

Good enough followers

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I've debated whether calling this reflection "good enough followers" sounds too un-ambitious, but stick with me.

Some of you may have heard the expression "good enough mothers", a term coined by Dr. Donald Winnicott, a paediatrician and psychiatrist in the 50s. About this time "experts" were writing increasingly prescriptive books describing what a perfect mother was. As a paediatrician Winnicott was in an ideal position to hear the anguish of mothers who felt they were failing to meet excessively demanding mothering practices, and he set out to write about what was "enough" to be a good mother. First, the mother must be devoted to her child, then must be able to adapt to changes in the child as time passed. Winnicott recognised that a mother cannot be perfect -- she had her own needs, other matters to deal with, and she inevitably grew tired at times. Even so, if she still managed to carry out her core responsibilities with her child, that would be good enough.

The Gospel reading from John starts in the Upper Room where the disciples -- minus Thomas, and perhaps including other devout followers -- had locked themselves in. They feared that they'd be the next targets of the Pharisees, and they may well have also been afraid of possible judgment from Jesus -- in light of some of them recently disavowing him. In any case, Jesus appeared before them and reassured them, "Peace be with you." He then showed them the wounds in his hands and side. Thomas shortly afterwards received the news of Jesus' appearance from the disciples, but said he needed to see for himself.

I can remember thinking to myself when I heard this that I'd probably want to see for myself, too -- seeing is believing, after all -- and calling him "Doubting Thomas" may have left an unnecessarily negative impression of him. (This is not to ignore Jesus' gentle chiding about not having to see to believe.) One of the commentaries suggested that Thomas might instead have been described as practical. Another commentator suggests that today he probably would have been an engineer, surgeon or dentist. I thought maybe at the time he was just brave enough to ask the question that others in his sandals would have *wanted* to ask -- but didn't.

Earlier in this gospel John tells another story about Thomas. Upon hearing of the death of Lazarus, Jesus and the disciples were talking about going to Bethany. The disciples discouraged Jesus from making this trip, reminding him that the Jews in this area had threatened to stone him. Thomas, perhaps guessing that Jesus would go anyway, said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Perhaps foolhardy, but coming from Thomas's devotion to Jesus -- and certainly not hesitant.

Several traditional sources suggest that in the years following the crucifixion Thomas took the gospel to India or at least well east of the Holy Land: Thomas is considered the founder of Christianity in the south of India. To me this demonstrates the humanity, and perhaps complexity of Thomas, and above all his devotion to Jesus's command to spread his word.

Before he called his disciples, Jesus must have known -- or at least known *about* -- them. He would have been aware of some of their individual strengths -- maybe

some of their weaknesses, and, in the years they travelled together, he would have become fully aware of the qualities of each of them – and their individual differences. For example, however much Jesus loved Peter, he accurately, if sadly, predicted that Peter would deny him three times before the cock crowed. He also did not seem completely surprised when Judas kissed him in betrayal.

Winnicott's good enough mother starts with devotion, then has to keep adjusting and adapting to her task as it unfolds. She doesn't have to be perfect – and neither do Jesus's good enough followers. They just have to be focused on their commission and persistent, asking for support where necessary, and helping compatriots when they're down.

If they're struggling, Jesus also comes to them again – gives us other chances – as he came again so Thomas could see, feel, and believe. How can we not also be good enough – imperfect as we are, if we're devoted to Jesus and prepared to learn and adapt as we go?

Spoiler alert: At our group meeting last week Sharon had read ahead in the verses from Acts following today's reading and these verses are so appropriate:

On previous Sundays we've heard about how the disciples were imprisoned following Jesus's arrest, then somehow left the lock-up and resumed preaching. Once the disciples were rounded up again after their escape, they were brought to the Pharisees for judgment:

Reading from the 5th chapter of Acts, beginning with verse 34 But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time.

Then he said to them, "Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!"

As for what good enough gets us, historians estimate that 30 years after the crucifixion, there were 40,000 converts to Christianity. At present there are well over 2 billion Christians in the world.

By God's grace, we can be confident enough to shake off our doubts, and show God's love to others as His good-enough followers.