

What's in a name? I find myself asking on Low Sunday. Names, reputations, are very easy to acquire and very difficult to lose.

Working as I do in the criminal justice sector I'm all too aware that a reputation, generally a negative one, is something which has a tendency to follow you wherever you go and no matter what you achieve, there nearly always seems to be someone who is all too willing to remind you of what you once were.

And it's not just ex-offenders who have this problem. Most, in fact I'd say all, of us have made a mess of things from time to time. And all too often it's the time when things have gone wrong which sticks in people's memory.

One person who would understand this was the Apostle Thomas. Or "doubting Thomas" to give him the name by which he is often, and unfairly, known.

There were plenty of other disciples who didn't believe that Jesus had risen. When the women went and found the tomb empty and ran back and told the disciples we read in Luke's Gospel that they dismissed it as "an idle tale". It wasn't until they were faced with Jesus himself, risen and walking amongst them, that they actually believed it.

But Thomas sadly missed out on Jesus first appearance to the disciples, we don't know where he was or what he was doing, but he wasn't there. And coming back he must have thought his friends had gone mad. Less than three days earlier he had watched from a distance hiding away as his friend was put to death in the most brutal way possible by the Roman Army – an efficient killing machine. And now here were his friends saying that Jesus had been there, in the very room where they were standing. Most people, in Thomas' shoes would have behaved in exactly the same way. Rational Thomas, Cautious Thomas. "I won't believe it unless I have some proof". "If it is actually Jesus, he'll have the marks of the crucifixion on his body, unless I see those, I won't believe.

And then Jesus comes back one week later and Thomas is there. And Jesus shows him the marks of the nails and the spear and Thomas, rather than grudgingly accepting that he was wrong, a sort of "oh all right then" accepting, makes the most unequivocal, unambiguous statement of faith in Jesus Christ that anyone has ever made before or since – "My Lord and my God". It is for this level of faith and depth of understanding that we should remember Thomas. Courageous Thomas, Faithful Thomas.

From that moment on Thomas' life was changed. His faith in his risen Lord was complete and the rest of his life was spent sharing the Gospel before finally being martyred, possibly in India having founded the Church there which bears his name to this day. It seems extraordinary that this life of Christian service, dedicated to his Lord even to point of death should be given the title "doubting".

But it's so easy to do, isn't it? As people we can get a reputation and we can all too easily give a name to others which is inaccurate and unfair.

One of the outcomes, I hope, of this Corona Virus Pandemic is that we began to challenge some of the names that we have so carelessly and casually given. The neighbourhood which was unfriendly with the neighbours that were stand-offish, now sees neighbours standing on their doorstep clapping and cheering the keyworkers and talking to one another. We see people talking to one

another on their daily walk, keeping an eye out for each other, offering to shop for elderly and isolated neighbours.

We see those who so many people have termed “immigrants”, a drain on our society, taking our jobs – now we see that they are propping up the NHS, providing our essential services and saving our lives.

Perhaps it takes a dramatic change in circumstances for us to review our preconceptions, and to re-consider the labels which we have so casually apportioned. Maybe it’s time for a re-think.

And this thinking through of our perceptions can go wider than our friends and neighbours. What about the Church?

We’ve picked up a few labels over the years. Quaint, lovable, familiar - rather like an old cardigan. There for the traditional functions – useful for baptisms, weddings and funerals. Inoffensive, uncontroversial, easy to ignore.

And there’s some less palatable ones too – outdated, irrelevant even uncaring and detached, rocked by numerous scandals, contradictory and hypocritical.

Most of these things have been levelled at the Church over the past few years. And you can see why. If we profess to be an organisation which proclaims the life-changing power of the Resurrection of Jesus and yet come across as an inconsequential group of people interested only in preserving the way things were done two hundred years ago, most people are going to lose interest pretty quickly.

What’s it going to take for us to shake off some of these names which we’ve picked up?

The resurrection is a call to the Christian Church not just to proclaim that Jesus is risen. Not just to sing songs about it, to write poems or sermons about it. It’s Jesus’ teaching that he lives in each one of us, that through the way we live our lives in the world we are called to be Christ to one another. So whilst the risen Christ does not now walk into rooms to convince ordinary people of the truth of his resurrection, it is our lives lived in his resurrection power, not our words spoken in pious conviction, which will convince people of that truth.

To do that the Church needs to be where the people are. Sometimes that will be in our buildings. People love our buildings, they want to come and find something of God there and it’s vital that they are welcomed with open arms when they come. And, of course, we can’t wait for them to be open again. But the church needs to be outside as well, in the streets, the shopping centres, the schools and hospitals and factories and prisons, and, as we’ve had to learn quickly over the past few weeks, on the internet. And the Church, of course, is you and me, people called by Jesus to be his followers, witnesses and proclaimers of his resurrection.

Easter Sunday, and all the Sundays after are a call to Christian people to act more than to speak. And to act in three ways, firstly to seek the will of God on their lives – to ask each day, to what is God calling me? Is God in charge of my life? Am I listening attentively to his guidance? And secondly in the words of the prophet Micah, to do justly, love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. In other words to live in a Christlike way, through kindness, compassion, integrity and justice. Thirdly to ask

for the help of the Holy Spirit, which was given to the Church at Pentecost to empower them to live out their calling.

And it is in encounter with someone who is living in this way – a life guided by God and lived out in the pattern of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, which will convince people now, as it did then of the truth, that Jesus Christ is indeed risen from the dead and enable them to proclaim with Thomas, my Lord and my God. May God give you grace to live out his resurrection in the world, that the world may know its truth and be changed.