

*Readers' Notes*

## **The Incredulity of St Thomas**

National Gallery, London



Painting title: The Incredulity of Saint Thomas

Artist: **Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano**

Date: c. 1502-4

Location: Room 57, Sainsbury wing, National Gallery, London

Medium: Oil on synthetic panel, transferred from poplar

[nationalgallery.org.uk](http://nationalgallery.org.uk)

## **Introduction**

At the beginning of Lent we all make a journey. We travel as pilgrims, and as the Church here on earth. Regardless of what we give up or choose to take on during these seven long weeks, we all make a journey. And so too, does our Lord, Jesus Christ.

So this painting that you see here in the National Gallery, London, is particularly relevant to this season, since by being positioned at the end of a very long corridor, to see it close up requires a journey from east to west. You have to walk through four rooms, each doorway bringing the painting a bit closer. The view seems infinite as five more architectural arches draw you on, until you arrive at the feet of Jesus. By hanging it in this way we see that the length and depth of the perspective are breathtaking.

## **To travel spiritually**

This is Cima de Conegliano's 'The Incredulity of St Thomas' altarpiece commissioned in 1497 for the altar in the Church of San Francesco in northern Venice. Numerous paint losses, due to blistering as a result of extensive flood damage, have been lovingly restored so that we appreciate not only its conservation but its sheer scale. For the painting itself is framed in a further arch, revealing an indented or coffered ceiling in a room where two more arches are stencilled into the back wall, to reveal a distant Italian landscape with trees and a castle. This pictorial scene itself speaks of a further journey that the spiritual traveller is required to make on their journey of faith.

As we stand in front of Cima's huge masterpiece, we are therefore, carried through at least seven arches, guiding, directing and revealing the extraordinary depth of the painting. And this emphasis on scale and depth are part of the point of our faith in Christ whose death transcended every dimension of this world. So that while this encounter between Jesus, his disciples and specifically Thomas, occurs after the resurrection, right at the end of our Easter journey, to travel spiritually and physically to this very moment requires all the drama and power that the greatest journey from doubt to faith can ever express. Since it is the drama and journey of seeing Christ after his death, and of believing in his resurrection. As Christians, we all enter into this unique mystery.

## **John's Gospel: Jesus welcomes Thomas**

According to John's Gospel after his resurrection, Christ appeared to the disciples and showed them his wounds. Thomas was absent and when they told him that they had seen the Lord he would not believe them and said: 'Unless I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe' (John 20: 19-27). Then eight days later, Thomas placed his finger in the wound in Christ's side and was convinced that Christ had risen from the dead. Here we see that Masaccio has chosen to show the precise moment of this revelation.

The challenge for all artists is how to portray Jesus as both human and divine at any one time during his life on earth, and of how to portray these attributes all in one go and on the same canvas. So artists devised a whole range of signs and symbols. Here we see the wounds of the cross in Jesus side, hands and feet. We notice that only Jesus is bare-chested and only he wears white robes. Jesus stands right in the centre of the group and is the only figure that does not have a halo but three gold flecks emerging from his head – does this represent his humanity or his divinity?

## **Humanity and divinity – the journey to faith**

All the post-resurrection experiences with Christ as narrated in the gospels were real, visible, and accessible through the bodily senses so Cima paints Jesus as both similar in style and technique to the group of disciples (he became like one of us) and with the same physique, yet different enough to know that it truly is him.

If humanity and divinity both need to be conveyed, how then do artists portray doubt and faith to become realised? Thomas on our left in red and green creates a diagonal shift with his body and his index finger as he reaches over to touch Jesus' side. This diagonal gesture enables the viewer to understand the physical and spiritual shift that Thomas needs in order to move from doubt to faith. And Jesus ever so gently holds out his right hand towards Thomas and turns his head and his body to allow him to touch the wound in his side. 'Here I am Thomas', is what Jesus is evoking here, 'believe in me'. By turning both his head and his torso, Jesus is saying that to follow him, we need to believe with both our minds and our hearts. It is the union of both that enables faith to arise.

## **Resurrection glory**

To realize the unrealizable, to bring this miracle within the immediate grasp and understanding of everyone is the genius of both John's Gospel story here and of our artist. We can be sure from this painting and its supporting text - that the resurrection was, and is, real. To want to see Jesus again is not about doubt as Thomas has historically and inaccurately been accused of, but about relationship. Thomas doesn't want to believe simply because the other disciples told him he should, he wants to have his own experience of relationship, and he can only do that by seeing Jesus for himself.

Thomas' declaration of faith is unique. No other disciple in any of the Gospels expresses their faith in Christ with the same weight. When Simon Peter says: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God* this isn't the same as saying: *My Lord and My God* – in the Greek this is more radical, more personal and it connects the beginning of John's Gospel with its end because *The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us* happens again right now.

Cima shows us both a serious calmness of mood here, as well as an animated symmetry at work. This is not the drama of gesticulation, of loud outbursts and exclams; all the hand and facial movements are controlled and dignified; rather it is the internal realisation of faith, of the spirit moving quietly from within, of God becoming present to a hungry recipient.

## **The God who Speaks**

It gives me great pleasure at the beginning of Lent to promote the next phase of our exciting Initiative – *The God who Speaks*. This initiative focuses on celebrating, living and sharing God's word throughout the Catholic Church in England and Wales and continues until the end of December 2020. Take a look around the website and get involved in the activities happening in your diocese. Where is God speaking in your parishes, in your churches and in your homes?

As we journey this Lent with Jesus, and here with Thomas, may you find richness in the Scriptures, hope amid the grief of the Passion, joy in the resurrection, and be reminded that doubt can turn to faith, death can turn to new life and that the God who Speaks in your hearts today, is with you every day until the end of time.

May we all be enriched and renewed by this special year, and together, let us share the love of Christ to the ends of the earth.

## **Questions for a Group Discussion**

### **Opening Prayer**

Pilgrim God,  
you walk alongside us  
and speak to us throughout the Scriptures:  
    in the message of the prophets,  
    the songs of David  
    and the vision of Paul.  
Your Son, Jesus Christ, listens to our hopes and fears  
and shows us how to live:  
    in our love of neighbour  
    our desire for justice,  
    and in our dying and rising each day.  
Send us the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and minds  
so that we may be your witnesses throughout the world:  
    in our protection of the vulnerable,  
    our words and actions  
    and in our communion with the earth.  
Amen

### **Questions**

1. What strikes you about this painting?
2. How might it deepen your faith this Lent and Easter?
3. Looking at the relationship between Jesus and Thomas in this painting, what can we be inspired to do in our parishes and communities to create relationship this Lent?
4. How can we make these ideas happen?

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Father...  
Hail Mary...

V. Your word is our path and your truth is our light.  
R. This day and every day.

Our Lady of the Annunciation	pray for us
St Matthew	pray for us.
St Jerome	pray for us.
Amen.	