

Easter 1A 2023

As a University student I remember studying John Stuart Mill's book called: *On Liberty*. This got me reading some of his other works which I commend to you, and coming across the following profound quotable quote: *There are many truths of which the full meaning cannot be realised until personal experience has brought it home.*

Have you ever watched the film *Titanic*? If you haven't I think it would be fair to say that to comment you had to be there i.e to have experienced it. The truth is that some things just don't lend themselves well to third person accounts. Sometimes we can be persuaded; at other times we must experience a film or a book for ourselves.

There's a consistent yearning in most people for powerful experiences. Thousands pack concerts that pummel the senses. We pay big bucks to be "moved." Being "entertained" isn't enough; we have to be "touched" in some magical way that leaves an impact on our senses.

We want to be carried away by the crowd, lost in the music, shocked by violence or graphic language or behaviour. We crave salsa that makes us sweat, speed that is breathtaking, humour that makes us laugh until we cry.

Virtual reality technology can be as addictive as any narcotic. It is not hard to see why. For a child left on his or her own for hours at a time, the thrills of a video game hold far more appeal, for instance, than a book. The stimulation, the sensual impact is so much easier to achieve. There's no third person effect. The player is plunged immediately into graphic, intense action. The impact is even greater when it is shared with others. Only a player can understand another player's excitement. If one of the group hasn't got the newest version of the game, it creates an instant barrier. I am not sure where all this is taking us, but I guess we shall see.

It's not too hard to visualise some doubt on the part of a modern day Thomas. Some things just need to be experienced to be believed. Perhaps it wasn't that Thomas doubted his friends' honesty, or doubted the power that Jesus had. Thomas just wasn't there. John's Gospel reads, "But Thomas, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came."

What a tragedy that absence was. A life-shaping moment happened, and Thomas wasn't there to experience it with the tightly-knit band of which he was a part. In his book *A Community of Character*, Stanley Hauerwas uses an example of the power of shared experience. He points to the development of a community of rabbits in Richard Adams' popular book, *Watership Down*. Hauerwas says that, "what we seek is not power, or security, or equality, or even dignity, but a sense of worth gained from participation and contribution to a common sense of adventure." He continues, "Indeed, our dignity derives exactly from our sense of having played a part in such a story."

In the story of *Watership Down*, it is the shared adventures of the rabbits which create the bond of community. In the Christian story, it is the experience of being with Jesus that draws his followers together. Thomas, by his absence, had missed a piece of the adventure. And Thomas, no doubt (pardon the pun), felt distanced from his community because something incredible had happened which the others had experienced and he had not.

Now, we don't know why Thomas wasn't there. Perhaps he had a very good reason; perhaps it was a day when he just wanted to be alone. But whatever the reason, Thomas was absent from the band of Jesus' followers. He just wasn't there.

It is interesting to speculate about how the story might have been different if Thomas had not been with the community when they next gathered. Or the next time, or the time after that. Communities are living entities that respond to change by protecting themselves. When a living thing is wounded, when a piece of the whole is removed, that living thing begins to seal its wound in order to begin the healing process. If the missing part of the whole is recovered and grafted back on very quickly, it may be re-incorporated and resume its place and function. The longer it is disconnected from the whole, the less likely it is to survive the re-incorporation.

We, like the gathered followers of the crucified and newly risen Christ, are a community based on shared participation in the greatest of adventures. Week by week, Christ comes and stands among us. Week by week we break bread with him. We gathered followers share the stories of the ongoing adventure, bind each others' wounds, lift each others' hearts. Together. In Psalm 111, we read, "I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright in the congregation." In Acts, we read about 120 people who experienced the power of the Holy Spirit together. They shared the story of this encounter with excitement, and brought 3,000 more people into the community who also wanted to share in that excitement.

If we expect others to believe us, to eagerly join us on this adventure, we've got to find a way to help them experience the presence of God in our midst. Our worship and our fellowship need to be open in order to experience the full power of God-in-community. Our excitement when we describe the support of this community must be at least equal to the excitement we express after seeing a good event!

God, in Christ, has created a community that allows us to derive not only our dignity, but our very lives from our sense of having played a part in the adventure of continuing creation and salvation. What an experience! You just have to be here!

Fr Robert Newton