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THE REALIST AMONG THE DISCIPLES.

FOR two reasons the Apostle Thomas has not had justice done him. One is that a man such as he was does not do justice to himself in what he says and does, and so is often misjudged. The other is that a not entirely appropriate description has been attached to Thomas in the popular mind. He is always called "doubting Thomas." The epithet is as true as and no truer than Bacon's famous "jesting Pilate." Pilate jested and Thomas doubted, but neither the jest in the one case nor the doubt in the other is the key to the man.

Thomas was not a doubter so much as a realist. His characteristic was not a denial of the spiritual, but a great difficulty in reaching it. He never came to a conclusion adverse to Christ or to spiritual things, and to call him, as is sometimes done, "the sceptic among the apostles" is absurd. But he could not accept such things so easily as some others could. His mind was one that was much impressed by what was round about him, by what was existent and apparent, and he did not lightly get past that to the unseen. Facts were always present to him, and if he was to have faith it must face them and not fly over them. But all this is not scepticism: it is only sober realism.

If a great ideal is put before them, two different types of mind receive it in two very different ways. One rushes to it with enthusiasm, and is inspired by it to the forgetting or the scorning of the thought of difficulties or defeat. The other is never blinded to the practical situation. It knows an idea, even an ideal, is a very different thing from a *fait accompli*, and that a new hope is always the risk of a new despair. Whenever a great and inspiring enterprise is started in, for example, social reform—a recent illustration

of it was when General Booth launched his "Darkest England" proposals—one may see these two tendencies among those who receive it. Thomas's mind was of the latter of these two types. He believed in Christ, but he felt it was no light thing to believe in Him. The Kingdom of God, of which He was constantly speaking, would not be built in a day. It was a little premature to begin already to dispute, as some of his more ardent fellow-disciples were doing, who would sit on the thrones next the Master. They were hardly that length yet. Even when Christ Himself was speaking among the sunny, flower-clad hills of Galilee, Thomas's mind would sometimes wander—not unbelievingly, but seriously—to the difficulties of the long path that lay in front, and that had to be traversed before it all would be realized.

Does this mean that Thomas had really no right to be an apostle? Such allegiance may seem to be unworthy to be associated with the impetuous enthusiasm of Peter or the ardent devotion of John. On the contrary, the discipleship of Thomas was a notably worthy discipleship. For let us remember that the whole tendency of a nature such as his would be to remain outside a movement such as Christ's, to watch it—perhaps sympathetically—but no more. His bias would be very strongly against committing himself. But Thomas did commit himself. He identified himself with the Galilean Prophet's immediate following. He did this in no blind excitement and under no passing impulse, but with a full and grave sense of what would be involved in it. This was, I say, a notable discipleship, and the worth of it would be appreciated by no one more than the Master Himself. Thomas accepted Christ as his Leader, and where his Leader went he followed, though he saw the goal was both dangerous and distant. That he should be found in Christ's immediate following at all, committed to Him, speaks volumes for a man like Thomas.

It is not always so with Thomases or would-be Thomases to-day.

But what sort of a disciple did this sober-minded realist make? Would his not be a chilling, weakening influence? Let us see. Unfortunately we have only three glimpses of him; but they are all important and significant. They are recorded, it may be mentioned, only in the Fourth Gospel. The author of that Gospel, whether the Apostle John or not, was unquestionably a man of supreme spiritual elevation and insight. His temperament was that of the seer—a temperament the very opposite of that of the realist. But such souls have often a very special affection for those of wingless faith. Is it altogether fanciful to wonder whether some such regard inspired the record of Thomas's deeds and words in this Gospel?

The first appearance of Thomas in the evangelical narrative is on the occasion when Jesus proposed to go to Bethany, where Lazarus lay dead, and to Jerusalem, despite the danger that threatened there. When the disciples heard the proposal they remonstrated. "The Jews," they said to the Master, "of late sought to stone Thee, and goest Thou thither again?" But when he persisted in his intention, who was it at last who spoke? It was an unusual spokesman—Thomas. He was not blind to the danger of going towards the capital. He knew it meant difficulty and peril; more than that, he considered it meant death. With the knowledge of all this, with his eyes open, and with the apprehension of the worst, Thomas turned to his brethren and said, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." One is not quite justified, since the Gospels are such very meagre reports, in judging from the silence of the rest and the unwonted leadership of Thomas that the others were afraid. It looks not altogether unlike it. At any rate Thomas was in this most critical hour conspicuously faithful and brave.

We can in part understand it. To the others, just because of their enthusiastic following of Christ, the thought of his defeat and death must have been utterly paralysing. It was the rocking of the very world under their feet. To Thomas it was somewhat different. A man of his temperament was able to admit into his mind, alongside of even a very real and deep devotion to Christ, contemplations and calculations that would not occur to others. His mind had at times gone forward to consider what the relations of Christ and the authorities might come to be. He, like his Master, was not deceived by the excitement of Galilean crowds. Beneath that he had read a steadily growing hostility that some day would come to a head. And now the crisis seemed at hand. When it came it would mean—one thing. Yes: Peter and John's talk about the arrangement of the thrones had been premature. They had more usefully discussed the arrangement of prison-cells. The days of promise and prospect in Galilee were over now: before was hostile Judea and the Master bent on going there. It had come to the end—more quickly, more inevitably, more *fatally* than even in his gloomiest hours he had ever thought.

Well—and here spoke the heroic Thomas—if it had: what then? At least there is something to hold to. At least one can be faithful, loyal, brave. If we are not to be kings, at least we need not be cowards and traitors. We looked to share the Master's success: we can share His failure. We thought to live with Him: "let us also go that we may die with Him." Our dreams have gone; our duty remains—the duty of faithfulness, of honour, of courage. Come what may—and only one thing can come—it is better to be true than base, to be brave than craven. Let us go to Jerusalem!

Not a syllable of murmuring against the Master. Not a suggestion of "I knew it." Not a thought of personal

escape. In the approach of the crisis, which none of the disciples had ever foreseen, but which Thomas more than any of the others must have foreshadowed, this man was the first, the firmest, the most faithful.

And so that little band went up, silent, apprehensive, troubled, to Jerusalem. It was the journey of which in St. Mark's Gospel we have such a striking detail. "They were in the way," says the evangelist, "going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus went before them, and they were amazed, and as they followed they were afraid." Why has no artist ever painted the group? Ahead, alone, rapt in thought, the Master, conscious that already He was entering on the Via Dolorosa: the twelve coming after, perplexed and alarmed, and of them first, with stern face, but with firm footstep, Thomas.

Such is the first glimpse we have of that disciple whose position in the apostolic band many have been inclined to look on rather disparagingly.

We hear no more of Thomas till he reappears in the gathering of the little company in the upper room. The disciples were troubled and sad. Their Master had spoken of betrayal at the hands of one of themselves, and of His approaching departure whither they could not follow Him. Silence and gloom crept over the eleven—the traitor had gone forth—as Jesus spoke thus. The Master saw the sad faces, and began to cheer them. "Let not your hearts be troubled," He said, and went on to speak words of comfort and encouragement. His words doubtless lifted the clouds from most of their minds. But not from at least one. The impression of what it would mean to them if their Master were gone was not so quickly removed from the mind of Thomas. His appreciation of real fact, his realization of an actual situation made him feel dissatisfied with the general exhortation "Believe in God," and the unanalysed statement, "Ye know whither I go." These words may

have soothed the others: happy for the moment to hear their Master's voice speaking sweetly and tenderly, they did not care to examine too exactly what He said. But Thomas's mind was different. It was not in the face of a situation so real and terrible, to be quieted with vague comfort, or with words that did not seem to cover an actual fact. Was the dread emptiness of the Master's departure from them, who owed everything to Him, and were nothing without Him, met by His saying mysteriously, "Whither I go ye know"? They did *not* know. They knew He was going to an unknown betrayal, probably into the hands of His deadly foes. The situation was too real, too serious for unexplained words. He looked at John, still resting on his dear, near Master's breast; he looked at Peter, full of the inward resolve he would yet show Jesus what stuff he was made of by following Him to the end. He looked at the others. Did one of them realize that perhaps in a day their Master's place would be vacant, and they would be left leaderless, with the vague words echoing in their ears, "Ye know the way whither I have gone?" It was a moment of solemnity and peace and holy beauty. The Master was speaking tender words, as only He could be tender. They were alone. It seemed profane to interrupt. But Thomas could not forget the realities that lay just outside the door, and awaited on the morrow, and he burst in with the contradiction and the question: "Lord, we know *not* whither Thou goest, and how *can* we know the way?"

I repeat, Thomas was not a doubter so much as a realist. The interruption sounded unbelieving, but it was not the words of an unbeliever. It was the serious enquiry of a man who realized what the future would be without Jesus, and so demanded a comfort that should be real and true. There is a scrutiny and even a denial of the words of the very Master Himself which may be more truly honouring to Him than an acceptance of them which is not insincere,

but easy. It is no light thing to receive the Gospel in any form. That God is really my Father, that my sins can be forgiven, that dear dead ones are safe with Christ, and that to-morrow we shall see them again—I do not understand, nor do I even envy the man who accepts all that with a facile faith.

The third scene in which Thomas appears in the evangelical narrative is after the Crucifixion. It is the double scene in which he first refuses to believe his fellow disciple's report that Jesus was risen again, and afterwards is approached by Jesus Himself. It is, of course, this scene, and especially his saying in it, that he would not believe unless he put his fingers into the marks of the nails, that have gained for Thomas the title of the doubter. But not even here is the title really appropriate, or, in any disparaging sense, deserved.

Look at the situation and Thomas in it. Think of him as a man whose whole mind was powerfully impressed by the actual, who did not easily forget things or ignore things. Then think of the Crucifixion. Consider how that most dread of all realities in history must have burned itself into Thomas's mind and memory. Could anything efface it? Did he ever cease to hear the sickening hammering of the nails, or for a moment fail to see the dropping blood, the increasing pallor of that face, the slowly stiffening limbs? He seemed to see or hear nothing else. He seemed to know nothing else than the one fact, that every hour of the day reiterated—Jesus is dead. From his absence when Christ first appeared to the disciples, Thomas seems to have chosen to be alone with his memories rather than even with his and his Master's friends. This was not due, as subsequent events showed, to any separation from them; perhaps it was only accidental. But Thomas would feel the utter futility of their meeting and talking. For He round whom they had met and to whom they had talked was dead. A

death, even an ordinary death, is the most real and the most final of facts. Think how such a death as that on Calvary of such an one as his Lord and Master must have impressed itself, like a colossal bar of iron, on the mind of a man such as Thomas.

And when this fact was not yet a week old, just as it was emerging from being merely stunning into even clearer realization, one morning the other disciples met him with glad faces and excited voices, saying, "We have seen the Lord!" The grave man's face never altered. Their buoyancy never even for a moment affected him. Dull hammering echoed again in his ears: a sunken head, a rigid form again appeared before his vision. Shall he deny? Shall he dispute? Shall he even question? To believe did not occur to him. What was the use of speaking? Why even interfere with this strange, passing reaction from despair? Quietly and simply he replied: "Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my fingers into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into His side, I will not believe."

It was as if he said: "Some story, some dream, some idea may make you thus glad, and God forbid I should seek to damp your day's joy. But as for me: I watched the Master die; I saw the nails driven home, the spear thrust in; I saw the heart's blood drained; I heard His last cry, and saw His head sink. I saw the end—the end. All these are facts that nothing can alter. Ideas and visions do not alter what has been, what is. If I am to hope again, give me like facts—that printed hand, that torn side. Till then, as I leave you to your joy, leave me to my gloom."

Again, here is not the doubter so much as the realist. The very reiteration of the concrete "print of the nails" shows it. This answer of Thomas is sometimes blamed as a presumptuous dictation of the method by which he demanded to be satisfied. This is to misunderstand

Thomas. As was said at the outset of this paper, a man of his temperament is easily misunderstood. He did not mean to propose this as a test to be taken literally: he meant it as an indication of the *kind* of support he needed —namely real facts, not mere stories and visions and rumours. It was not the artificial criticism of a superior person, or the carping objection of an unbeliever, or even the intellectual difficulty of a doubter, but the earnest necessitous demand of a mind that had been so impressed by real, outward, concrete facts, that only similar facts could remove the impression.

And when that which his nature needed was given him, when with gracious exactness the risen Master took Thomas at his word and said, "Reach hither thy finger and behold My hands and reach hither thy hand and thrust it into My side," how adoring yet how articulate was the apostle's confession of faith: "My Lord and my God." The words that Jesus added are not, I think, to be taken as a reproof for anything Thomas had said or done, but rather as an encouragement to that side of his nature in which he was more deficient. Jesus understood and appreciated men far too deeply to blame that one of his disciples whose following of Him had been on at least one critical occasion so noble, and all through had been so peculiarly laborious. It is not the high attainment Christ praises but the honest effort, not the stumbling step he censures but the false will. And Thomas's effort was honest and his will was never false. He was honest in committing himself to Christ's cause: honest in following bare duty, when all else seemed to have failed: honest in his interruption in the upper room: honest in his turning from what seemed to him the futile story of the Lord's appearance: honest, in the end, in his adoring confession. Faith, peace, joy, simplicity,—all these and other things are desirable and Christ may desire that

we should possess them; but after all the one thing that even He may *demand* of a man is honesty. The lesson of Thomas's life is not, as many read it, an apology for doubting, but faithfulness to the light we have. In our day, when life and thought are so complex, we may learn much from the realist among the disciples,—as much perhaps as from any other. At times when we cannot with John's eagle eye pierce through the clouds to a vision of the peace and joy and beauty and victory beyond, let the earnest mind and firm foot of Thomas show us the next step. And to us too the Lord of truth, who is the rewarder of all them that diligently seek Him, will be gracious, and may assure our lonely, labouring spirits of His presence by means—in the actual discipline of our life—as real, as direct and as personally apt as when He said to Thomas, "Behold My hands."

P. CARNEGIE SIMPSON.