

My Lord and My God
Patronal Feast of St. Thomas
2 July 2023

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St. Thomas's Anglican Church, Toronto
John 20.24-29; Hebrews 10.35-11.1

When I was in California visiting family two weeks ago, I attended Mass at another parish named in honour of our patron saint, namely St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal Church in Hollywood. I love worshipping in other parishes because it's edifying to experience how other communities express their wonder, love, and praise for the gift of Jesus Christ our Lord and to hear other preachers expound the Word.

One of the things I appreciated about St. Thomas the Apostle in Hollywood was its sense of devotion. The parish gathered in silence as the organist played the voluntary. The hymns that day happened to be some of my favourites, and the ceremonial was carried out with dignity and care. I appreciated that the Angelus was prayed at the end of Mass, and that the clergy entered and exited in birettas, those funny black hats with pompoms.

There's just so much variety in Anglo-Catholicism, and that's a good thing. We have a lot of trappings, some common to many churches, some particular to a given location, some instituted by the same priest or devotees thereof in whatever churches they have served. Over twenty years in ministry, I've observed some interesting cross-pollination as parishes borrow from each other, trying on new customs and returning to older ones. Among these customs are a host of gestures and private prayers. Many of us bow our heads at the Name of Jesus, or at the mention of the Trinity. We genuflect during a brief portion of the Nicene Creed and whenever we approach the Sacrament. There's a whole set of so-called "secret" prayers that the celebrant may say at various times in the liturgy, such as at the offertory while preparing the bread and wine and at the lavabo, the ritual washing of hands after censuring the altar. What's the point of all these things? They remind us that we are in the presence of God, and that God is present among us specifically through the person of Jesus Christ our Lord.

To newcomers to this tradition, the nodding and crossing and genuflecting and quietly whispered prayers both at the altar and amongst various parishioners in the nave and choir can be somewhat confusing, if not sometimes downright off-putting. Some people need time to turn the proverbial stumbling blocks into stepping stones. And I'm sure more than a few of us have chosen to stick with St. Thomas's *despite* these eccentricities rather than because of them. I know because I've heard some of you tell me as much!

On the other hand, a lot of us are here precisely *because* we're weird. Or *distinctive*, if you prefer. Others are here because they can tolerate the weirdness as long as it's not crammed down their throats. For my part, I'm pretty comfortable with a whole lot of different ways of celebrating the Mass. I have distinct preferences, to be sure, and my default will always be biased towards those preferences, but what I like and how I understand things certainly isn't the only way things ought to be. And the same is true in reverse. Thankfully, the richness of this tradition is really quite something, and I appreciate seeing it practiced so fully across the spectrum of parishes. But every now and again, some little practice will stand out in a new way, lend itself new meaning, and I will see and hear it as if for the first time.

One of the things I noticed at St. Thomas the Apostle in Hollywood the other week was how, because of the way their sound system worked, I was able to hear clearly what the celebrant said

after elevating the host and the chalice. He used a phrase that many clergy and laity say quietly or in their hearts at those moments in the liturgy: “My Lord and my God.” You may do that yourself; I remember coming across an instruction in a devotional manual that recommended worshippers say this quietly as a way of focusing on the Real Presence of Jesus in the Sacrament.

This morning’s Gospel lesson gives us the Scriptural origin of that proclamation. When Jesus appears to St. Thomas and invites him to touch his body to prove to himself the truth of the resurrection, we are not told whether Thomas takes Jesus up on that invitation. Many artists depict Thomas putting his finger in the holes in Jesus’ hands and poking his hand in the spear wound in Jesus’ side. But we don’t really know. John simply reports, “Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’”

Many a sermon has focused on *Doubting* Thomas, but I would rather focus this morning on Thomas’s confession of *faith*, a confession so strong, so powerful, so unequivocal, that it has inspired generations of believers to utter those very same words at the holiest moment of the eucharistic prayer, when the consecrated bread and wine are elevated so that the faithful can join our patron saint in his act of undoubting wonder, love, and praise.

No ambiguity whatsoever can be found in Thomas’s astonishing and *certain* confession that Jesus, standing before him, *is* his *Lord* and *God*. You don’t call someone your Lord if he isn’t actually in charge of your life, and you don’t worship that person as God unless you really believe that in doing so, you are worshipping the one true living God and not committing some horrendous blasphemy.

Because if Jesus *isn’t* God, that’s exactly what Thomas would have been doing: blaspheming God. But Christians century after century and Sunday by Sunday, some of us on a daily basis, look at that host and that cup, and proclaim, “My Lord and my God!”

Theological debates have raged for centuries over what Jesus meant when he said, “This is my Body” and “This is my Blood”. And I am not here to expound any particular metaphysical theology of the Eucharist.

I *am* standing here, however, to *invite* you to emulate our patron, St. Thomas, in his bold proclamation, a proclamation that is free from any doubt whatsoever, that Jesus is truly present with us when we see with the eyes of faith the Body of Christ and the Blood of Christ. For if Jesus is truly present, we can with all confidence join Thomas in exclaiming, “My Lord and my God”.

At the end of our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus says to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” And in our epistle reading, Hebrews chapter ten, we are told, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

The Lectionary implicitly invites preachers to make a connection between Thomas’s seeing and our own *not* seeing, such that we are the ones who walk by faith and not by sight. But I think such preachers are missing something. They don’t see that when Thomas says, “My Lord and my God,” he is not looking at a proof of Jesus’ divinity. He is asserting his conviction that Jesus is God. For Thomas, the resurrected Body of Jesus is *also* the assurance of things *hoped for*, the conviction of things *not seen*.

So what about us? Do we perceive with the eyes of faith Jesus' presence among us? And do we believe without any doubt whatsoever that Jesus is indeed Lord and God? And if so, what does that mean about the way we live our lives in this world as we prepare for the eternal life of the world to come?

Without a doubt, I would love to have the resurrected Body of Jesus appear to me in the same form that it appeared to Thomas. But that's not how it happens for us. For us, the resurrected Body of Jesus appears to us when he tells us "This is my Body" and the eyes of faith respond "My Lord and my God!" The Eucharist is the assurance of things *hoped for*, the conviction of things *not seen*. The Eucharist is the enactment of our faith in the resurrection of Jesus, and a foretaste of our own resurrection life in him.

In this parish, we are fortunate to have many people who care passionately about eucharistic theology and devotion. Part of what makes Anglo-Catholicism so distinctive within the Anglican Communion is its focus on the reality of Jesus' presence in the most holy Sacrament of his Body and Blood. But Anglicans have no official metaphysics to explain how the Sacrament manifests Christ's Real Presence. In this congregation alone I am aware that practically the full spectrum of Eucharistic belief and practice coexist, and for the most part, I think that's a good thing. I say "for the most part" because I do draw a line at those who look at communion and don't see God. Who think it's all hocus pocus.

So it's perfectly fine if you're not sure what's happening up here, or if you have a different understanding from my own. But as a steward of the Catholic tradition not only in this parish but in the Anglican Communion, I'm sticking with Thomas.

Our Collect of the Day puts what I'm trying to get at perfectly, so let us end on with that: The Lord be with you...Let us pray. Almighty and everliving God, who for the more confirmation of the faith didst suffer thy holy Apostle Thomas to be doubtful in thy Son's resurrection: Grant us so perfectly, and without all doubt, to believe in thy Son Jesus Christ, that our faith in thy sight may never be reproved. Hear us, O Lord, through the same Jesus Christ, to whom, with thee and the Holy Spirit, be all honour and glory, now and for evermore. Amen.