



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 27 September 2006

Thomas the twin

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Continuing our encounters with the Twelve Apostles chosen directly by Jesus, today we will focus our attention on Thomas. Ever present in the four lists compiled by the New Testament, in the first three Gospels he is placed next to Matthew (cf. *Mt* 10: 3; *Mk* 3: 18; *Lk* 6: 15), whereas in Acts, he is found after Philip (cf. *Acts* 1: 13).

His name derives from a Hebrew root, *ta'am*, which means "paired, twin". In fact, John's Gospel several times calls him "Dydimus" (cf. *Jn* 11: 16; 20: 24; 21: 2), a Greek nickname for, precisely, "twin". The reason for this nickname is unclear.

It is above all the Fourth Gospel that gives us information that outlines some important traits of his personality.

The first concerns his exhortation to the other Apostles when Jesus, at a critical moment in his life, decided to go to Bethany to raise Lazarus, thus coming dangerously close to Jerusalem (*Mk* 10: 32).

On that occasion Thomas said to his fellow disciples: "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (*Jn* 11: 16). His determination to follow his Master is truly exemplary and offers us a valuable lesson: it reveals his total readiness to stand by Jesus, to the point of identifying his own destiny

with that of Jesus and of desiring to share with him the supreme trial of death.

In fact, the most important thing is never to distance oneself from Jesus.

Moreover, when the Gospels use the verb "to follow", it means that where he goes, his disciple must also go.

Thus, Christian life is defined as a life with Jesus Christ, a life to spend together with him. St Paul writes something similar when he assures the Christians of Corinth: "You are in our hearts, to die together and to live together" (II Cor 7: 3). What takes place between the Apostle and his Christians must obviously apply first of all to the relationship between Christians and Jesus himself: dying together, living together, being in his Heart as he is in ours.

A second intervention by Thomas is recorded at the Last Supper. On that occasion, predicting his own imminent departure, Jesus announced that he was going to prepare a place for his disciples so that they could be where he is found; and he explains to them: "Where [I] am going you know the way" (Jn 14: 4). It is then that Thomas intervenes, saying: "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" (Jn 14: 5).

In fact, with this remark he places himself at a rather low level of understanding; but his words provide Jesus with the opportunity to pronounce his famous definition: "I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14: 6).

Thus, it is primarily to Thomas that he makes this revelation, but it is valid for all of us and for every age. Every time we hear or read these words, we can stand beside Thomas in spirit and imagine that the Lord is also speaking to us, just as he spoke to him.

At the same time, his question also confers upon us the right, so to speak, to ask Jesus for explanations. We often do not understand him. Let us be brave enough to say: "I do not understand you, Lord; listen to me, help me to understand". In such a way, with this frankness which is the true way of praying, of speaking to Jesus, we express our meagre capacity to understand and at the same time place ourselves in the trusting attitude of someone who expects light and strength from the One able to provide them.

Then, the proverbial scene of the doubting Thomas that occurred eight days after Easter is very well known. At first he did not believe that Jesus had appeared in his absence and said: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe" (Jn 20: 25).

Basically, from these words emerges the conviction that Jesus can now be recognized by his wounds rather than by his face. Thomas holds that the signs that confirm Jesus' identity are now

above all his wounds, in which he reveals to us how much he loved us. In this the Apostle is not mistaken.

As we know, Jesus reappeared among his disciples eight days later and this time Thomas was present. Jesus summons him: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing" (Jn 20: 27).

Thomas reacts with the most splendid profession of faith in the whole of the New Testament: "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20: 28). St Augustine comments on this: Thomas "saw and touched the man, and acknowledged the God whom he neither saw nor touched; but by the means of what he saw and touched, he now put far away from him every doubt, and believed the other" (*In ev. Jo.* 121, 5).

The Evangelist continues with Jesus' last words to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (Jn 20: 29). This sentence can also be put into the present: "Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe".

In any case, here Jesus spells out a fundamental principle for Christians who will come after Thomas, hence, for all of us.

It is interesting to note that another Thomas, the great Medieval theologian of Aquinas, juxtaposed this formula of blessedness with the apparently opposite one recorded by Luke: "Blessed are the eyes which see what you see!" (Lk 10: 23). However, Aquinas comments: "Those who believe without seeing are more meritorious than those who, seeing, believe" (*In Johann. XX lectio VI* 2566).

In fact, the Letter to the Hebrews, recalling the whole series of the ancient biblical Patriarchs who believed in God without seeing the fulfilment of his promises, defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11: 1).

The Apostle Thomas' case is important to us for at least three reasons: first, because it comforts us in our insecurity; second, because it shows us that every doubt can lead to an outcome brighter than any uncertainty; and, lastly, because the words that Jesus addressed to him remind us of the true meaning of mature faith and encourage us to persevere, despite the difficulty, along our journey of adhesion to him.

A final point concerning Thomas is preserved for us in the Fourth Gospel, which presents him as a witness of the Risen One in the subsequent event of the miraculous catch in the Sea of Tiberias (cf. Jn 21: 2ff.).

On that occasion, Thomas is even mentioned immediately after Simon Peter: an evident sign of

the considerable importance that he enjoyed in the context of the early Christian communities.

Indeed, the *Acts* and the *Gospel of Thomas*, both apocryphal works but in any case important for the study of Christian origins, were written in his name.

Lastly, let us remember that an ancient tradition claims that Thomas first evangelized Syria and Persia (mentioned by Origen, according to Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 3, 1) then went on to Western India (cf. *Acts of Thomas* 1-2 and 17ff.), from where also he finally reached Southern India.

Let us end our reflection in this missionary perspective, expressing the hope that Thomas' example will never fail to strengthen our faith in Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Our God.

To special groups

I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims present today, including participants in the Pauline Colloquium, Friends of *L'Osservatore Romano*, and the Villa Maria College Choir from Christchurch, New Zealand. I also greet in a special way the Asian Mission Congress Delegates and Pilgrims from Thailand. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of peace and joy!

Today, we are celebrating the World Tourism Day, an important social phenomenon in the contemporary world. I hope that tourism will increasingly further dialogue and reciprocal respect for cultures, thus becoming an open door to peace and harmonious coexistence.

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. May the example of charity of St Vincent de Paul, whose memorial we are celebrating today, impel you, dear *young people*, to implement the plans for your future in a joyful and disinterested service to your neighbour. May it help you, dear *sick people*, to face suffering as a special vocation to love, and may it prompt you, dear *newly-weds*, to found a family that is always open to the gift of life and to the poor.