

PSALM 133 verses 1 – 3

¹ How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!

² It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe.

³ It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life for evermore.

JOHN 20 verses 24 – 31

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!'

But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.'

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them.

Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and

said, 'Peace be with you!' ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'

²⁸ Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

ACTS 2 verses 41 - 47

⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the

breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many

wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone

who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere

hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

“HALLMARKS OF THE MASTER”

READING: *John 20 verses 24 - 31*

There are a number of television programmes dealing with antiques. Not my particularly choice of viewing but others do enjoy them especially when something extremely valuable turns up – a Faberge flower, valued at £1 million; a clock on a recent programme where its owner was given a value of £15000-£20000. Items of silverware are examined to find marks placed there by the jeweller or manufacturer, referred to as Hallmarks because many years ago all items made of silver, whether pots, dishes, trays, utensils or jewellery were produced by a member of a guild or union, and at one time those guild members both met and worked in large rooms called “halls”. Hallmarks are etched or engraved into every item for two reasons. Firstly to show that the item is genuine, that it is in fact an item made of pure silver and not a mixture of cheaper materials. So, a hallmark is a guarantee of quality and purity. The second thing a hallmark does is tell you where the product comes from. In other words what hall it comes from, and in some cases, which individual made it. In England, hallmarks are not only composed of letters or initials, often, and especially in the case of larger items, there is normally a crest incorporated into the markings. A leopard's head indicates that piece comes from London; a castle indicates that the silver came from Edinburgh. The hallmark of the guild in Sheffield is a crown, and that of Birmingham is an anchor. Hallmarks originated from the start of the 14th century, when King Edward I, passed a law saying that no precious metal could be sold without a guarantee of its purity being marked on it. From 1300 to this very day the practice of hallmarking has continued in one form or another.

The reason I have gone into all this detail about hallmarks is because hallmarks can help us to understand our readings and the issues that they speak to. In the reading from John's gospel we read about Thomas, “Doubting Thomas” as he has come to be known. Thomas had not been with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared to them after the resurrection, and when they told him about it, his first reaction was a normal one, he did not believe it. Thomas had a healthy scepticism, and like most people who have a healthy scepticism, he would not believe until he first had some proof, and he did not hesitate to tell the others that. ***“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands”, he said, “and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe it” (John 20 verse 25).***

Most of us, no matter what is said about how blessed it is for us to believe without seeing, really want to see first. Like Thomas, we want some evidence before we accept as true what other people tell us, particularly when they are telling us things that seem impossible. Thomas would not believe until he himself saw the marks on Jesus. We really cannot fault him for that, particularly since he was being confronted with a story that simply defies human imagination. We do know, of course, how the story of Thomas came out.

Jesus appeared again to the disciples a week later, and the first person he speaks to, after he says to his disciples “Peace be with you”, is Thomas. ***“Put your finger here”, he says to Thomas. See my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” (John 20 verse 27).*** Thomas, seeing him, believes and says to him, and you can imagine the awe and conviction in his voice, ***“My Lord, and my God!” (John 20 verse 28).*** Christian tradition tells us that, later in life, Thomas became the apostle to the nations east of Israel, and that he died a martyrs' death in India. Because he saw the risen Lord with his own eyes, he believed. He believed and went on to do what all the other disciples did, spreading the good news about Jesus, that Jesus died so that we would know the love of God, and that he rose from the dead so that we might know that God's love is forever, and that all who follow him receive eternal life.

But what about today? What happens today to those who want proof-positive before they believe and say to Jesus: my Lord and my God? How can we expect all the people around us to believe

that Jesus is risen from the dead and persuade them to become his disciples without providing them with some evidence, some proof that it has really happened.

We know that Jesus said to Thomas after showing him the marks of his death, the marks of his love: **"Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."** (*John 20 verse 29*), but perhaps just quoting that Bible verse to a sceptic will not help very much, and I don't think either that Jesus was suggesting that we should not present proof to others of his resurrection as we try to fulfil the "great commission" he gave us to **"go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you..."** (*Matthew 28 verses 19 and 20*). Far from it.

Indeed, when you look at the gospel reading today one thing stands out. The very first time Jesus appeared to his disciples in the upper room he showed them the marks of his love (*John 20 verse 20*). This was a full week before he showed Thomas the wounds that pierced his hands and his side. For this reason I think what Jesus meant when he said "Blessed are those who have **NOT** seen and yet have believed" - is simply and precisely that. Blessed indeed are people who accept Jesus as their Saviour, their risen Lord, without having had any proof presented to them. Blessed are they who start walking in faith before they have all the answers to their questions, because they will start experiencing the benefits of faith straight away. Jesus was not suggesting that there are no blessings for those who believe only after seeing. He was suggesting that doubt can get in the way of our experiencing those blessings. Jesus presented the marks of his love to his disciples so that they might believe and go out as his apostles to make disciples of all the nations. He showed the marks of his love so that the blessings that faith in him brings might become available to more people. Today it is still the same. But rather than the marks of his love being shown in his physical body, they are shown, or are meant to be shown in us, "the body of Christ" – the church.

There is a mystical tradition in certain parts of the Christian Church where the "saints" have marks on their bodies have appeared mirroring the marks on Jesus at his crucifixion – the nail-prints in the hands, the slit in the side, the marks of whippings and of the thorns pushed into the head. Whilst there are sceptics within the church regarding these, for others they are a divine indication of the fact that one has been chosen by God to bear these marks of Christ.

But the most notable part of the hallmark of Christ that we bear, when we are truly in him and he in us, is our love for each other and our desire in that love to be fellowship with one another and work together in harmony despite all differences that may exist between us. *Someone related his experience as a small boy when he went to his first symphony orchestra concert. He marvelled at the different musicians as they came onto the stage and sat down. They all seemed so different. Some were young, others were old. Some were thin, others not so. Some had lots of hair, others were bald. There were women, and there were men. One by one they picked up their instruments and each began to play a few notes. It sounded like a dozen cats fighting. None of them were playing the same notes, let alone the same music. Then the boy saw a man in a long black coat walk to the centre of the stage. He raised a long thin black stick and the noise stopped. With a sweep of this man's hand the musicians began to play again and the sound this time was incredibly beautiful.*

This experience is a picture not only of the early church and its believers, who are described in The Book of Acts as being one in heart and mind, but also of today's church and today's believers. Yes, blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe! But blessed too are those who have seen. Blessed are those who have seen the marks of Christ in us and have believed! Blessed too are we who have those marks, blessed are we who have fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ, and who show it by how we love each other. We are a people who make can music instead of making noise, because we have a conductor whom we can follow. We have Jesus to direct us. Look at those who have the hallmark of Christ upon them, those who walk in

light and live by the love of their master, and learn from them. Look for the hallmarks and pray that they may be seen in you, that God might purify you and place his seal of salvation upon you.

MARKS OF JESUS

O Lord Jesus help me seek today
to live in peace and holiness I pray,
Help me Lord to allow You to make me whole
come complete Your sanctifying work here in my soul.

Wash away my sin and make me whole
come do Your refining work in my soul,
In love Lord come remove every trace of sin
Rule without rival now Lord Jesus deep within.

May peace daily attend my pathway
I'd be a blessing to others I pray,
I desire that others would daily see
the tell-tale marks of the loving Lord Jesus in me

May holiness and peace I now pray
be seen freely in me here day by day,
May they be the hallmarks of my life I plead
may I show forth Christ Jesus in word and deed.

Ed Ostrum