

There is an irony in the tradition that Thomas ended up in India preaching to mystics, given that his moment in the spotlight finds him protesting that the resurrection of Jesus cannot be a real, actual and physical event: "unless I see and touch I will not believe" (20 v25). Despite his nickname, 'doubting' Thomas was not a sceptic, just a realist.

Thomas is included every time the Twelve are listed in the Synoptics, including the last list at Pentecost; he is presumably from Galilee though there is no account of his call. He goes fishing with Peter in John chapter 21. His name derives from the Aramaic meaning 'twin' which is why he was called Didymus (the Greek for twin). He speaks twice earlier in John (but nowhere in the Synoptics), once to encourage the disciples to go with Jesus back to Judea despite the mounting danger (11 v16) and once on the final evening when he blurts out "Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (14 v5). This is hardly a rounded character study, though it does suggest a man who would be likely to ask for evidence and do so in the blunt manner quoted.

But as with most of the Twelve he disappears from view in subsequent accounts. Tradition has it that he sailed east to Muziris, in south-western India (Kerala) around 50AD. This was apparently a thriving port, though its precise location is now uncertain, and Pliny the Elder, 20 years later, advised against landing there as it was full of brigands - clearly Thomas had not converted them all! In his description of apostolic mission fields, Eusebius (early 4<sup>th</sup> century) has Thomas as the missionary to the Parthians, Rome's persistent enemy on its eastern border. For what it is worth Marco Polo records visiting Thomas' tomb<sup>80</sup>. So despite this somewhat contrived attempt to describe the apostolic outreach as 'truly global', there may be truth in Thomas having gone to the East. There are certainly 'Saint Thomas Christians' across India, who worship in Syriac (a language close to Aramaic) and are often called Nazrani, followers of the Nazarene.

Thomas is an unlikely choice to make the ultimate - and for John definitive - affirmation about Jesus, "my Lord and my God" (20 v28). This honour might have fallen to Peter or 'the Beloved Disciple' or perhaps Andrew (giving a neat symmetry with his first declaration of Jesus' identity as Messiah in 1 v41). But Thomas it was - and doubters have taken heart ever since! For as John Marsh notes: "The words 'my Lord' would have sufficed to show that Thomas was now as satisfied as any other of the disciples that Jesus had returned to them; in adding the words 'and my God' he is taking a step beyond the relationship between disciple and rabbi"<sup>81</sup>. Though invited to "put your finger here and see my hands" John does not record whether he did so. But he does record the comment of Jesus: "blessed are those who have not seen but are yet believing (trusting)" (20 vv26ff). A later writer would comment: "though you have not seen him, you love him" (I Peter 1 v8).

These particular words of Thomas "my Lord and my God" may have been set down by John as a challenge to the emperor Domitian (81-96AD) in whose time there was serious persecution of Christians. Some historians have claimed that Domitian demanded to be known as '*Dominus et Deus*' (Lord and God) though there is no coinage to back up that suggestion. But not since the opening verses ("and the Word was God") has Jesus Christ actually been called God, except by his critics and enemies (e.g. 10 vv31ff). For John's first readers, worship is being regularly offered to Jesus as Lord and God. Thus Pliny the Younger, as a provincial governor, has a comment in his celebrated letter to the emperor Trajan<sup>82</sup>. He asks advice on what to do about Christians who "asserted that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god". If the whole Gospel of John is, in part, a confidence-building exercise then this outburst by Thomas is the climax to the story, the affirmation which will ensure life 'in all its fullness' (10 v10). It mirrors the prologue perfectly.

The other unique Easter story in the fourth Gospel concerns Mary Magdalene. Let C H Dodd have the first word:

"This story never came out of any common stock of tradition ... Either we have a free, imaginative composition based upon the bare tradition of an appearance to Mary Magdalene ... or else the story came through some highly individual channel directly from the source. ... The power to render psychological traits imaginatively with convincing insight cannot be denied to a writer to whom we owe the masterly character-parts of Pontius Pilate and the Woman of Samaria. Yet I cannot for long rid myself of the feeling ... that this has something indefinably first-hand about it. There is nothing like it in the gospels. Is there anything quite like it in all ancient literature?"<sup>83</sup>

As Thomas is bidden to touch, Mary is forbidden. Even to ask why this should be so is to take a risk. On the face of it, since John understands the resurrection and ascension as a single episode, the words "do not hold on to me" mean that John believes that the bodily resurrection appearances are temporary and that the time is now near when Jesus will be 'accessible' to all, "not seeing but believing" (20 v29). Thus William Temple: "Our devotion is not to hold us by the empty tomb; it must lift our hearts to heaven"<sup>84</sup>. To see Jesus means, for John, to appreciate what God was doing in and through him. Thus when some Greeks want to see Jesus, he cries out "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (12 v23) since John is presenting Jesus as the Saviour of the whole world.

The risk is, of course, to deduce from this encounter that Mary Magdalene was more likely than any other person to cling to Jesus. She lingers alone in the garden, weeping like a widow; her name is called in that unforgettable way. It is on such atmospheric texts that the whole

flimsy hypothesis of Jesus' relationship with her, even marriage, is dependent - a matter unmentionable by the formal commentators of course! Allusions to Mary being close to Jesus were actively suppressed by orthodox believers during subsequent centuries even as the rumours persisted (see the postscript below). However, it cannot be denied that the Greek word describing her contact may rightly be translated 'grasp' or 'cling'. It is definitely stronger than merely 'touch' (as in the Latin '*noli me tangere*') and once or twice in other literature even means 'kindle into flame'.

Mary Magdalene is mentioned a dozen times in all four gospels, more often than any disciple other than the closest three, Peter and the brothers James and John. Given the rather large number of Marys around, there has been confusion from the beginning as to whether this Mary was the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Luke thinks not, but that she was one of the Galilean women who accompanied Jesus from early days and whom he had healed: "from whom seven demons had gone out" (Luke 8 v2). But John implies that Mary the sister of Martha had good reason to thank Jesus for some kindness and forgiveness; he identifies her as "the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair" (11 v2 and 12 vv1-8). Since Pope Gregory (590AD) several imaginative commentators, novelists and dramatists (notably Dorothy L Sayers<sup>85</sup>) have conflated the two characters into one. In the Synoptics Mary Magdalene heads the various lists of women at the cross and bringing the spices to the tomb. In John she comes alone to the tomb, for in the fourth Gospel the body was already embalmed by Joseph and Nicodemus on the Friday. She was certainly special; how special is mostly mischievous speculation! She is never mentioned again in our scriptures - certainly not by Paul in his presentation of the resurrection narrative. But her encounter in John has led to the description of her as the 'apostle to the apostles'<sup>86</sup>.

It is clear that the stories featuring Thomas and Mary Magdalene are included in John's account of Easter to make his theological points: Jesus has gone away, Jesus has returned, Jesus is with us through the Spirit, intangible but real. The punch-line to both stories is the blessing of those 'not seeing but believing' (20 v29); John's readers who were not there may receive the promise.

### **Postscript:**

There is another odd connection between Thomas and Mary Magdalene. They both appear in the titles of recently discovered so-called 'gospels'.

The 'Gospel of Thomas' written in Syriac was unearthed in upper Egypt, where the sheer dryness of the atmosphere preserved so many papyri. It is a collection of Jesus' sayings rather than an account of his life, death and resurrection, so not properly a 'gospel' at all. There must have been several such collections, more or less authentic, depending on

the memories of particular groups or individuals. Both Matthew and Luke drew on other sources to embellish Mark's Gospel. There is the 'Didache' from the early second century. Some scholars believe that the 'Gospel of Thomas' actually comes from the first century, i.e. as early as the Gospels, but most place it much later. Scholars are unsure on whether it was originally written in Greek or in Syriac; if the latter there is a link with Thomas if Syriac was his preferred language and the one he used in India. A fuller text (dated around 350AD) was discovered in a Coptic translation. And not long after 350AD Cyril, bishop in Jerusalem, could write: "Let none read the Gospel according to Thomas: for it is the work not of one of the twelve Apostles, but of one of the three wicked disciples of Manes"<sup>87</sup>. It is thus one of several books which were never approved and were omitted from any canon of Christian scripture.

Similarly the 'Gospel of Mary' was rejected and only survives in fragments, sufficient for most to agree that the Mary in question is the Magdalene<sup>88</sup>. The various fragments were also discovered in dry Upper Egypt; scholars have provisionally dated them to the second century. The most fascinating section extant, in a very artificial dialogue, features Simon Peter asking Mary: "Sister, we know that the Saviour loved you more than the rest of the women. Tell us the words of the Saviour which you remember, which you know but we do not, nor have we heard them." How unlikely is that! But the closeness of Mary to Jesus is again highlighted. The apostles respond in true male chauvinist spirit: "But Andrew answered and said to the brethren 'Say what you think concerning what she said. For I do not believe that the Saviour said this. For certainly these teachings are of other ideas'. Peter also opposed her in regard to these matters and asked them about the Saviour. 'Did he then speak secretly with a woman, in preference to us, and not openly? Are we to turn back and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?'" Did he indeed?

It is probably no more than coincidence that the two characters with the most distinctive roles towards the end of John are the two whose names are used to head up these so-called gospels. But it may point to the circulation of John's Gospel among the Jewish and Christian communities of Egypt, given that we know they were reading it by 125AD. Rival or subversive groups, semi-Christian Gnostics, of which there were several in Egypt, when setting out to write up Christian teaching to suit their own interpretations and practices, would have found in John these two distinctive characters ideal to pin such documents on. Their efforts appear odd - and they are indeed odd - set against the measured and amazing text of John's Gospel itself. To paraphrase the closing phrase of the First Letter, "Little children, keep yourselves from imitations!" (I John 5 v21)