

08 August 2021

### **Thomas, our twin**

Psalm 34: 1-8, NRSV

I will bless the Lord at all times;  
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

My soul makes its boast in the Lord;  
let the humble hear and be glad.

O magnify the Lord with me,  
and let us exalt his name together.

I sought the Lord, and he answered me,  
and delivered me from all my fears.

Look to him, and be radiant;  
so your[a] faces shall never be ashamed.

This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord,  
and was saved from every trouble.

The angel of the Lord encamps  
around those who fear him, and delivers them.

O taste and see that the Lord is good;  
happy are those who take refuge in him.

Luke 6: 13-16

And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

John 11:7-8, 16

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ... Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

John 14: 5

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

John 20: 19, 24-28

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ... But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

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As a child in Sunday School, I had to memorize the names of the 12 disciples. We even learned a song reciting their names and featuring a chorus with the lyric: "He has called us, too; He has called us, too. We are his disciples, I am one and you." Half a century later, even with the help of the song I still don't remember all the disciples' names. But even if I could still rattle off or sing the names of 12 men and a few women among Jesus' larger group of disciples, I would still know very little about who they were. The 5 disciples we think of most readily — Simon / Peter, Judas, the brothers James and John, Thomas — we know only by bare anecdotal sketch.

This is appropriate, of course. The Gospels are about Jesus, after all, and the focus is and should be on Him.

Yet the disciples are inextricable from the Gospel stories. The disciples' devotion, confusion, faults, and doubts provide context and narrative structure to Jesus' teachings and actions. They demonstrate Jesus' ministry in relationship, not just in public. They place us in the story.

Some of you may recall that I have mentioned Thomas in prior summer sermons. He is an alluring enigma, a man for whom we don't even have a proper name, who has been made into a caricature, but whose recorded actions speak to me of a certain fearlessness.

Thomas is most often referred to as *Doubting*. But that epithet does not come from the Scriptures. He is identified in the Gospels as Thomas the twin. This sermon was precipitated by a question I posed to Will earlier this year: was Thomas an actual twin, and if so, was his twin still alive when Thomas followed Jesus?

Twins had equivocal status in ancient societies, sometimes revered or welcomed as a sign of divine favor, but equally often viewed as ill-omened, even cursed. The story of Esau and Jacob, for example, presents a complex narrative about the nature and relationship of twins. I wondered: what was Thomas' experience, and how did that shape his persona and his discipleship to the Christ?

To his credit — or perhaps to your dismay, as you may decide — Will suggested I go investigate for myself and report back to you all from this pulpit.

Here is the short version of what I discovered: no one knows.

What we know is simply this: Thomas is a name which means twin. That's pretty much it.

Depending on the translation, he is referred to as Thomas the twin, or Thomas Didymus, which also means twin. So he is literally identified as *the twin, the twin*. We have no idea why he has no name of his own, only this double assertion of twinness.

However, as I read various Biblical commentaries and sermons about Thomas, it became clear to me that this mystery — this absence of an individual identity — has inspired widely differing interpretations.

The more I read, these interpretations began to resemble the litany of nose insults from *Cyrano de Bergerac*, or as updated by Steve Martin in his modernized homage, *Roxanne*.

Following the excellent examples of Rostand and Martin, I've grouped various commentaries into six categories.

- **Factual:**  
Various scholars have taken the literal path, and supposed that Thomas was a biological twin, whether of fellow disciples Matthew or Philip, or of a sister, Lydia, or some other unnamed person living or dead. In this interpretation, his twinness marks him out as someone who is defined by reference to a sibling. Notably, if he was the twin of either Matthew or Philip, neither of them bears the twin designation, which would suggest that Thomas would have been the second-born, lesser twin. The remarkable thing about this interpretation is that not only are Thomas, Mathew, and Philip not identified as brothers, Matthew and Philip are barely mentioned except in the roster of disciples Jesus chose, and whoever else might have been the firstborn twin has been lost from our knowledge. So if Thomas was literally a twin, the lesser twin became the more prominent. That's at least congruent with a through-line theme of the Bible, Esau and Jacob included.
- **Apocryphal:**  
A few scholars outside the canon have postulated that Thomas was Jesus' birth twin, which raises obvious Scriptural objections. We do know that Joseph and Mary had a natural, human family after Jesus' birth. I couldn't find any mention of if, but it occurred to me that perhaps Aramaic had an idiomatic expression analogous to the latter-day slur *Irish twins*, referring to siblings born within a year of each other. However, there is no Scriptural reference connecting Thomas to Mary and Joseph, so this seems like an unlikely stretch.
- **Descriptive:**  
Other scholars have supposed that Thomas closely resembled someone else, whether one of the disciples, another unnamed person, or perhaps Jesus himself. Here Thomas was so named because he looked like someone who was again more significant or more important than he was. In this interpretation, he is the *doppelgänger*, the double, the duplicate, the spare. A kinder interpretation — one which I did not encounter — might be that Thomas was a ringer but better a version of another person well known in Jesus' time, perhaps someone powerful and feared, along the lines of *he who must not be named*. There isn't any Scriptural basis either to support or dismiss this interpretation. So... maybe?
- **Jocular:**  
A couple of scholars noted that in any social group, nicknames arise from ribbing — gentle or not-so-gentle mockery of striking physical attributes or personality quirks. Here the interpretation is that our mystery disciple was tagged *the twin* because of his changeable

nature or quick temperament. This view casts Thomas as notable for abrupt shifts from one emotional state to another. But if any of the disciples might be called out for that attribute, wouldn't Simon Peter be an equal or better candidate?

- Metaphorical:

In a similar vein, other scholars have posited that Thomas is his own twin: he carries within him a dualistic nature which is divided, containing opposing internal impulses of unbelief and faith, incredulity and allegiance, devotion and isolation. Again, however, this doesn't really distinguish Thomas from any of the other disciples, who as a group evince wildly divergent states of conviction and despair, awe and pettiness, devotion and panic.

- Sentimental:

Finally, I found at least one source proposing that Jesus named Thomas to signify deep, singular affection: Thomas as his other self, the heart of his heart. This endearment interpretation sings to me, but runs up against passages in John referring to *the disciple Jesus loved*, who does not appear to be Thomas. So appealing though it is, it seems dubious.

Across these and probably several other categories, the twin's recorded deeds and statements are interpreted again and again as indicative of a man who was incomplete, conflicted, or a shadow. One who was with Jesus and yet questioned, among the twelve yet did not find comfort in their community.

Like Cyrano, whose mind, heart, and soul were obscured to all those who could only see his oversized nose.

What I see differs from so many of these learned commentaries of Biblical scholars and millennia of pastoral teachings.

What I see when I read the few mentions of the twin is his willingness to put himself in harm's way, whether physical or social, to be with Jesus. When Jesus insisted that he would return to Judea where religious officials sought to kill him, the twin determined that if Jesus would not be dissuaded then at least he and the others would go die with him. When Jesus told the disciples they knew the way to where he was going, the twin was the one who was unafraid to look foolish in naming his bafflement, and asked Jesus to give explicit directions. Following Jesus' death, the twin declined the false security of hiding with the rest in a locked room, tempting the same grisly death Jesus prayed to avoid and all the disciples fled. Perhaps he craved solitude just as Jesus so often did, or sought Jesus' memory in the isolation of wandering among the throng and crush of the city.

I see also an unwillingness to accept easy consolation. Any of you who have been plunged into grief at the death of someone you loved dearly may have experienced the desperate pull of the bereaved heart to see the loved one out of the corner of your eye, across the street, in a crowd, at a distance, in the doorway. There is a momentary lift of joy, a flood of relief in the fleeting illusion that perhaps it has all been a terrible mistake, and the beloved is alive after all. The twin refused to allow himself to entertain this magical thinking.

Finally I see a fervent desire to believe all that Jesus had said and done and been to him. When Jesus invited the twin to touch him, to feel his violated but living body, the twin showed no hesitation in exuberantly declaring his joy and praise.

I love the twin for what I see of him in these scant anecdotes.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the more I contemplated the Gospel anecdotes about the twin, the more I came to appreciate how Providentially apropos is this morning's lectionary reading from Psalm 34, offering an ancient parallel between the Psalmist and the twin:

*I sought the Lord, and he answered me,  
and delivered me from all my fears.  
Look to him, and be radiant;  
so your faces shall never be ashamed.  
This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord,  
and was saved from every trouble.*

This Psalm feels perfectly characteristic for the twin, testifying to being embraced by Jesus, his soul's cries repeatedly answered with love.

Moreover, there are multiple ancient and traditional accounts of the twin traveling across India and even into China, preaching the Gospel and founding churches late into the first century. He is reported to have died a martyr in India, and is widely venerated by both Christians and Muslims there as the father of the church in the subcontinent.

Gathering these many fragmentary and refractory impressions together, please allow me to offer a seventh category of interpretation for the twin: Prophetic.

I propose to you that Jesus named our mystery disciple *the twin* prophetically, in the same way He Christened Simon Peter prophetically. Simon's birth name is recorded to emphasize that he was the rock on which Jesus chose to found his church not because of who he was before meeting Jesus, but because of who he became after following Jesus.

I suggest to you this morning that Thomas's name represents an even more intimate and existential dedication. The twin carries no pre-Christening name because in his case it would be a distraction. Jesus named him the twin — everyone's twin, *our twin* — with all the ambivalence that entailed in the ancient world and the millennia since and ever into the future, and all that inspires in our individual and collective hearts. Our twin reflects back to us the full spectrum of our real and projected fears and prejudices, bafflement, grief, despair, courage, adoration, ecstatic faith, ministry.

In him we later disciples are quick to dismiss a person acknowledged only in reference to someone else or an externally imposed idea, not meriting a distinct or complete identity.

In him we castigate our shadow self, the impolitic one we would condemn, ridicule, or condescend to.

In him we condemn our self-contradictory attributes and impulses, conflicted, changeable and inconstant.

We cast him as the self-exiled outsider, even within Jesus' chosen inner circle.

Yet we also admire his bravery.

We regard him as Jesus' counterpart or complement.

We envision him as the beloved Platonic matching piece to Jesus' heart, as a full sibling to the Christ.

We celebrate him as a saint.

If we can accept this prophetic interpretation of the disciple named *the twin, our twin*, can we also see him — can we then see ourselves — as courageous and heartbroken; doubting yet devoted; chosen and known and heard and dearly, specifically loved by God; and unselfconsciously radiating that love to all we meet? Can we recognize ourselves as *his twin*?

May it be so.