

It's always the ones you least expect.

Who would have thought that four scruffy Scousers with a moderate talent for singing and strumming would go on to be the most successful and influential popular musicians in history? Certainly not Dick Rowe, A&R man of Decca Records who was offered the opportunity to sign the Beatles but turned them down with the phrase that must have haunted him for many many a year 'Groups with guitars are on the way out.'

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Who would have thought that the boy who didn't speak until he was four, didn't read until he was seven, was rubbish at school and was finally expelled— would go on to pretty much write the book on modern physics and be recognised as one of the most intelligent people who ever lived? Not those charged with the education of the young Albert Einstein, that's for certain.

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So perhaps you can be forgiven for not recognising exceptional talent when it appears under your own nose and in your own backyard: nobody expects to find a diamond in a dustbin after all, though those gemstones must occasionally land up in the trash. But even for less exalted achievements than writing Yesterday and the theory of special relativity...

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I discovered recently that forty years ago this very day a former Rector of St Mary's— Selwyn Tillet— was ordained priest. Hats off to Selwyn for his long years of service, the most delightful portion of which I am sure were served in this parish. I wonder if his mother ever gazed at him as a child and thought: he'll be Reverend Tillett one day. I very much doubt it, but you never know. What I do know is that seventeen years ago also on this very day, somewhere in Essex your current Rector was ordained deacon and I can confirm categorically that for the entirety of the preceding thirty-nine years nobody, least of all me, was expecting that.

It's always the ones you least expect. I'm still surprised.

I do think that this day— 3rd July— is the best of all days for a person to be ordained. Not because it's the day the white collar was tethered round *my* neck (I'm not that self-obsessed), but because it is the feast of St Thomas. As all ordinands emerge from theological college absolutely certain that they know everything about ministry, then perhaps Doubting Thomas will cast a paternal saintly eye over them in the

subsequent years when their greenwood certitude evaporates and doubts multiply exponentially before they baked-in calcify.

But, I have diverged. The theme of this sermon was supposed to be 'it's always the ones you least expect'.

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Which leads me back to St Thomas the Apostle, saint of the day. Last off the blocks to a realisation of the resurrection, stubborn sceptic of his fellow disciples' crazy claims, a by-word for doubt; and yet in many ways the most impressive of all the apostolic dozen. Why? because according to his legend, it was he who took the good news the furthest. While his fellow apostles mostly potted around a surprisingly small area of the ancient Mediterranean- parts of modern-day Greece, Turkey, Palestine and Italy- Thomas had more distant lands in his sights.

When Roman Catholic missionaries arrived in India in the 16th century they were surprised to find Christianity already established in the country entirely independent of the efforts of Europeans. This appears to have been hard for them to take in, as when the Lutherans came along in the 17th century they were also amazed, and in the 19th century other Protestants were astounded too that Christianity was not the shiny new thing they thought they were bringing to what they imagined to be the benighted backwards peoples of the sub-continent, but very much old hat to the enlightened folk of India. And this, according to ancient accounts, is all down to the evangelistic efforts of the one man, you've guessed it, St Thomas the Apostle.

According to traditional accounts of the Mar Thoma Christians of India, the Apostle Thomas landed in Muziris on the Kerala coast in AD 52, and through his preaching and ministry the Christian community which still bears his name was born. He was martyred with a spear near Madras in AD 72. In the interim he travelled to Indonesia and China- (before the cultural revolution there were ancient Christian pagodas to attest to the early presence of the faith)-and also managed to fit in a visit to the court of the Parthian king Gondophernes, who put him in charge of building a royal palace. When Thomas spent the money given to him to build the Prince's palatial new pad on the poor of Parthia, he perhaps unsurprisingly found himself imprisoned for his pains. But if you see a saint pictured with a spear or with architects compasses or square, (there are four in this church) for obvious reasons, it's St Thomas.

That's a pretty impressive CV. But with all that scepticism early on, who'd have thought it? It's always the ones you least expect.

Could be, of course that after his dalliance with doubt Thomas was trying the hardest of them all to prove himself, his devotion, his faith and so he went the

greatest distance, literally and –ending his life on the end of a javelin– symbolically too. Could be. Perhaps the clues were there from the start– the doubting scene is the famous one, but Thomas appears before that in the gospel, certain enough at that point to die for his faith. Perhaps the clues were there if only we had the eyes of retrospect. But we didn't have them then. We're all wise after the event. And so Thomas would have been yet another of the ones we least expect.

Sat there in those unforgiving Victorian pews (are there any other kind?) you might not expect much of yourself, at least as far as all this Jesus business goes. You may well be plagued by doubts about your faith; sniff suspiciously at this doctrine or that dogma (and many are, it has to be said, distinctly whiffy); find it difficult to get yourself enthused; instead of really feeling it you find yourself captive to insouciance, indolence, indifference; struggle to get yourself to church and find yourself distracted when you get there; regularly omit to say your prayers which feel empty when you do get round to them. Welcome to the club. It's easy to lose heart.

But don't. Because, where Christianity is concerned, it's *always* the ones you least expect. Like Thomas the woodworker, and Peter and Andrew and James and John the fishermen, and Mary Magdalene the sex worker and Matthew the tax collector and Paul the tent maker. *Always* the ones you least expect. Like me. And like you.

We will go on to great things. We already are, you and me, and all the other people who on this day still remember the carpenter from Nazareth.

Listen to these comments about Jesus in the Gospels from those who knew him best

*When his family heard what Jesus was doing, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."*

*"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?"*

*"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"*

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