on this patronal festival. St Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians: *"Just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ."* AS we face the world's pain and suffering today, we are in our time facing in the same direction as Christ is facing.

A young woman who was arrested by the Nazis and taken to Auschwitz where she died, named Etty Hillesum, wrote this in 1944: *"I somehow want to suffer with you, God. All this suffering is somehow your suffering, and I want to participate with you in it."*

On St Thomas' Day, we are reminded that during his entire life on earth, Jesus went wherever the pain was. And we, his apprentices are called to follow him.