

One of the most entertaining and enduring characters of British sitcom must be Victor Meldrew in 'One Foot in the Grave'. Entertaining, yet exasperating in his pessimism, complaining endlessly as he encounters misfortune after misfortune with that wonderful identifying phrase 'I don't believe it!'

Today is St. Thomas' Day and there is not a little of Victor Meldrew in Thomas, and it's only in the fourth Gospel that he really comes to life.

Reflecting on today's Gospel he has forever been dubbed the Patron saint of Doubt, and the phrase 'a doubting Thomas' has become a familiar description of those who always feel their glass is half empty rather than half full.

But there is a lot more to Thomas than his doubting, and there is much in his character to instruct us and encourage us, and indeed to challenge us.

We get the first glimpse of Thomas in the story of Lazarus. News came to Jesus that his close friend was ill. The news then came that Lazarus had died, and Jesus, who was up north in Galilee determined to travel south to Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, where Lazarus lived with his sisters, Martha and Mary.

Now on two previous occasions efforts had been made by the religious leaders to stone Jesus in Jerusalem, and the authorities were still baying for his blood.

To go to Lazarus' funeral seemed reckless – to be in public view at a public ceremony. The other disciples were not keen and advised against it, including what we might call 'the leadership team' of Peter, James and John. They were caught between their loyalty and love for Jesus and their natural aversion to risk and danger.

It is Thomas who steps up, and with great courage says to the others, 'Let us go with Jesus, even if it means we die with him'.

True, he was a pessimist. He expected the worst. He saw trouble and misfortune everywhere, but in spite of his worst fears he had courage, the courage to say 'Let's go.' The courage to follow Jesus when things were difficult, when things were hard rather than easy.

When Jesus said he was going to go to Jerusalem for Lazarus' funeral, Thomas said, 'I don't believe it!', but that didn't mean that he wouldn't stay by Jesus, and stand by Jesus whatever lay ahead.

We can all be fair-weather Christians. It is in the dark and difficult times that faith is tested, and we all need something of Thomas' courage when those times come along.

And then there is the Honesty of Thomas.

In the Upper Room on the night of the Last Supper, on the night that he was going to be betrayed by Judas, Jesus was trying to make the disciples aware of the inevitability of what was going to happen and that ultimately he would be going back to his Father's house 'where he would prepare a place for them'. Those familiar words from John's Gospel. Jesus tells them, 'You know the way to the place where I am going'.

But it is Thomas who has the honesty to say, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going'. 'Look, I don't understand what you are saying'.

Neither probably did the others, but they stayed quiet. Thomas was the one who was prepared to ask the awkward question. He had the honesty to ask the questions that everyone else was thinking but hadn't the courage to ask.

At times we need to be like the little child who keeps on asking 'why?' You know those blunt questions children sometimes ask, and we try to pan them off with some bland statement and they come back with another and 'why?', and then another.

That's what Thomas was prepared to do, and it's what a lot of us are asking in the post-Brexit confusion in which we find ourselves. And we need to keep asking, Why, What, When and Where as we seek for clarity and a positive way ahead.

The same with the church. As Thomas shows us, it's not disloyal when pronouncements come from above to ask 'Why?', even if our first reaction is 'I just don't believe it!'

And questions are Ok about matters of faith. It is sometimes only by asking 'Why?' that we get clarity about our faith and thus strengthen our faith. We need to have the courage and honesty to keep on asking questions.

Thomas knew dark times, times of great despair and despondency. He was utterly loyal to Jesus so when Jesus was arrested and crucified, the darkness and despair were even blacker and deeper.

And for a while he seemed to lose hope. He believed that the cause for which he had stood had been lost forever, that right and justice and love had been forever defeated, that evil and wrong had won.

Over his head was a blackened sky. For Thomas there shone not one single gleam of light. His world had collapsed and he was in deep despair.

That's why he absented himself from the disciples' meetings, why he wasn't there on the evening of the Resurrection or the next evening. While the rest of the disciples gathered together for comfort and support, Thomas kept to himself.

Something prompted him to make the effort to re-connect with the disciples – and that took no small amount of courage, but when he did, he encountered Jesus as we heard in today’s Gospel. Jesus didn’t rebuke him but gently restored his faith and hope, and gently rolled back the dark clouds of despair to brighten his life once again with hope and light.

Sometimes when we go through difficult times, like Thomas we dis-connect from the church. We feel let down by God, and we are hurt. And that is understandable, but what Thomas shows us is that when we have the courage to re-connect, then that is when we open ourselves to encounter Jesus and to receive his gentle and healing ministrations, especially as we kneel before his altar and open our hands to receive the bread of life.

In many ways Thomas is our contemporary. There is so much in his life to instruct us, to encourage us and to challenge us.

So let us on his day, be reassured by his honesty, be challenged by his courage and be comforted by his confusion, and be enabled to hold to hope that with Jesus darkness and despair will be lifted and healed.

There is redemption and renewal, even for Victor Meldrew, even though he probably wouldn’t believe it!