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Dear Friends

***Faith and doubt***  
***John 20:19-31***

I have a deep faith in our judiciary - I accept there have been and maybe miscarriages of justice but deep down I trust a judicial system that listens carefully to evidence and sentences wrongdoing. During my ministry two cases in the Crown Court have affirmed my trust in our system. A man who raped a profoundly deaf member of one of my congregations was duly punished. I spent months supporting the victim before, during and after the court case. Now and again doubts entered my head as I sat in the court room. Would her inability to speak clearly affect the way her evidence was interpreted? Thankfully the truth was heard.



At the Old Bailey, Tania Clarence was detained in a secure hospital for “manslaughter by way of diminished responsibility”. I cried when I heard the news for I remembered her in-laws saying “she’s a murderer” after I conducted the funeral of her children Ben, Max and Olivia. I will never forget standing between three small coffins as I conducted the funeral, live-streamed to South Africa. And I shall never forget the conversations I had with Tania in that secure hospital garden. Depressed, unable to bear watching the decline of her disabled and life limited children, overwhelmed by four years of sleep deprivation and believing that quality of life is more important than quantity, she took their lives. The conversations remain confidential but from the moment I met her I had a deep sense that “there by the grace of God go I”. Whilst some hoped she would be returned to prison, a convicted murderer, I had faith that justice would be done.

You may feel my link with today’s gospel story of Thomas is tenuous but just as I think of Jemima each Easter (see last week’s newsletter) I also think of Tania, Gary (her beloved husband) and Taya their surviving child the Sunday after Easter when we think of a man often referred to as doubting Thomas.

Once upon a time I thought the opposite of faith was doubt, but I now realise the opposite of faith or trust is not doubt but certainty. Doubt, trust and faith are inextricably linked. Should a woman who smothers her children be imprisoned? Tania will always struggle to live with herself and the enormity of her actions – that in itself is a life sentence. If we could hold a trial today to ascertain who killed Jesus who do you think would be found guilty? Judas who sold his friend for silver? Jesus’ closest friends who, fearing for their own safety, denied him. The chief priests and the Pharisees? A Roman Governor? The crowds who barely knew him yet who collectively shouted “crucify”? Did one of them or all of them have blood on their hands? Who deserves punishment? And, if you believe God punishes wrongdoers, then who in the eternal high courtroom is going to cop it?

Overwhelmed by guilt, Pilate washes his hands, Judas tops himself, the crowds scatter, the religious convince themselves they are innocent and his closest friends filled with fear for their own safety hide themselves. And yet into this place of guilt and fear the risen, yet still broken and wounded, Lord comes breathing words of forgiveness. “Shalom”, he says. I cannot imagine the feelings or thoughts that ran through their minds as they were forced to look at what they had done. Yet, there is not even a millisecond of articulated retribution or vengeance. There are no accusations but only a gift, “Receive the Holy Spirit”. In the turmoil of grief and guilt those first disciples, with all their failings, are sent out to continue Jesus’ ministry and to forgive or retain the sins of others. In other words his followers are called to promote justice. Thomas, we are told, was not present on that Easter evening but a week later, having said he could only believe if he sees the risen Christ he is also gifted with those very words, “Peace be with you”. Thomas, despite his frailty, is invited to reach out and touch his wounded Lord. None of us knows whether Thomas was brave enough to do so – but then, of course, Thomas is simply the generic Christian filled with moments of deep faith and staking doubts. Thomas is you and Thomas is me and Thomas is all of us who want proof beyond reasonable doubt and yet who cannot have it.

In the eternal court room sentences are tempered with holiness, righteousness, love and compassion for we worship a God who has entered into our pain and suffering and also knows the voices that says, "There by the grace of God go I" because in his Christ he was the victim of our sinfulness. God forgives where we are quick to judge. Some might even say that God in failing to seek retribution suspends justice ...but that is not so. Judgment tempered with love is called, "the Kingdom of God" or "the Kingdom of heaven".

For many years individuals have come to me to make their confessions. Sometimes in a formal setting, at other times in a conversation over a coffee at home. Whilst I have heard from a number of people who have committed very serious crimes, for the most part people are burdened with a multitude of "little indiscretions". At the end of our time together as we part I often use the old familiar words to each penitent, "pray for me a sinner too". None of us is perfect and the story of Thomas is such a relief not because the man who had his moments of doubt gets to see and sense and possibly even feel the risen Lord but because the one whom he loved and whom he, with others, harmed still loves him, forgives him and sends him out into the world to share His forgiveness. That is the story worth telling today. Perhaps whilst we are locked down in our homes behind closed doors, now is the time to pick up the phone and call someone we should have made our peace with long ago, and in so doing perhaps we shall meet the risen Lord despite our doubts.

Alleluia! He is risen  
**He is risen indeed, Alleluia!**

Wishing you many blessings in this Easter season,  
Vicki  
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*Folk have asked to see the newbies born in Holy week! And the ones who are moving on to new homes imminently!*

