



## The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

### Homily for S Thomas's Day (3<sup>rd</sup> July) 2024

Father Christopher Horton, my erstwhile Vicar, was wont to mention a reference he had once seen, which said of its subject that he was the sort of man, who pushes a door marked pull. He would proceed to ask whether this was a positive or negative comment; the answer was that it depended.

On the one hand, it might suggest someone, who refuses to be governed by reasonable and legitimate norms; but, on the other hand, we might be talking about someone, who is not limited by the habits and perspectives of others, preferring to find out for himself where proper boundaries might lie and so discover possibilities and options, which are not immediately apparent..

Such an observation might have been made about Saint Thomas; and sermons about him can take one of two directions.

The former of these is to focus on his response to Jesus and Thomas's lack of trust and faith in what he had been told. The moniker - Doubting Thomas - that he has acquired over the years carries with it an element of rebuke. Preachers often then move to our own reluctance to believe.

The latter option is to extol Thomas's demand for proof rather than acquiesce in credulity. Following this line, we are encouraged to search for truth rather than simply accept what we are told.

Whilst these might seem - and are often presented - to be alternatives, in fact, they are not necessarily incompatible analyses of Thomas's response: the doubt might have been culpable in the circumstances, but the tendency to find out for oneself is laudable: no more so that in our own day when fake news assails us from every direction.

This synthesis is no mere floppy compromise, but actually chimes with an observation, which has struck me many times over the years: that people's qualities, which are sometimes rather irksome can be the same characteristics for which one is grateful in other circumstances: for instance, draining persistence is repackaged as welcome tenacity in our minds when it cuts through the resistance to us achieving our ends.

Of course, in the way of these things, it is easier to diagnose this dual value of other people's qualities than our own: we much more readily see the positives of our character traits than the downside of them. Yet, as with Saint Thomas, what we might consider to be our strengths and virtues can have their shadow side in particular contexts.

Learning when to deploy our various qualities and when to moderate them is a feature of maturing as human beings. It requires discernment of the contingent circumstances and a degree of self-reflexion to recognise when we have got it right and when we have made a mistake.

For Christians, the exercise takes on a more profound character, because it developing the gifts God has given us in such a way that He can most fully work His Purpose in the world through us: the fact that we have various qualities and capacities does not mean that they are appropriately deployed on every occasion and in every circumstance: sometimes it is better just to pull the door marked, "Pull." Whether or not Saint Thomas got it right, I suspect will continue to be a matter of debate.