

Two Sides of One Coin

Today we celebrate the appearance of the Risen Christ to St Thomas. In the account in the Gospel of St John, this event is placed immediately after the appearance to St Mary Magdalene, Equal-to-the-Apostles, in the Garden by the Empty Tomb. In this sermon I want to show how these two accounts belong together and should be read together. Why? I believe this is because St John wants us to understand that there are two different but complementary ways in which people encounter and receive the Risen Christ; two sides of one coin. We shall then discover how these gospel insights lead us to the 4th Ecumenical Council and its declaration of who Christ is with respect to His human and divine natures.

So, let us identify some important differences between how St Mary encountered the risen Christ and how St Thomas received Him. St Mary Magdalene and St Thomas were evidently two very different people and therefore followed two very different routes in their confession of the risen Christ. This is most easily seen when we straightforwardly compare and contrast their responses to Christ. First, we note that neither saint immediately receives Christ as He truly is. In her grief St Mary supposes him to be the gardener of the cemetery; in his disbelief St Thomas suspects a ghost, a fake or a mistake. St Mary recognises our Lord when he says her name. St Thomas recognises him by the hallmark of his wounds.

Although I don't want to stereotype these responses there may be a bit of male and female going on here! It could be true that women, some women at any rate, are more attuned to the personal dimension of the relationship with Christ before they get into the detail whilst many men may be more inclined to want it all laid out before they commit personally. Be that as it may, the more important differences show themselves in how both saints progress towards faith in Christ. This is certainly not a gender thing but may be a reflection of personality and temperament.

The key idea around which all of this turns is “touch.” Our Lord tells Mary Magdalene *not* to cling to Him for He has not yet ascended to his Father - *but* - he tells Thomas *precisely* to touch Him, or rather His wounds, in order to confirm his faith. St Mary Magdalene first addresses Christ as Rabboni or Teacher, a title which emphasises the humanity of Christ, and then proceeds to the divinity - manifest most clearly in our Lord’s response concerning His Ascension; whereas St Thomas, seeking the divinity, which at first he doubts, together with the true personal identity of what he sees, proceeds by way of the humanity manifest by his very intimate and humane touching of Christ wounds.

Putting it more simply, Magdalene is OK with the humanity but must not touch in order to confess the divinity whereas Thomas is OK with the divinity provided he can touch the wounds in order to confess the humanity, and hence the identity of Christ. Both end up where they started, Magdalene with the humanity, Thomas with the divinity, but in so doing they both confess the same faith albeit by two different sides – human to the divine (Mary) and divine to the human (Thomas).. You will recall that the fourth ecumenical Council of Chalcedon succinctly declared what both saints came to discover personally and existentially, namely that Christ is one Person in two natures, both human and divine. That their spiritual paths to this one truth lie in two contrasting directions is not simply due to the inscrutable Providence of God but rather to the fact that both individuals had different ways of relating to Christ according to their personalities and temperaments. So, we see here two different starting points, two different directions but ultimately the same goal and outcome: one coin, two sides.

It may seem to you that this is just some sort of unnecessary and complicated academic analysis, but it is not. I believe that it reveals something very important for our own walk of faith and our own confession of Christ. Some people follow the route of St Thomas, some that of St Mary Magdalene. Which are you ... or maybe some other route? St Thomas has

often been portrayed as someone who doubted either that a resurrection had happened or if it had happened that it was truly Christ who had risen. Surely this is indicated by the Risen Lord's comment afterwards: "Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe." (John 20:29b). True enough, but I think there is something else important here beyond the usual conclusion that St Thomas is the Apostle for modern sceptics who must have evidence before they can believe.

If you think about it, many people today do not doubt the humanity of Christ (as Thomas did) but these do often doubt the divinity of Christ which in the gospel also initially perhaps lay beyond Mary Magdalene's grasp. To those, therefore, who can receive Jesus as an ethical or spiritual teacher, a group which ranges from most liberal or radical heterodox Christians to Muslims and Hindus, and who struggle with or deny the divinity of Christ, our Lord's words to St Mary Magdalene are most relevant. Do not touch, do not cling, do not hold onto me, do not be overfamiliar. Jesus is not our buddy. He is not simply a lovely loving spiritual person. "Step back!" we say, "do not touch!" and see Him ascended and glorified, sitting at the right hand of the Father, the Pantokrator or Ruler of All ... not then Jesus my mate or Jesus my guru but rather Jesus the Lord of all creation, the King of Kings, Emanuel - God with us incarnate in the flesh - Aslan the lion not Harry the hamster!

There are others of course who, like St Thomas, do not doubt the divinity of Christ but find it really difficult to accept his *full* humanity. The Incarnation means that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Divine Logos or Word received the whole of our humanity, freely offered by the woman full of grace, Our Lady, Mary, Theotokos and Ever-Virgin. The Mother of God was not born without the taint of original sin (as our Roman Catholic brethren falsely suppose) but she acquired that blessed state, theosis, through her radical obedience to the Triune God and the conformity of her life to the Word of God who through her would become incarnate in her own womb by the miraculous overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. In

the conception of Christ, therefore, and in his subsequent human life, Christ was in ALL respects the same as us, except for sin (Hebrews 4:15). This means that Jesus got emotional, experienced pain and temptation and of course, he truly suffered and died a shameful death on the cross. *This* is what St Thomas had to know for himself to confirm the identity of Christ risen ... so Christ invited him to touch his wounds ... something not allowed to St Mary Magdalene because she had other concerns and spiritual needs.

If we are to take the humanity of Jesus seriously we must also accept that his death was a real human death, not a pretend death. Once dead, his living body became a corpse. His resurrection from the dead was not, therefore, the resuscitation of a corpse, (as was the case with St Lazarus, who of course had to die again), but rather a New Creation, as St Paul affirms (1 Corinthians 15:35-50; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

Perhaps all of us Orthodox need to check these things out as well. Is our spirituality balanced, our confession of faith truly Chalcedonian? Whether we are a Mary Magdalene, or a Thomas matters not but whatever our disposition and approach is on this two-sided Chalcedonian coin let us guard our heart that we may truly confess Christ as He is, not as we want Him to be or what we thought Him to be in our ignorance. True He is our Saviour ... but also Lord; our Friend and Brother as well of course but also our Master ... Man and God, God and Man; one Person, God Incarnate, “philanthropos” the Lover of Mankind.

Archpriest Gregory Hallam

Thomas Sunday, 9th May 2021