Generations of children, and their parents, have enjoyed A A Milne’s stories about Winnie the Pooh. This morning I want to remind you about the donkey Eeyore. Melancholy and morose, Eeyore is the one over whom heavy grey clouds seem to be in permanent residence. Have you got him in mind? Well, this morning’s disciple, Thomas, was what we might call the Eeyore among the disciples of Jesus: the eternal pessimist.

When Jesus chose his twelve disciples, I’m really glad he included someone like Thomas. Someone who was intensely loyal but not always with it. Someone who wanted nevertheless to know exactly what was going on. Someone who wasn’t going to be taken for a ride. Someone who saw exciting things happening, yes, but always to somebody else. Someone who managed to be absent on the one occasion when it was really important to be present.

This morning we’re going to discover what happens to Eeyore-like people when they meet the risen Jesus. We shall be like a fly on the wall, watching how Jesus deals with Thomas - only to realise that he is dealing with us too. This is the great value of having characters like Thomas in the Bible: we can let him do our doubting for us. For in Thomas, the sceptical, the awkward, the hard-headed have their personal representative among the disciples of Jesus. That’s why he’s so important. Because he was so brilliant at doubting, we don’t have to doubt at all.

We begin by noticing something very important. It’s this. Although the Lord is disappointed with Thomas, he does not condemn him. He does not dismiss out of hand those who doubt him, those who, for one reason or another, find it difficult to believe. So that if, as we gather in this Cathedral this morning, you are one of those who identifies more closely with doubting Thomas than you would like to, take heart. There’s good news here.

That’s because doubt is not the same as unbelief. To believe something is to be in one mind about accepting it as true. To disbelieve is to be in one mind about rejecting it. But to doubt is to waver between these two extremes: to be in two minds about it. It’s serious, yes. It’s something to deal with, yes. But it is not as serious as unbelief. It’s serious because doubts about God can drift into the settled hostility towards him which is the essence of unbelief. But it is not there yet.

Well then, to Thomas. In the other Gospels and Acts he is merely included in the lists of the twelve apostles. Personal references to him are found only in John’s Gospel.

The first is in chapter 11 in the story of the raising of Lazarus. To go to Bethany means returning to an area where Jesus is in danger from his enemies. The disciples point this out but Jesus insists on going in order to bring Lazarus back to life. Thomas’s reaction is one of deep loyalty and profound pessimism: ‘Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’ (11.16).

A typical Eeyore reaction from someone for whom the cup is always half empty rather than half full! He concentrates exclusively on the down side. The only outcome he can foresee is trouble. It’s bound to end in tears.

The next occasion on which we meet Thomas is in John 14. It is Jesus’ final evening with his disciples and he uses the occasion to teach and comfort them: ‘...if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.’ Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ (14.3-5)

He’s trying very hard to follow what Jesus is saying but getting stuck. Jesus tells them that they know the way to the place where he is going. But this doesn’t make sense to down-to-earth and literal-minded Thomas! Since he doesn’t know Jesus’ destination, how can he know how he will get there? But, you see, the great thing about him is that he asks. He isn’t content to bluff and to nod wisely as if he knows exactly what Jesus is talking about. He takes the bull
by the horns and asks Jesus what he means. This isn’t the time to go into the details of Jesus’ answer. On the subject of doubt, the point to grasp is simply this: our questions are there to be asked.

People troubled by doubts are often plagued by a feeling of guilt that their faith isn’t strong enough. Doubts can become enmeshed in a conspiracy of silence that makes it difficult to be open about them. We try and sit on our doubts and hang on grimly to an apparently cheerful but actually rather unreal faith. It can be hard to admit that we have doubts and to ask the difficult questions that we feel guilty about having. But it really is no good to tell ourselves ‘Just believe!’ and brush the problems under the carpet.

A schoolboy once defined faith as ‘believing things you know aren’t true’. But that isn’t right, is it? Faith isn’t a matter of forcing ourselves to believe things we don’t believe. Faith may be content to walk in the dark but it doesn’t do so with its eyes shut. Surely, if Jesus’ claim to be ‘the way and the truth and the life’ is true, then there is no question that he cannot at least be asked, no problem that cannot at least be shared with him.

The final mention of Thomas comes in chapter 20. After the terrible events of the crucifixion of Jesus, the disciples gather in the Upper Room, locking the doors behind them in case the authorities decide to come and arrest them as well. But they can’t keep Jesus out! He ‘...came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.’ (20.19b-20).

But Thomas isn’t there. For some reason, he misses it. Isn’t that just typical! And when the other disciples tell him that they have seen the Lord, he refuses to believe them. His hopes about Jesus had been shattered by the events of his trial and death. He won’t take the risk of going through the pain of further disappointment. And so: ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’ (20.25). He needs really conclusive proof before he will believe - or so he says. Until he gets it, he will continue to doubt.

A week later he gets it. This time he is with the others when Jesus comes and says “Peace be with you!” This time Jesus speaks to Thomas personally: ‘...Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ (20.27-28). His doubt is resolved into firm faith. From his mouth come the words that form the pinnacle of John’s Gospel, one of the most explicit statements of faith in the whole of the New Testament, the affirmation that Jesus is his Lord and his God.

Why did he doubt the truth of the resurrection of Jesus? It wasn’t really through any lack of evidence, was it? He had experienced at first hand the lifestyle, the teaching and the miracles of the Son of God for three years. Like the others he had heard him talk of his suffering, death and subsequent resurrection. He had heard the clear witness of his fellow disciples to the effect that they had met Jesus, not a ghost but a flesh-and-bone-possessing, breakfast-eating, living person. Few people have ever had access to as much of the evidence as Thomas had. But despite the strength of the evidence, to believe was too much for him.

Resolving doubts about God is not just a matter of sorting out the evidence and getting a right understanding. Faith is a response of the whole person, including the mind but not just the mind. Faith is something which also involves the emotions and the will. And that goes for doubt as well. Our doubts are sometimes simply a matter of becoming acquainted with the right evidence and getting our thinking straight. But sometimes, as with Thomas, there is a bit more to it. His doubt sprang from the fear of disillusionment. He preferred the safety of doubt to the risk of further disappointment. Just like some of us, his attitude was: ‘God’s word is too good to be true for me’.

Until he met Jesus for himself. Until the risen Lord addressed him personally and offered him the evidence that he thought he needed but didn’t really. Then, in response to Jesus’ command, ‘Stop doubting and believe’, he admitted that Jesus was his Lord and his God and took his place with the other apostles.

The chapter ends with wonderful encouragement for the likes of us who have never seen Jesus in the way that Thomas did. ‘Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”’ (20.29). We’re told, aren’t we, that ‘seeing is believing’ as if it’s impossible really to believe without seeing. But, according to Jesus, that’s not right. It is possible to believe without seeing. Let us allow Thomas to do our doubting for us and join him on his knees in acknowledging the risen Jesus as ‘my Lord and my God’. Amen.