

I wonder what helps you to believe?

There are plenty of reasons not to believe... Thomas had several. He hadn't been there with the others to see Jesus alive. He had seen Jesus put to death on a cross. He was still traumatized by what he had seen. How could he believe these stories?

We also haven't seen Jesus in the usual sense. And we may well have seen other things that make believing hard - we see the awful things that happen in the world, we feel the pain of those who suffer, we know our own pain and confusion about many things.

And yet we are here today. And we live lives which are guided by faith - our faith in our risen Lord. So I wonder what it is that helps you to believe?

Well, maybe if I run through a few of the things that help me to believe then that might help you think of your own list - some the same, perhaps, and some different.

One thing that helps me believe is the church. Not because the church is perfect, but because even though we are very imperfect, we are still capable of glimpses of grace. There are times when I see people acting with generosity and love - a bit like those first believers who David read about. And I also see times when relationships in church have

broken down and then been rebuilt - when hurts have been healed and people who are very different have learned to get along. That is a sign of grace too.

Sometimes we spend time together as a church - on a Quiet Day, or a Weekend Away, and there is a special quality to the way we get on. There is a sense of an extra dimension that we share - almost a taste of heaven - and that helps me to believe.

And my faith is also encouraged because somehow the church is still here. When you see how terribly Christians have somehow behaved, how church leaders have been led terribly astray, how churches have been persecuted and pushed aground... But somehow a faithful remnant survives - the truth of the gospel resurfaces - someone comes to lead us back to being God's people once again, like a St Francis, or maybe an Archbishop Justin and a Pope Francis.

And it goes right back to those very first Christians. The greatest support for my belief in the resurrection is the fact that the church began. This small group of frightened men and women, who often completely missed the point of what Jesus said, and had neither the desire or the ability to create a new religion by themselves - they became to nucleus for an explosion of faith and Christian living

across the ancient world - an explosion that is still going on.

So Sarah has discovered a common faith with the Christians she has met in South Africa - her new friends, who she says she wants to bring home with her. I told her she could, we had room. She said, for all 70? The faith she and the others share crosses boundaries of race and culture.

On the smaller scale I am helped to believe whenever I work together with others from the church, and we sense that God is adding something extra. We have a meeting, planning some act of worship or outreach. We don't know where to go. But we pray, and we talk, and we listen, and we discern the way forward. It can even happen at the PCC. We feel God at work in our midst.

Sometimes I feel the same thing in a one to one encounter. I go into a very difficult pastoral situation. How can I help people in this dark place know something of God's light? I have no idea. But as I trust much more deeply than usual - because I am at a loss - I am often given words to say, or something to suggest, and we find some small way forward, some glimmer of light still shining.

Sometimes I see that light shining in some else's life - someone who has been through a very dark time, but is

somehow given the strength to hang on - to find hope and to find a way forward. Seeing that sort of struggling pilgrimage strengthens my faith much more than anyone who doesn't seem to face any difficulties.

I was telling the 11.15 service on Sunday, when we came to communion, that for me personally this service of Holy Communion is a great support of faith. In my student days, I spent most services I went to questioning whether I believed everything I was saying, until at last I just had to walk up, and put out my hands - open myself to God just receive his love and his life. That was enough to give me what I needed to stumble on with God for another week.

Going on a silent retreat is always a step of faith. What if God doesn't show up? But I'm going again next week, because experience shows that God does show up, and during those quiet days he works things in me which are more real than most of what I experience, and which change the way that I live.

That change can be a support to our faith. Not just experiencing God - wherever that happens most for us - but also looking back over our lives, and seeing the times God has supported us - like the famous Footsteps poem - and also seeing the way he has helped us to change and to grow, and to live life more fully.

The more we step out in faith and trust with God, the more we find that faith and trust is strengthened. The more we ask Jesus to walk with us every day, the more we become aware that he is there with us.

So, I wonder, what is it that helps you to believe? Some of these ways? And maybe others...

As we give thanks for Thomas - for his doubts and honesty, and for his belief, we can give thanks for our faith, and for God's grace, as Jesus gives thanks for us - "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."