

Touch

Matthew 9.9-13, 18-26

At a time when the review of the events of lockdown, and in particular some flagrant alleged breaches – in my view – by people in high places not yet fully scrutinised and brought to account, we look to the other areas in our society where equally far-reaching damage has touched our nation. To the economy, now hit by other forces like food and fuel inflation; to the ongoing impact of Brexit on essential industries like farming and hospitality and services in general. The ongoing pressures which never seem to have let up in the health and social care services from the days of Covid. The very real struggle of faith communities, charities and the third sector whose hands reach out to touch and help, but whose resources are stretched far further than ever intended. Is it the case that their well-meaning support of the most vulnerable and needy in our society is often taken advantage of by national and local governing bodies who have built in the touch of charitable third sector contribution of time and money into the care economy of our country? What should be a topping up of what is statutory in and fundamental to a civilised society, it seems to me, is being used to shore up national and local underfunding, undermined by the years of austerity. The gospel of Jesus, the actions and teaching of Jesus, have much to say when analysing the realities of today, and where the touch of help must be provided, and felt.

Jesus' stand with the marginalised and the fragile and the needy is a cautionary lesson for all to heed. We are all being held under the magnifying glass of Christ's unwavering and unsettling compassion. The economy of Christ's Kingdom makes us look long and hard at what we do and what we do not do. Not just the financial deficit, but the moral, spiritual and time-spending deficit too. Where is the touch of compassion to be found in what **we** do today?

To paraphrase a popular saying, "Show me what you spend your money on, and I'll tell you what you believe in. Show me where you spend your time and I'll tell you where your priorities lie."

With Jesus, so much of His time was spent with those whose needs were great, whose situations were often prejudged, whose cries for help were often unheard. In their need, in their desperation, people reached out to Him. Their anguish touched His heart. Just as their words touched His heart. Just as their hands touched the hem of His garments. As they reached out to Him, so He reaches out to them: to touch. Lepers and the mentally unwell; children; broken women and men; believers and doubters; hungry and lost and frightened. This touching Saviour reached out again and again. He touched.

What people tell you they missed during the lockdown months was real-time, in-person community. And touch.

Now, in these days of Me Too and ongoing scandals about sexual harassment, abuse in churches and other institutions, and physical and emotional bullying, the reality of touch has become so difficult.

Nevertheless, touch is an important, though complex, part of human living. Babies deprived of skin-to-skin contact with their parents suffer a sense of isolation. Important bonding just after the birth has taken place, and in the weeks afterwards, can be made more difficult. Babies are not always calm and placid, but on many occasions, it is that physical sense of connection, associated with touch, sound, smell, that for parent and child can provide a strong sense of comfort, care and well-being. I don't know that we ever lose that need for touch.

At the other end of the age-range, in nursing homes and care facilities, and hospitals when some older people may be lost in the labyrinth of dementia, it is the sound of a loved one's voice, even

if the face is not always recognised, and the touch of a hand that gives a reassurance that cannot be explained but can be felt.

In the Matthew reading, whilst Jesus was enroute to minister to the dying/dead twelve-year-old girl He is interrupted by a sick woman with a blood disorder. She had suffered for every year the dying/dead girl had lived. Bleeding for twelve years. Seeing this strange Man she'd never met, had only heard about, with hope and fear she didn't call out, she reached out, to touch. "If I only touch His garment, I shall be made well." Or literally in the Greek, I shall be rescued. Just the fringe, from a woman on the fringe, whose blood-flow would have made her untouchable in polite, religious society. By touching Jesus, she made Him ritually unclean. But it did not stop Him. Jesus felt her touch and spoke to her. It's not hard to imagine He would have reached out and lifted her up. Hand on a hand, a touch. And whatever happened, for this is no medical text-book, she was made well.

How often is it the touch of inclusion, or recognition, is all that it takes to begin the healing process in our world? The touch of our words of grace recognising wrongs, and apologising? The touch of our understanding, as we see what isn't right or fair and begin the process of addressing injustice. The touch of our hands, when we feel there is nothing we can say or do, but we can touch, and hold on, and be with. The touch of our actions, challenging persistent taboos and stigmatisation, and 'othering' that humans are so prone to fall into.

Touch is about incarnation, that physical presence of God. Touch is Jesus living up to His birth-title – Immanuel – God with us. Touch is the fulfilment of Jesus' promise to be with His people, always. The whole gospel in this tiny and transitory passage, as Jesus moved through His ministry. Bold to touch the sore places, unafraid to be touched by the hurting, fringe people.

Desmond Tutu talked about this vulnerable, hands-stretching-out God calling to us, 'Help Me, help Me, help Me.'

Desmond Tutu tells about a church in Rome that has a statue of Christ without arms. When you ask why, you are told that it shows how God relies on us, God's human partners, to get up and do God's work for God. Without us, God has no eyes; without us, God has no ears; without us, God has no feet; without us, God has no hands.

Does this speak to you? Are you touched by this?

Tonight, might you be God's hands reaching out to touch? Tonight, might you be the people touched by the needs of others and moved to help in God's Name? Touch.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen